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**Personnel, Institutions, and Power:  
Revisiting the Concept of Executive Personalisation**

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# Personnel, Institutions, and Power: Revisiting the Concept of Executive Personalisation

## Abstract

Evidence points to an increasing personalisation of political power by chief executives in recent years. It is often argued that such personalisation contributes to the current trend of autocratisation and the global decline of democracy. Yet our understanding hereof remains fractured, not least because there are a plethora of tacit understandings, definitions, and concepts vis-à-vis what political personalisation is. While potentially occurring in both autocracies and democracies, the scholarship is still too often siloed according to regime type. We thus develop a framework defining the phenomenon as a process in which the chief executive personalises power in policymaking and policy implementation by weakening the constraining capacities of relevant actors. The “personalisation of executive power” (PEXP) runs through three distinct mechanisms: personnel management, institutional engineering, and power arrogation. We illustrate the usefulness of our conceptual framework with four case studies during the COVID-19 pandemic: El Salvador, Ghana, South Korea, and Zimbabwe.

Keywords: autocracy, democracy, executive, decision making, concentration of political power, personalisation, Covid-19 pandemic

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## **1 Introduction**

The phenomenon of power personalisation has become a subject of considerable scholarly attention in recent years, driven by a discernible global surge in the phenomenon (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017). In fact, many contemporary leaders across different political regimes have been identified as having actively concentrated power while dismantling or significantly reducing executive constraints. Prominent examples like Bolsonaro, Trump, Netanyahu, Orbán, Museveni, and Xi have often been cited to exemplify this trend. This rise in power personalisation

has not been limited to autocratic regimes, which have been historically associated with personalism (Geddes et al. 2014); the trend is also manifesting within democratic contexts, too (Frantz et al. 2021). It therefore becomes crucial to recognise and address the emerging significance of power personalisation within autocracies and democracies alike.

The personalisation of political power, as shown in the scholarship, encompasses a transformative process that reconfigures the power dynamics between the chief executive and other political actors in an asymmetric manner, overly favouring the former. Within the context of autocracies, the literature illustrates scenarios where the leader's power is enhanced, for instance, at the expense of the ruling party (Leber et al. 2022), the military (Geddes et al. 2014, 2018), or influential business oligarchies (Goldman 2004; Shevtsova 2009). In democracies, personalising chief executives increase their power relative to parliaments (Mwenda 2007; Poguntke and Webb 2005), political parties (Frantz et al. 2021), or regarding oversight by the judiciary (Llanos and Tibi Weber 2022) and other control institutions. The academic discourse thus highlights not only the multifaceted nature of power personalisation and its varied manifestations within different political systems but also the myriad political actors who cede power to the personalising chief executive – being these either political institutions, such as parties, the military, the bureaucracy, and parliament, or entities beyond formal political structures, such as civil society and non-state actors.

Irrespective of regime type, however, the personalisation of political power is commonly associated with adverse consequences. Scholars working on autocracies highlight outcomes such as repression (Frantz et al. 2020), regime instability (Grundholm 2020), fractionalisation within ruling coalitions (Geddes et al. 2018), and the weakened oversight capacity of intraparty elites (Leber et al. 2022). In democracies, the personalisation of power can lead to voter apathy and reduce overall democratic quality (McAllister 2007), undermine economic development (Wright 2010), provoke political polarisation (Frantz et al. 2020), and threaten the very survival of democracy (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006).

The recognition of political personalisation as a precarious global phenomenon notwithstanding, a notable gap exists in terms of a comprehensive and holistic understanding of its empirical manifestations – not only across regime types but also world regions, as helping to facilitate a more accurate assessment of its social, economic, and political impacts. We identified this deficiency when researching the concentration of power during the global COVID-19 pandemic (Kuehn et al. 2021). To understand the pandemic's political effects, some universal instruments were developed (such as the Pandemic Democratic Violation Index; Edgell et al. 2021) or existing measures were adapted (such as autocratisation measures; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Despite these notable contributions, some observable processes remained unexplained, many of them pointing at conspicuous movements around the accumulation of political power by executive leaderships that may or may not involve regime change. In Brazil, for instance, President Bolsonaro used appointment and administrative measures to centralise COVID-19-related decisions (Kuehn et al. 2021); in the United States, President Trump used

presidential power to silence critical voices from his own expert government agencies (Viglione 2020). These two illiberal presidents not only attracted attention for their attacks on democratic institutions, but also by the rejection of checks on their authority during the policymaking processes led by their governments.

The literature has extensively shown that chief executives may utilise diverse mechanisms to concentrate power, and these are displayed across different arenas in seeking to constrain a range of political actors. We aim, then, at a more comprehensive understanding of these multifaceted strategies – one that would allow us to comparatively identify and assess the extent of personalisation processes across both political regimes and world regions. We find that “personalisation” is a fitting descriptor that explains ongoing contemporary trends in politics. Similarly, we acknowledge that scholarly work has developed appropriate tools for this endeavour. Still, the pervasive expansion of personalisation in recent times, and, significantly, the concurrent global actualisation of this phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted the lack of a coherent analytical framework that could capture observable processes occurring simultaneously across different political and spatial contexts.

As such, we develop here the concept of the “personalisation of executive power” (PEXP) that can be applied across all types of political regimes and world regions. We define PEXP as a process in which the chief executive’s power over political decisions increases at the expense of other political actors. PEXP has five constitutive elements: the chief executive, political decisions, the increase of political power, other political actors, and the mechanisms through which such an increase can occur. We define all these elements in due course and illustrate their empirical applicability with the help of four case studies: El Salvador, Ghana, South Korea, and Zimbabwe between 2020 and 2022. Even though personalisation is a pervasive current phenomenon, the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically triggered ad hoc personalisation initiatives, too – with incumbents simultaneously pursuing strategic actions to control the emergency situation. This allows us to observe to what extent they were able to redefine their relations with other political actors herewith.

The remainder of this Working Paper is structured as follows: The next section addresses the scholarly discussions on power personalisation and argues why it is crucial to provide a definition that can be operationalised for empirical research to travel across different contexts and units of analysis. Section 3 presents our novel concept and details its constitutive elements. In section 4, we provide a first demonstration of the empirical utility and applicability of the concept through case studies of power personalisation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 5 concludes with a comparative discussion of our empirical findings and presents perspectives for future research.



## 2 Literature Review

Personalism has been a recurring theme in the study of politics. In 1971, for instance, Farrell recognised its omnipresence across regimes by observing that “in almost all political systems, executive dominance and the personification of this domination in a single leader is a central fact of political life” (1971: x). Important recent research reminds us that the phenomenon of personalism in politics is ubiquitous (Baturo and Elkink 2021; Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010; Gattermann 2022; Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017; Leber et al. 2022; Musella 2022; Osei and Wigmore-Shepherd 2022).

Scholars from different Area Studies traditions have equally acknowledged this phenomenon for a long time, although it may remain hidden under disparate conceptual labels. Sub-Saharan Africanists, for instance, have used such terminologies as “monopolistic” or “personal” (Jackson and Rosberg 1984), “prebendal” (Joseph 1987), “neo-patrimonial” (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997) or “Big Man rule” (Driscoll 2020), while Latin American scholars have captured the phenomenon using such concepts as “caudillo politics” (Taylor 1996) and “neo-caudillismo” (Corrales 2008) or “hyper-presidentialism” (Nino 1996). Personalisation studies focusing on the Middle East have equally produced a diverse array of conceptual labels including “neopatrimonialism” (Bank and Richter 2010), “personalised authoritarian regimes” (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2002), and “monarchical authoritarianism” (Bank et al. 2015; Herb 1999). Finally, personalism has also been studied in the context of autocracies and emerging democracies in Asia (Neher 1994), noting how presidentialism in emerging democracies there creates the conditions for personality politics (Fukuyama et al. 2005) or taking North Korea as a leader state (Lim 2015). Some scholars distinguish personalism by intensity and apply concepts like “personal rulership” (Roth 1968) “personalistic dictatorship” (Huntington, 1991), or “sultanistic regimes” (Chehabi and Linz 1998) to imply extreme forms of personal rule.

In spite of this terminological overload, the core connotation of personalist rule has not changed much over the years. It fundamentally involves, as Jackson and Rosberg postulate, a political arrangement that is centred around an individual ruler who “figures very prominently in politics, while social collectivities [do so] very little” (1984: 425–426). The disparate conceptual labels may therefore be only different in semantics but essentially refer to the same political phenomenon. For most authors, the common theoretical starting point is Max Weber’s concept of “neopatrimonialism” – a type of hybrid authority (*Herrschaft*) still shaped by the preferences of the leader instead of formally codified laws (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Dulani and Tengatenga 2020; Guliyev 2011; Roth 1968).

Starting from Weber, Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle (1997) introduce the specific element of unilateral decision-making. Using “presidentialism” as a conceptual label, they define personal rule as the “systematic concentration of political power in the hands of one individual, who resists delegating all but the most trivial decision-making tasks” (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997: 63). They point to personal rule being a consequence of presidents asserting

absolute control by systematically disempowering structures in institutions like the military, judiciary, or the cabinet, such that “all significant decisions” emanate from the president’s office. Huntington also draws on the concept of neopatrimonialism in defining personalist dictatorships as those where “the individual leader is the source of authority and that power depends on access to, closeness to, dependence on, and support from the leader” (1991: 110).

From this definition as well as those mentioned earlier, we can posit that the core concept of “personalism” has prevailed over time, without much addition. As highlighted above, even where authors decide on terminologies that radically depart from earlier usages – such as Bratton and van de Walle’s presidentialism – the conceptual differences remain minimal. Recent works on personalisation continue this long-term tradition. Some of the recent disparate labels include “personalised politics” (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007; Pedersen and Rahat 2019), “personalist and personalisation of politics” (Geddes 1999; Geddes et al. 2018), “patrimonial presidency,” “one-man rule” (Mwenda 2007), and the “presidentialised executive” (Poguntke and Webb 2005), among others. As with the classical literature, political power in the contemporary debate is seen among the different authors as personalised when there is a systematic, incremental increase in the autonomy of the chief executive vis-à-vis other actors. An important distinction is drawn here, however, between the process of power concentration – described as the personalisation of power (Geddes et al. 2018; Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017; Frantz et al. 2020; Pedersen and Rahat 2019) – and the situation where the leader is more important than other actors, also known as “personalised politics,” “personalism,” or a “personalist regime” (Frantz et al. 2020, 2021; Geddes et al. 2014; Pedersen and Rahat 2019).

When dealing with personalisation as the process of expanding the chief executive’s power, two different scholarly debates stand out. On the one hand, as personalisation may take part under different political regimes, existing definitions vary regarding the exact institutions or actors whose power decreases or stagnates vis-à-vis the chief executive’s. For instance, there are a collection of works on party–leader dynamics both in democracies (Cabada and Tomšič 2016; Frantz et al. 2021; Pedersen and Rahat 2019) and autocracies (Geddes et al. 2018; Leber et al. 2022). Poguntke and Webb (2005) take into account the diminishing constraints emanating from coalition partners and other intra-institutional actors in democratic systems. Looking at governing institutions such as parliaments and judiciaries may be meaningful to study personalisation processes in systems where institutions act as veto powers and serve to keep the executive in check. In authoritarian contexts, though, the same institutions might rather keep political opposition under wraps (Slater 2003: 82), while real opposition comes from other actors – such as the security apparatus and/or the military (Geddes et al. 2014, 2018).

On the other hand, the literature also discusses the mechanisms through which such personalisation occurs. That is, the strategies and mechanisms that leaders use to weaken the monitoring and capacity of the actors they feel constrained by. An influential distinction was

developed here by Slater (2003). Writing on the personalisation of power in Malaysia, he differentiates between three elements: packing (the appointment of personal loyalists to top posts while purging rivals); rigging (the strategic modification of institutional rules and procedures to forestall competition for leadership positions); and, circumventing (the creation of alternative policy channels to divert influence and resources away from rivals). These mechanisms appear recurrently in the literature, but others have been added too such as: co-option, meaning the use of personnel-management tools to convert otherwise constraining individuals into loyalists (Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017; Mwenda 2007); factionalisation, denoting the creation or deepening of old internal factions to weaken opposition elites (e.g. Geddes et al. 2018); agency creation, as the foundation of parallel apparatuses that allow the leader to control, for example, the use of violence (Grundholm 2020); violence or the threat of it through personal attacks, threats to personal safety, or outright violence to weaken opposition actors or institutions like the judiciary (Llanos et al. 2016; VonDoepp and Ellett 2011); rewards such as the exchange of material benefits for the political loyalty of, for example, critical journalists (News24 2021); and, the cult of personality (Leber et al. 2022; Lim 2015).

We learn from the vast literature on personalism how this is a pervasive phenomenon that, with different terminologies, extends across time, regime types, and regions. The existing scholarship has equally captured traits of the personalisation process, meaning how it takes place and who the potential actors are that chief executives seek to bring under control. However, here specificity has prevailed over generality, as lots of variation exists across regime types on who these actors are and how the chief executive weakens existing constraints on their power. These academic contributions are necessary, intermediate steps in the quest for an overarching or umbrella concept of personalisation as a process. We now detail our own proposal on how best to move in this direction.

### **3 Conceptualising the Personalisation of Executive Power**

We conceptualise the aforementioned PEX as a process in which the chief executive's power over political decisions increases at the expense of other relevant actors. This concept has five constitutive elements: (1) the chief executive, (2) political decisions, (3) the increase of political power, (4) other political actors, and (5) the mechanisms through which the increase can occur.

#### **3.1 The chief executive**

We start by defining and identifying the chief executive, for which we rely on the concept of the "actual effective ruler," who "de facto exercises power in a country" at a given point in time as defined by Goemans et al. (2009). Whether they are called president, general secretary, prime minister, chancellor, king, emir, sultan, or heads of a military council, chief executives invariably hold the most important political position in a country. Importantly, the power of

the (individual) chief executive differs from (collective or shared) executive power, meaning the cabinet, the politburo, advisory councils, interagency coordination bodies or a group of aides, family members, or comrades, in that the latter operate under the former's direct authority and their power may be subject to the chief executive's discretion. As the core component of the PEXP concept is to theorise about increases in the chief executive's power over political decision-making, we approach this in detail below. We also include a subsection where we refer to the other political actors and explain how we organise them along the categories proposed in our concept.

### 3.2 Political decisions

In defining political decisions, we refer to what is often called the "decision-making process." Here we draw from the literature on public policy and distinguish two analytically distinctive (although sometimes empirically overlapping) stages: policymaking and policy implementation.<sup>1</sup> Policymaking extends from the drafting of a legislation (bill) through the legislative document (or a derivate of it) being up for discussion and approval by the (constitutionally defined) bodies authorised to produce such legal content. Finetuning this dimension consists itself of various stages. Typically, drafting comes first and adoption later, with each of these two (sub)stages involving the participation of a number of actors and institutions. Once the legislation has legally binding status (normally after publication in an official newsletter or gazette), the policy-implementation process begins.

Policy implementation involves the transformation of the legislation, the policy output, into a policy outcome, as carried out by those at different levels of the state bureaucracy. At the central level, for example, there are national ministries and/or quasi-autonomous agencies outside of them. While this typically occurs at different levels within each political system, it does not mean that chief executives, as formal heads of the administration, have all those agencies under their direct control. Bureaucracies can use, for example, their informational advantages to oppose or delay executive initiatives (see, for instance, Christenson and Kriner 2014). Further, the implementation of some policies may require the participation of those at different administrative levels, the delegation to multiple organisations, or the commissioning of non-state actors.

### 3.3 The increasing of political power

In general terms, power in political decision-making processes is based on two distinct sources: authority and oversight. "Authority" refers to the ability, whether formally enshrined or not, of a given political actor to make decisions at either stage of the process. In relation to

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1 For this, see Knill and Tosun (2020) as an example of the extremely broad and rich literature on the policy cycle.

policymaking, authority means the ability to define the direction, content, duration, or application of the criteria and rules regarding the relevant policy outlined in the legislation as well as to decide which state (or non-state) agency shall be charged with implementing that policy. Authority in terms of policy implementation refers to the ability of a given political actor to shape the transformation of the policy output into a policy outcome.

“Oversight,” in turn, refers to a given political actor’s ability to supervise the respective stages of the political decision-making process and hold the actors with authority accountable. The supervision of policymaking and policy implementation entails, at least, two distinguishable but complementary elements: monitoring (Poguntke and Webb 2005) – that is, observing and evaluating the actors who have authority over policymaking or policy implementation – and constraining (Leber et al. 2022) – that is, punishing or threatening to punish the actors who have authority over policymaking or policy implementation. In other words, while in our framework authority refers to power over the ex-ante and substantive aspects of a given policy, oversight is mainly an ex post procedural power to monitor and constrain the process regarding how a particular policy is made and implemented.

Table 1 below summarises the four dimensions of political decision-making power. In so doing, it anticipates the complexities of an observable increase in executive personalisation that can take place across these dimensions: there may be increases in personalisation in all of them or just in one or two, and there may be distinct forms and intensities of personalisation in different and/or specific policy fields.

**Table 1. The Four Dimensions of Political Decision-Making Power**

	Stages of decision-making		
		<i>Policymaking</i>	<i>Policy implementation</i>
<b>Sources of political power</b>	<i>Authority</i>	<b>A:</b> The ability to draft and adopt legally binding legislation that defines policy	<b>B:</b> The ability to transform legislation (policy output) into policy outcomes
	<i>Oversight</i>	<b>C:</b> The ability to supervise (monitor and constrain) the process of policymaking	<b>D:</b> The ability to supervise (monitor and constrain) the actors that transform legislation (policy output) into policy outcomes

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

### 3.4 Other political actors

Authority and oversight at the two stages of the political decision-making process are distributed across a range of actors throughout a given polity. These include the chief executive, but also the myriad institutions, agencies, and individuals that interact with the chief executive on policymaking and policy implementation. For example, chief executives in democracies share policymaking authority with the regularly elected legislature, which will need to consent to the executive's bill for the proposal at hand to become law. In terms of policy-implementation authority, the chief executive is the formal head of the administration, but often has no direct authority to shape the implementation of certain policies. In many cases, chief executives will need to attain the consensus of members of the cabinet or might need to work through intermediaries. Also, the bureaucracy can oppose, delay, or even shape policy implementation. In terms of oversight regarding policymaking and policy implementation, the chief executive often has little such power themselves and is typically the object of oversight by others – such as legislative committees, auditing bodies, the judiciary or other legal institutions, groups, or individuals.

Who the other political actors with authority and oversight regarding policymaking and policy implementation are depends on the specific characteristics of, first, the political system, and second, the policy area in question. Thus, their concrete identification is a key empirical matter. However, they can be disaggregated analytically according to their role in the political decision-making process, or also, according to the dimensions of power outlined in Table 1. In cell A of Table 1 above, we would then locate the actors, institutions, and agencies that participate in the formulation of policies – meaning those that share authority on policymaking. Next to the chief executive and leading figures from the relevant ministries, these include typically the legislature in a democratic system while in authoritarian regimes they are the members of the dictator's ruling coalition, such as their relatives, members of the military junta, central party committees, religious leaders, businesspeople, or influential bureaucrats.

In cell B of Table 1 we would find the actors, institutions, and agencies possessing authority on policy implementation. As noted above, across most political systems the chief executive is the head of the state's administrative apparatus and has, thus, often formal top authority over policy implementation. Next to the chief executive, it is usually ministries that develop policy regulations based on the legal document approving the policy at the previous stage of the process. Other political entities with policy-implementation authority include the agencies within or outside the ministries enforcing these rules. These institutions and agents can be closer to or more distant from the chief executive. For example, those working in the President's Office depend directly on the chief executive (without the mediation of a minister) and tend to be loyal appointees. Meanwhile, the cabinet may accommodate the chief executive's people but also different parties or political streams. Extra-cabinet agencies also belong here, usually depending indirectly on the chief executive and directly on the specific ministry in charge of policy enforcement.

Cells C and D in Table 1 locate the actors, institutions, and agencies that exercise oversight on the process of substantive decision-making without having the authority to make policy decisions per se. In cell C, this includes, for instance, (in theory autonomous) institutions such as the judiciary that control the legality of policy decisions but also ad hoc or historically grown institutions that intervene according to the policy field to hand. In some non-democratic regimes, the military, factions within the ruling party, and religious or traditional authorities may have the ability to practise oversight (monitor and constrain) regarding policymaking.

Finally, in cell D of Table 1 we find actors, institutions, and agencies that oversee the behaviour of institutions and actors tasked with implementing policies who may be located within or outside the executive. In democratic regimes, the opposition sitting in the legislature and audit institutions is granted a majority or a substantive percentage of participation in these oversight agencies. In most autocracies, as noted, a variety of actors exist with the factual ability to supervise policy implementation, such as influential figures in the state bureaucracy, the ruling party, and the security organisations – but also tribal and local leaders or influential businesspeople.

Again, the nature and factual role of these actors, agencies, or institutions varies across political systems and the exact policy field under study. Also, the same actor can have different roles (such as the legislature being both a policymaking and an oversight institution during the policy-implementation process).

### 3.5 Mechanisms of executive personalisation

As discussed in section 2, the idea of personalisation has been extensively dealt with in the literature, which has uncovered the different strategies and related mechanisms that leaders around the world have used to this end. We draw from this corpus to operationalise the observable mechanisms through which executive personalisation occurs in the four combinations of the two dimensions highlighted in Table 1. Three mechanisms discussed in previous works on the personalisation of politics come up as of particular importance to understand when a discretionary increase of executive power is taking place. They can be defined as follows:

*Personnel management (PM)* relates to the chief executive seeking to determine who the individuals are whose consent is required during policymaking or policy implementation in a move that will tilt the balance of authority or oversight capacity in their own favour.

*Institutional engineering (IE)* concerns the chief executive seeking to change the rules or the institutions that frame the policymaking or policy-implementation processes to increase their authority or oversight in such processes.

*Power arrogation (PA)* relates to the chief executive seeking to influence the actors or institutions involved in the four dimensions of political decision-making power through extraordinary means such as coercion, violence, and bribery with the purpose to increase their own authority and/or oversight capacities.

It is our understanding that through these three mechanisms a given chief executive's intention to diminish the influence of other political actors and thus to increase their personal discretion over the corresponding dimension of the decision-making process becomes apparent. However, their empirical observation is not straightforward as they may appear individually or all together, be presented boldly or disguised behind governing routines, or even justified in emergencies under the cover of extraordinary but constitutional tools of governance such as emergency legislation. Below we discuss these in more detail. In particular, we address how they combine with authority and oversight in policymaking and policy implementation.

### **3.5.1 *Personnel management***

The management of personnel at the top of those institutions relevant across the respective stages of the decision-making process constitutes an important component within the toolbox of power personalisation, therefore being widely used in existing approaches (Baturu and Elkind 2016; Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017; Leber et al. 2022; Mwenda 2007; Slater 2003). By appointing loyalists, the chief executive weakens the constraints on their control of key institutions. Appointing someone who is personally connected and therefore loyal to the chief executive as the head of an institution with authority and/or oversight during policymaking and policy implementation can lead to an increase the chief executive's power. Personal connections can be established by different means, which should be observable empirically – for instance, when the appointee is a relative of the chief executive or comes from the same tribe, village, region, or military unit, belongs to the same political camp or party, is a personal friend, or has previously worked for the chief executive.

### **3.5.2 *Institutional engineering***

IE describes the chief executive's attempt to increase authority or circumvent oversight either by modifying existing institutions and rules or creating new ones (McAllister 2007; Mwenda 2007; Rahat and Sheaffer 2007; Svolik 2012). It takes place if the chief executive modifies rules (e.g. procedural, constitutional) or creates a new institution (e.g. ministry, state agency, council, or body) relevant for policymaking or policy implementation, thus annulling, circumventing, or diminishing the existing structures of institutionalised decision-making.

### **3.5.3 *Power arrogation***

Personalisation through PA occurs when the chief executive assumes authority or circumvents oversight through extraordinary (often informal) ways not captured by the previous two



mechanisms. A chief executive extends their power through PA if they (or another actor operating on their behalf) uses coercion, violence (or the threat of it), or bribery against political actors who have authority or oversight regarding policymaking and policy implementation.

#### 4 The COVID-19 Emergency

As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with a remarkable and observable concentration of power in the hands of the executive. While governments issued stay-at-home orders, imposed lockdowns, quarantines, curfews, and movement controls associated with limits on civil liberties and rights (Cassani 2021), pandemic-related circumstances simultaneously provided chief executives with a window of opportunity to bolster their power. Turkey's President Erdogan made the opportunistic attempt to increase control over social media companies. In Russia, President Putin managed to get approval for a constitutional reform that allows him to stay in power until 2036; the reform was later controversially approved in a referendum. In the US, President Trump used his power not to fight the pandemic but rather to silence critical voices from within his own expert government agencies. Against this backdrop, we now discuss the applicability and usefulness of our concept across four country cases.

When selecting these illustrations, we largely relied on our existing expert knowledge of different world regions. This eventually resulted in more detailed discussion of four countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and East Asia respectively: Ghana, Zimbabwe, El Salvador, and South Korea. As for the time frame, we limit our exploration to 2020 and 2021. The selection of these cases also reflects variation in the regime type in 2019, the year before the World Health Organization declared SARS-CoV-2's continued spread a pandemic. According to V-Dem's Regimes of the World data, South Korea and Ghana were classified as liberal democracies, El Salvador as an electoral democracy, and Zimbabwe as an electoral autocracy prior to this health emergency (Coppedge et al. 2023). More specifically, when examining the extent of "constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power" (Coppedge et al. 2023: 45), as measured by the V-Dem liberal democracy index, as of 2019 South Korea was ranked highest (0.79), followed by Ghana (0.61), El Salvador (0.43), and then Zimbabwe (0.20).

Similarly, the cases vary regarding electoral contestation and the extent to which "rulers [are] responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval" (Coppedge et al. 2023: 44) as measured by V-Dem's electoral democracy index: South Korea ranked highest here too (0.85), followed by Ghana (0.72), El Salvador (0.63), and then Zimbabwe (0.29). The variation in the limits imposed on the government and the level of electoral contestation will allow us to demonstrate that our concept captures the mechanism of personalisation in countries with varying levels of pre-existing constraints on the executive.

#### 4.1 South Korea

In May 2017, Moon Jae-in achieved a significant victory in South Korea's 19th presidential election. His administration began amid the decline of conservative influence in the country. In March 2017, President Park, daughter of Park Chung-hee, a former dictator, was impeached due to bribery scandals and the abuse of power. Under Moon's leadership, the Democratic Party (DP), which he previously headed, secured subsequent victories in local and parliamentary elections in 2018 and 2020. These wins marked an unprecedented surge in the dominance of the liberal party since the democratisation process first began in 1987.

From a global comparative perspective, the number of cumulative COVID-19 deaths per million people in South Korea as of the end of 2022 fell in the second quartile of that year.<sup>2</sup> Although there were strong efforts to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus during the early periods of onset, waves occurred due to a mix of policy failures and the emergence of the Delta and Omicron variants from the end of 2021. The biggest wave ("5th Wave") was during the first six months of 2022 (January–June), when the new variants Omicron BA.1 and BA.2 emerged. This wave resulted in the largest number of daily confirmed cases as well as daily number of deaths for the period January 2020 to December 2022 combined (Mathieu et al. 2020).

The government's policies on the pandemic were a hotly debated topic at both the elite and the public levels, in relating to government accountability and responsiveness. Being a liberal democracy, the pandemic's handling became a key issue in the opposition's alleging of public-policy failures. Furthermore, the presidential elections scheduled for May 2022 also fuelled debates around government accountability, centred on the premature relaxation of social-distancing measures. From the beginning of the pandemic's onset, in January and February 2020, opposition members waged criticism against the incumbent Moon administration for the lack of swift border controls against those arriving from China that could have blocked the further spread of the virus (Song 2023). Debates then ensued during both the "4th Wave" (June–December 2021) and the "5th Wave" (January–June 2022) – when the government relaxed social-distancing regulations in the fall of 2021 and early 2022,<sup>3</sup> political opponents and members of the shadow presidential campaigns voiced how the regulation was not based on science, but political motives to appease the public who were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with social-distancing measures (Donga-Ilbo 2022). Kim Yoon, Professor of Medicine at Seoul University and member of the presidential campaign for the People's Party (PP), noted,

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2 At the end of December 2022, total COVID-19-related deaths in South Korea stood at 622 per million. The cut off for the first quartile of that year was 191 such death per million, for its second quartile 931 per million (Mathieu et al. 2020).

3 Some of the social-distancing regulations were relaxed. On 17 January 2022, for example, the number of people allowed in private meetings was relaxed from four to six persons; commercial business such as cafes, restaurants, and movie theatres were allowed to operate one hour more, from 9pm to 10pm in February and then pushed back again to 11pm in March.

for example, that it was unscientific to relax social-distancing measures and how the administration had been neglecting the empirical evidence when it came to public policymaking (Bae 2021). Yoon Seok-yeol, then presidential candidate, also openly criticised social-distancing and vaccine measures for having no “scientific” grounds and promised an overhaul of these procedures to constituents (Yeon-hee 2022).

In South Korea, the personalisation of executive power in the realm of public-health policy occurred mainly across two dimensions (see Table 1 above): the increase in the chief executive’s authority on both policymaking and policy implementation via the mechanism of PM and IE. This episode pertains to the appointment of Ki Moran as “Quarantine Policy Officer,” a newly created position within the President’s Office (Blue House) in April 2021 by Moon. This move was perceived, particularly by the conservative media, as one to hasten the implementation of COVID-19 recovery measures – known as the “With Corona” policy.<sup>4</sup> The appointment eventually saw the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) take a subordinate role, despite being the core agency holding functions of policymaking and policy implementation. Before explaining how KDCA’s authority over policymaking and policy implementation decreased, it is important to elaborate on its role in this context. In September 2020, the KDCA was promoted to an independent administrative agency via amendment of the “Government Organization Act” (2023) by the national assembly. The change permitted the KDCA not only to independently manage its organisational structure, personnel, and budget, but also granted the authority to establish policies related to pandemic control and enforce the “Infectious Diseases Control and Prevention Act” (2023). Compared to the past, the KDCA was no longer subject to the supervision of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and acquired independent sub-ministry status.

However, the creation of a new position and the appointment of relevant personnel within the President’s Office in early 2021 undermined the previous establishing of the KDCA’s authority. In April 2021, President Moon established, as noted, the role of Quarantine Policy Officer and appointed Ki, a specialist in preventive medicine,<sup>5</sup> to the President’s Office. The purpose of this was to enhance coordination between the latter and the KDCA regarding quarantine measures and the “With Corona” policy. The primary goals were to strengthen communication and expertise in government quarantine policies and to clearly differentiate responsibilities between quarantine and vaccine-related policies. However, this new appointment had the consequence of diminishing the leadership role of KDCA head Jung Eun-kyung in handling quarantine and vaccine-related policies. Commissioner Jung had been at the forefront of managing the COVID-19 crisis hitherto and of successfully implementing quarantine guidelines since the beginning. Nonetheless, Ki’s appointment led to increased competition between the Blue House and the KDCA, allowing the former to now exert greater control over decision-

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4 Specifically, these measures aimed to lift mandatory social-distancing measures and mask requirements.

5 Ki’s husband was a candidate in the parliamentary elections as a member of the DP.

making and the implementation of quarantine policies. The quarantine planning officer's oversight of KDCA actions undermined Commissioner Jung's authority in epidemic prevention and vaccine procurement. This situation led to criticism that Ki had become a "political quarantine tsar" while relegating Jung to a subordinate role under the command of the Blue House and the prime minister (Bae 2021). The political bias associated with the appointment was pointed out based on Ki's previous controversial statements regarding vaccine supplies, which were criticised as blindly justifying Blue House policy failures (Kim 2021).

The South Korea case shows that despite being a liberal democracy with substantial constraints on the executive, as noted in V-Dem's liberal democracy and electoral democracy index, personalisation occurred within the pandemic bureaucracy – the chief executive weakened the authority of the KDCA, the central state agency in charge of pandemic control. This was done via PM – using his authority to appoint personnel without legislative consent, the president was able to informally weaken the policymaking and policy-implementation authority of the KDCA. After Yoon's inauguration in May 2022, the position of Quarantine Policy Officer was eliminated, restoring the balance between KDCA and the Blue House.

**Table 2. Summary of Executive Personalisation in South Korea**

	<b>Policymaking</b>	<b>Policy implementation</b>
<b>Authority</b>	<p><b>PM:</b> Appointment of personnel within the President's Office that interferes with the authority of KDCA</p> <p><b>IE:</b> Creation of a position that increases authority of the President's Office in pandemic policymaking</p>	<p><b>PM:</b> Appointment of personnel within the President's Office that interferes with the authority of KDCA</p> <p><b>IE:</b> Creation of a position that increases authority of the President's Office in pandemic-related policy implementation</p>
<b>Oversight</b>	-	-

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## 4.2 El Salvador

On 1 June 2019, Bukele became, at 38 years old, the youngest president in Latin America and, with very high levels of popularity, one of the most influential leaders in the region (Forbes Staff 2020). On his way to the presidency, Bukele alleged that the electoral tribunal tried to hinder his candidacy by not registering in time "Nuevas Ideas," the political movement he had founded. As a result, he had to seek alliances and ended up running with the conservative party Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANU). His victory marked the end of the long-standing two-party system that had characterised El Salvador for several decades. However, during the initial two years of Bukele's presidency, the legislative branch was controlled by

the opposition parties, which exerted significant veto power over executive proposals. During his first months in office, the government's top priority was the formulation of a security strategy to combat drug trafficking and address the pervasive issue of gang violence. This strengthened popular support, as Salvadorans have long suffered from violence, corruption, and poverty (Maldonado 2023). The initial indication of political strain among government institutions became evident on 9 February 2020, when the legislative assembly declined to approve a substantial loan intended to finance Bukele's new security strategy. In response to this impasse, the chief executive rallied for a "popular uprising," and with the backing of the police and military, seized control of the assembly's building in an effort to coerce legislators into passing the required legislation (Arevalo and Wenham 2020). This confrontation publicly exposed the president's undemocratic credentials. This initial trend was exacerbated during the management of the COVID-19's health and economic crises.

Following the WHO's declaration of a pandemic on 11 March 2020, El Salvador adopted intensive measures to contain the spread of the virus, including border closures, suspension of classes, cancellation of mass events, and the implementation of mandatory quarantines. On 14 March, the legislative assembly approved the presidential decree declaring a state of emergency for 15 days and enacted a law temporarily limiting constitutional rights to restrict the freedoms of movement and association. Following the confirmation of SARS-CoV-2's presence in the country, Bukele declared a national quarantine for 30 days and ordered the arrest of people who did not comply with this mandate. Between 21 March and 11 April, approximately 102 complaints of arbitrary detention or excessive use of force were documented (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Within the executive, the president centralised the management of the pandemic. After the enforcement of the obligatory quarantine, Bukele appointed Franciso Alabi as minister of health, therewith selecting for the position the erstwhile vice minister of health operations – who was closer to the chief executive – after the previous minister lost popularity (Fonseca 2020). Sooner or later the personalised management of the pandemic by a close associate of the president led to accusations of secrecy on reported COVID-19 infections and deaths, and allegations of corruption among government officials. In addition, the rapid implementation of health measures became a justification for the arbitrary detention of individuals, with the chief executive displaying a lack of concern towards accusations of human rights violations. Despite the Constitutional Court issuing several habeas corpus rulings ordering the president and the police to refrain from arbitrary detentions under the pretext of enforcing mandatory quarantine, Bukele persistently made public statements encouraging the police to employ all necessary measures – even if it involved using excessive force (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Human rights excesses put the president in confrontation with the legislative and judicial branches. Due to the continued spread of the virus, the legislature extended the state of emergency on two occasions. In May 2020, however, the executive's request for the legislature's approval of the decree's renewal was ultimately rejected on the grounds of a perceived lack of

transparency in the government's management of approximately USD 179 million for the procurement of essential supplies for the fight against COVID-19 (Alvarado 2020). Faced with this legislative deadlock, Bukele resorted to an arbitrary interpretation to extend the state of emergency without legislative approval (EFE 2020). This seizure of power was subjected to control by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court, which attempted to suspend the effects of the decree through a precautionary measure. Days later, the Court issued a ruling declaring the state of emergency and other related decrees unconstitutional (Lara 2020). Nevertheless, between May and July 2020, Bukele continued along the same course of action, interpreting laws in his favour to issue decrees that bypassed legislative and judicial control.

The reopening of the economy in the second half of 2020 took place in a context of disagreement between the legislative and executive branches, leading to disorder and confusion among the public (Reuters Staff 2020); the president remained popular, however. At the end of July, Bukele announced major changes to his cabinet. This included the replacement of Nelson Fuentes as treasury minister, after he refused to comply with the president's order to withhold legislators' salaries as a means of coercion (Molina 2020). The attempt to monopolise oversight as regards economic decisions was also seen in the replacement of the central bank's president after the incumbent had presented an unfavourable economic report that clashed with Bukele's earlier statements (Villarroel 2020).

Nuevas Ideas then won a majority in the parliamentary elections held at the end of February 2021. Therewith, the executive now enjoyed a free pass for any initiative that was in need of legislative approval. The new assembly members were sworn in on 1 May 2021; on the same day, the assembly voted to remove the judges of the Constitutional Chamber and the attorney general. They were replaced with officials aligned with Bukele's governance trajectory (Bayoud 2021). Finally, in the context of an increase in disappearances and after the incumbent admitted to the press that a spike in homicides had occurred, Bukele decided to appoint Gustavo Villatoro as the new minister of security, until then the financial superintendent. According to the president, this cabinet reshuffle was due to a change in strategy in the fight against organised crime. However, the appointment was questioned due to the new official's links to previous administrations and corruption cases (Papadovassilakis 2021).

While the process of personalisation in El Salvador had arguably begun before COVID-19's onset, it reached its peak during the first year of the pandemic. Bukele ensured that his allies held positions in the most important institutions responsible for decision-making on the pandemic's management. Through the appointment of a loyal health minister, Bukele gained complete authority to shape health policies and enforce nationwide lockdowns, despite criticism regarding the arbitrary nature of these measures. In a similar fashion, against the backdrop of institutional tension and scrutiny over the handling of resources during the pandemic, as well as criticism of the increase in violent deaths and disappearances, the chief executive removed individuals within his inner circle who were not fully aligned with his agenda and

appointed trusted officials to the Treasury Ministry and Ministry of Security so as to have authority over the implementation of policies.

In the second half of the pandemic's first year, the most utilised mechanism by the chief executive was IE. Through an arbitrary interpretation of the pandemic norms, Bukele managed to circumvent the legislative branch and centralise policymaking as well as the ability of the Constitutional Court to control policy implementation. This was a fruitful mechanism for the leader until, in early 2021, legislative elections granted him the desired majority to further personalise policymaking and policy-implementation authority.

**Table 3. Summary of Personalisation Processes in El Salvador**

	<b>Policymaking</b>	<b>Policy implementation</b>
<b>Authority</b>	<p><u>Ministries (Health, Treasury, Security)</u>  <b>PM:</b> Appointment of cronies to Health Minister, Treasury Minister, and Security Minister</p> <p><u>Legislature</u>  <b>IE:</b> Declaration of state of emergency (without legislative approval)</p>	<p><u>Ministries (Health, Treasury, Security)</u>  <b>PM:</b> Appointment of cronies to Health Minister, Treasury Minister, and Security Minister</p>
<b>Oversight</b>	<p><u>Judiciary (Constitutional Chamber)</u>  <b>PM:</b> Appointment and removal of judges in the Constitutional Chamber  <b>IE:</b> Circumventing the Constitutional Chamber's rulings</p>	<p><u>Judiciary (National Council of the Judiciary, Supreme Court, Judges, Attorney General)</u>  <b>PM:</b> Appointment of members of the National Council of the Judiciary  Appointment of new judges and prosecutors  <b>IE:</b> Amendment of law for the judicial career</p> <p><u>Other monitoring bodies: Central Bank</u>  <b>PM:</b> Appointment of crony as president of the central bank</p>

*Source:* Authors' own elaboration.

In August 2021, control on policy implementation became evident through the approval of a new judicial-career law that resulted in the removal of over 200 judges from their positions (AFP 2021). Similarly, the Attorney General's Office was reformed in a move that allowed the removal of more of the government's critics. In September of the same year, parliament appointed governmental allies to the National Council of the Judiciary, therewith achieving full control over the appointment of Supreme Court magistrates and other judges. With this last measure, Bukele took power over the remaining most important institution of oversight vis-à-vis political decision-making (Benítez and Moreno 2021).

In conclusion, during the COVID-19 pandemic El Salvador witnessed the significant further personalisation of power in the hands of President Bukele. The chief executive strategically increased authority and oversight by PM, in placing his allies in key decision-making

positions within institutions crucial to policy formulation and implementation in relevant areas such as the Health, Treasury, and Security Ministries. Additionally, using IE, the president was able to gradually diminish the constraints and oversight ability of other political actors until he was able to take complete control over the entire policy decision-making process by securing favourable majorities in the legislature and the courts.

### 4.3 Ghana

On 7 January 2017, Akufo-Addo was sworn in as President of Ghana, marking a significant moment in the country's political landscape. As a renowned constitutional lawyer and advocate for democracy, Akufo-Addo's ascendancy to power generated great anticipation regarding his dedication to upholding constitutionalism, the rule of law, and human rights. Nonetheless, many actions of his administration have undermined constitutionalism and weakened oversight institutions, casting doubts on his purported commitment to democratic principles. But this is not surprising given the highly permissive constitutional space within which presidents of Ghana operate. Prior to assuming office, considerable research had already delved into the extensive executive powers wielded by the president of Ghana. Scholarly discussions have specifically concentrated on the almost unrestrained authority held by the Ghanaian chief executive and its detrimental effects on constitutionalism, as well as the erosion of oversight mechanisms intended to scrutinise presidential actions (Oquaye 2013; Van Gyampo and Graham 2014; Prempeh 2003). The constitutional provisions pertaining to appointments, for instance, grant the president substantial discretion in selecting individuals for key positions within the executive branch, public administration, government agencies, as well as independent state institutions such as the judiciary, special prosecutor's office, and public auditor's office. The expansive powers of appointment of the president engender concerns about the potential for patronage while providing opportunities to weaken oversight mechanisms.

During his first term in office (2017–2021), President Akufo-Addo appointed an unprecedented 110 ministers – therewith facing accusations of packing state institutions with his “family and friends” (BBC 2019). Aside from presiding over a bloated presidential staff more than 1,000 people strong, the president has been accused of systematically dismantling the ability of oversight actors to effectively hold his government to account. One incident that exemplifies these concerns about oversight occurred in June 2020, when a controversial presidential directive led to the removal of the auditor general from office (Lartey 2020). This move was met with harsh criticism and raised doubts about the president's commitment to transparency and accountability. Additionally, in November 2020, the resignation of the public prosecutor, citing “political interference in the independence of his office” (Hawkson 2020), further fuelled concerns about the erosion of institutional checks and balances. Additional illustration of the president's expansive powers is evidenced by the appointment of an unprecedented 12 Supreme



Court justices. The appointment process began in 2018, with four such justices. This was followed by the appointment of three more the year after. In 2020, an additional four were appointed before two further appointments took place only two years later. This notable increase in judicial appointments has resulted in allegations of “court packing” with individuals having overt partisan biases (*Ghanaweb* 2022). These actions not only undermined the judiciary and weakened its oversight abilities, they also raised concerns about the potential for personalisation and the presidential hamstringing of state institutions.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic presented Akufo-Addo with additional avenues to amass greater authority and consolidate his power even further. Ghana recorded its first case of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on 12 March 2020. The virus spread so quickly that by May 2020 over 7,000 cases and 34 deaths had been recorded – up from two cases barely two months earlier, in mid-March (*Worldometer* 2020). At the very outset of the pandemic, popular pressure was mounted on President Akufo-Addo to roll out politically decisive and restrictive mitigation measures against the spread of the virus. These agitations were, first and foremost, founded on the unprecedented emergency nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the fragility of the country’s healthcare system and the uncertainties it brought. Second, the community spreading of the virus was particularly rapid in the early days of the pandemic. Many key professional bodies such as the Ghana Medical Association strongly pressed upon Akufo-Addo the need to shift strategies towards more drastic containment measures, such as declaring a nationwide lockdown and shutting the country’s borders (*Ghana Business News* 2020).

The government initially responded by introducing an emergency law, alongside heightening surveillance and contact tracing to identify cases. On 17 March, a more advanced response was implemented to mandatorily quarantine incoming travellers, leading to an eventual closure of the country’s borders five days later. As case counts continued to grow in spite of the initial measures, a partial lockdown was enforced in the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions on 30 March, amid several other restrictions.

Under the pretext of safeguarding public health, the scope of presidential authority over policymaking and implementation pertaining to COVID-19 was significantly broadened. In April 2020, the president monopolised pandemic management by creating an interministerial presidential taskforce composed of some of his trusted appointees to coordinate the various chains of command in the handling of the COVID-19 crisis (*Sarkodie et al.* 2021). The taskforce, operating directly under the presidency and chaired by Akufo-Addo, became the fulcrum around which policies on the pandemic revolved. Aside from policies directly emanating from the taskforce, it was also responsible for the coordination of various government ministries, departments, and agencies (*Arkorful* 2022). The taskforce therefore became the main vehicle with which the president centralised the authority to make and implement COVID-19 policies.

It is emphasis-worthy that, again by creating the taskforce, Akufo-Addo successfully diverted influence regarding pandemic management to an alternative policy outfit over which he had direct control. As such, policy decisions on every facet of COVID-19’s handling, ranging

from border closures and the granting of economic reliefs to testing and contact tracing, emanated from the president without sufficiently involving – or otherwise completely circumventing – critical actors like the legislature and opposition parties due to their lack of representation in the taskforce. The latter therefore operated a highly opaque and exclusive COVID-19 strategy. This monopoly forced the main opposition party to form its parallel taskforce to rival that of the government (*Graphic Online* 2020). What was supposed to be a collective fight against the COVID-19 pandemic consequently became a political debate on who is excluded from or included in the government’s taskforce. Via the latter, the president not only appropriated the authority to draft and implement COVID-19 containment strategies from competent ministries but also personally became the chief communicator of the policy decisions so reached (by the taskforce). His frequent television broadcasts became the big headlines. They were “dramatic,” “unusual,” and broadcast on prime-time TV in the evenings – as such, becoming the key focus of attention as Ghanaians looked to him for updates, benevolence, and pandemic measures.

Akufo-Addo’s election had raised popular hopes for constitutionalism. Yet many of his actions in government eventually undermined oversight institutions, casting doubt on his professed dedication to democracy. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, his tenure witnessed the appointment of numerous ministers, accusations of patronage and favouritism in state institutions, and a significant packing of the Supreme Court. The outbreak of the pandemic provided further opportunities for the president to consolidate power under the guise of safeguarding public health. This included the use of the strategy of IE to establish a presidential taskforce that operated with centralised authority over COVID-19 policies, sidelining other actors and creating a politically divisive environment. Overall, these actions exacerbated power imbalances, limited transparency, and hindered effective institutional checks on the president’s power.

**Table 4. Summary of executive personalisation in Ghana**

	<b>Policymaking</b>	<b>Policy implementation</b>
<b>Authority</b>	<p><b>PM:</b> Appointment of members of the COVID-19 taskforce</p> <p><b>IE:</b> Establishment of the COVID-19 taskforce as a policymaking outfit</p>	<p><b>PM:</b> Appointment of members of the COVID-19 taskforce</p> <p><b>IE:</b> Establishment of the COVID-19 taskforce as a policy-implementation outfit</p>
<b>Oversight</b>	-	-

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

#### 4.4 Zimbabwe

Mnangagwa ascended to the presidency of Zimbabwe after a series of political crises in November 2017. President Mugabe, who had governed the country since independence in 1980, was ousted in a coup following mounting pressure from both the Zimbabwean public and his ZANU-PF party. Mnangagwa, who served as the vice president at the time, assumed the role of interim president until securing a narrow victory in the 2018 general elections. During Mugabe's 37-year tenure, there was a significant consolidation of executive power that became closely associated with his personal authority. Throughout this period, Mugabe acquired a reputation for undermining the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms, a trend that persisted until his eventual removal from power. In 2014, for instance, he amended the constitution of the ruling ZANU-PF party to allow him to directly appoint his deputies. He then proceeded to dismiss the sitting vice president over "traits of disloyalty" in a move that would pave the way for the appointment of his wife as the new vice president (*Aljazeera* 2017). This dismissal would enable Mugabe to rid himself of intra-executive opposition posed by a faction led by the deposed vice president, Mnangagwa, while weakening the latter's ability to coordinate and mobilise elites within the ruling party to obstruct his personalisation agenda.

After having brought the executive branch firmly under his grip, Mugabe sought to extend his personal control over other state institutions too. He began with the judiciary, namely by getting the ZANU-PF majority-led parliament to amend the Constitution to enable him to singularly handpick the country's top judges (Mhofu 2017). The new amendment clothed Mugabe with powers to unilaterally appoint the chief justice, deputy chief justices, and the justices of the Constitutional Court. When Mugabe's government was toppled, his successor Mnangagwa continued to uphold the tradition of weakening oversight mechanisms and centralising executive power (BTI 2022).

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportune context for Mnangagwa to further advance his agenda of power personalisation. The SARS-CoV-2 virus first reached Zimbabwe in March 2020, with the first confirmed case reported on the 20th of that month. It quickly spread throughout the country, leading to a surge in cases and deaths. Zimbabwe faced unique challenges in managing this outbreak (*Aljazeera* 2020), including due to an already-burdened healthcare system, limited testing capacity, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The government's response was swift and decisive. In a press conference in Harare on 17 March, President Mnangagwa announced the enactment of a "Declaration of National Disaster" to cover actions against COVID-19: that is, a constitutional mechanism allowing his administration to activate and escalate emergency responses without previous approval by the National Assembly. This action circumvented legislative power even though at the time no COVID-19 cases had yet been detected in the country (*Africa News* 2020). He then proceeded to issue "Statutory Instrument 225A" of 2020 – known as the "Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulation" – to shut down cross-border activity (without recourse to the legislature). The government additionally implemented various measures

to combat the spread of the virus, including nationwide lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the establishment of testing and treatment centres.

A key personalisation strategy utilised by Mnangagwa under the guise of the COVID-19 pandemic was high-profile appointments. In the heat of the unfolding health crisis, in May 2021, the president controversially made five appointments to the Constitutional Court (*The Zimbabwean Mail* 2021) while also appointing a soldier to head the Ministry of Health in May 2020 (*Reuters* staff 2020b) after medical officers and other health professionals declared strike action over the lack of personal protection equipment. The new minister had no record of competence in the area of health. This invited the opposition to criticise the appointment and characterise the incoming minister as Mnangagwa's puppet, someone unfit for the job (*All Africa* 2020; *Reuters* staff 2020b). Before these appointments, the president generated controversy by replacing former Mugabe allies with individuals identified as "coup leaders" and "military loyalists" who had played a significant role in his original coming to power. These appointees were strategically placed in such key bodies as the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Information, and of Agriculture (BBC 2017; Moyo 2017), indicating the deliberate use of PM to consolidate power and maintain loyalty within the government.

The president additionally took advantage of the pandemic to change the procedure for the appointment of Constitutional Court justices (Moyo and Phulu 2021). To appoint top judges in Zimbabwe, the president traditionally nominates candidates who are then screened by the Judicial Service Commission. The latter then submits a recommended list to the president who subsequently makes the final appointment. However, during the pandemic, the president proposed a constitutional revision (Amendment No.2) to empower him to directly appoint Constitutional Court judges. The public consultation on the amendment was expedited during the lockdown, impeding the active participation of many in this reform process. The direct appointment of five such judges by the president increased his dominance over the judiciary and weakened the independence and capacity of the court to keep the chief executive's power in check (*The Zimbabwean Mail* 2021).

The president's intrusion on the judiciary appeared to have paid off. There have been concerns that the judiciary was lenient and passed judgements endorsing Mnangagwa's quest to centralise decision-making on pandemic management. One such suspicious ruling is the case of Mashavira versus the opposition Movement for Democratic Change party, in which the Supreme Court's decision not only undermined the opposition but also emboldened the president and the ruling ZANU-PF party during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown. The Court failed to block many of Mnangagwa's draconian policies on lockdown, mask wearing, curfew, and, most importantly, the brutal mistreatment of civilians by the security forces.

One key move Mnangagwa made towards monopolising COVID-19 policymaking was the setting up of a 11-member-strong interministerial taskforce to coordinate efforts on fighting the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Expectedly, the opposition immediately criticised the establishment of this body – calling it a ploy by the president to take pandemic management out of the hands

of health professionals. To the opposition, there was no need to set up a new bureaucracy made up of different ministers given that a dedicated Ministry of Health was already in place to deal with the pandemic and other matters of public well-being. They suspected the president of trying to usurp the technical powers of professionals at the Ministry of Health for political gain (*All Africa* 2020).

The Zimbabwean case shows how Mnangagwa is closely following in Mugabe's footsteps, as marked by the consolidation of executive power and undermining of oversight mechanisms. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for the incumbent to further centralise power. He declared a national disaster, bypassed institutions such as the legislature, and issued regulations unilaterally. The president employed the strategy of PM by making high-profile appointments and of IE vis-à-vis the judiciary, therewith weakening its independence. Concerns were raised about the latter's leniency towards Mnangagwa's policies and its failure to address human rights abuses during the pandemic.

**Table 5. Summary of executive personalisation in Zimbabwe**

	<b>Policymaking</b>	<b>Policy implementation</b>
<b>Authority</b>	<p><b>PM:</b> Appointment of members of the COVID-19 taskforce</p> <p><b>IE:</b> Establishment of policymaking taskforce</p> <p><b>IE:</b> Declaration of national disaster</p>	<p><b>PM:</b> Four loyal army officers appointed to head the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Information, Agriculture, and Health</p> <p><b>IE:</b> Establishment of policy-implementation taskforce</p>
<b>Oversight</b>	<p><b>PM:</b> Five Supreme and High Court justices appointed</p> <p><b>IE:</b> A constitutional amendment (Amendment No.2) to empower the president to directly appoint Constitutional Court judges</p>	

*Source:* Authors' own elaboration.

## 5 Discussion and Outlook

Driven by several high-profile empirical examples such as Presidents Bolsonaro, Putin, Trump, and Xi, the personalisation of power by the chief executive has received considerable global attention in recent years, both from political scientists and the broader public. Having found that personalisation is not limited to a particular regime type and can occur in both autocracies and democracies as well as different world regions, we proposed a definition and conceptualisation of the "personalisation of executive power" (PEXP) that is applicable across different contexts. We defined PEXP as a process in which the chief executive's power over

political decisions increases at the expense of other relevant actors by looking at the sources of authority and oversight across the respective stages of the policy cycle. We argued that to survey how chief executives increase their authority and oversight one should look at three observable mechanisms: personnel management, institutional engineering, and power arrogation. Finally, we illustrated the empirical applicability of the concept by identifying personalisation events during the global emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea, El Salvador, Ghana, and Zimbabwe between 2020 and 2021. Personalisation mechanisms used in these cases and their frame were displayed in the dimensions summarised in Table 1 and in the subsequent tables accompanying each of our country cases.

In fact, personalisation occurred in all four studied countries, but with the help of the analytical distinctions developed in Table 1 we can see how different those processes were. If we consider first the dimension of “authority,” we could say that executive personalisation occurred everywhere: as a global health emergency, the pandemic resulted in countries adopting measures that invariably led to the increase of the chief executive’s authority at the expense of other authors in regard to policymaking and policy implementation – with a specific focus on health policy. From South Korea, a liberal democracy with substantial constraints on the executive, to Zimbabwe, an electoral autocracy, chief executives sought direct control over the policy cycle. It is widely known that emergencies are “the hour of the executive” (Lodge and Wegrich 2012: 2) and most constitutions provide mechanisms to deal with these special situations. It is noteworthy, though, that in the four case studies chief executives were caught going too far or were questioned for their loose and sometimes abusive interpretations of existing rules by using IE as well as PM. South Korea’s Moon installed a personally loyal advisor to the President’s Office whose arrival diminished the leadership role of a formally independent state agency. Meanwhile in Ghana, a presidential taskforce not only limited the involvement of other key actors in policymaking, but its tasks were furthermore supervised and later communicated primarily by the president himself. So far, regarding authority, all four case studies show that chief executives used IE and PM as mechanisms to appoint loyal people to work in newly established institutions (even though most of them turned out to be temporary), thus allowing closer control of policymaking and policy-implementation processes. In El Salvador, for example, the president controlled key policy areas such as health, finance, and security through the respective appointments he made. In this case, and also in Ghana and Zimbabwe, the use of IE by chief executives could be attested such as via the creation of special taskforces, alongside the abuse of emergency legislation in El Salvador and Zimbabwe.

In the latter two countries, the chief executive also notoriously overstepped “oversight” sources of power by using the pandemic to install favourable personnel or to institutionally engineer a new (and closer) body in a way that would constrain horizontal controls.<sup>6</sup> Before the legislative elections that took place during the pandemic’s second year, President Bukele

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that a considerable process of oversight PEXP was continuing during the pandemic in the case of Ghana. However, the beginning of this relates to reasons unassociated with COVID-19.

in El Salvador had already overstepped unfavourable court rulings – but alterations occurred when the new majority in the national assembly approved changes to the Supreme Court’s composition. An early decision of the newly appointed court concerned a questionable constitutional interpretation that would pave the way for Bukele’s presidential re-election in the future (Llanos and Tibi Weber 2022). In Zimbabwe, the prescribed lockdown was used by President Mnangagwa to rush through a constitutional amendment that now allowed the chief executive to directly appoint the judges sitting in the Constitutional Court. We did not find these kinds of personalisation events looking at oversight in the studied liberal democracies, namely the cases of Ghana and South Korea.

Interestingly, in none of the four cases did we observe personalisation via the mechanism of PA during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in February 2020 soldiers had marched into El Salvador’s parliament while the chief executive sat in the house speaker’s chair to “persuade” reluctant legislators to approve his security plan (*Guardian* 2020). This shows that, even though we did not find these means within our examined time frame, the mechanism of PA is potentially used to ensure favourable policy decisions. It remains to be seen whether this can be further generalised when we have coded more cases.

Even though the personalisation of authority and oversight are studied in the literature, they are normally regarded as separate processes. In contrast, our concept shows how interconnected they are. In fact, we do register personalisation of authority without that of oversight, but we do not have personalisation of oversight without that of authority too. This suggests that chief executives need to master their governments first, with demonstrating favourable policy outcomes a prerequisite to being able to control other institutions afterwards. In El Salvador, of course, there were legislative elections scheduled and taking place during the pandemic, and this was an opportunity for Bukele to move fast in the restructuring of the executive to achieve policy goals. But maybe this holds for other cases, too? At least the literature on autocratisation has extensively highlighted that only politically strong presidents (those that control large majorities in parliament) can overstep judicial authority (García Holgado and Mainwaring 2023).

The goal of this Working Paper was to present a novel concept of PEXP and to provide some first illustrative evidence on the concept’s potential operation in classifying empirical events indicative of its occurrence specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of the concept will proceed in four directions going forward. First, we will collect more data on personalisation or executive-power events from a broader selection of country cases. While the four presented here showed the applicability of the concept in seeking to uncover personalisation events across different regime types and regional contexts, more empirical data will be necessary to evaluate the concept’s individual elements and their relevance more robustly. Moreover, the evidence provided by our sample was limited in that none of the cases included instances of personalisation through the mechanism of PA (even though President Bukele’s decision to have the El Salvadoran legislature stormed by the armed forces could be

interpreted as such). Finally, it was not always clearly distinguishable in the four cases at which exact stage of political decision-making personalisation occurred. Empirical data from additional cases will identify whether the distinction between personalisation in policymaking and policy implementation is conceptually useful and empirically relevant. That additional data will also be essential for developing and testing the future steps of researching the personalisation of executive power.

Second, we will consider how to create an aggregate measure of PEXP at a given point in time. While the concept currently is set up to identify discrete events of personalisation in a certain moment, it does not yet allow an evaluation of the overall state of PEXP or the comparison of varying degrees thereof over time and across respective places. As a next conceptual step, we will need to define rules helping aggregate individual personalisation (and de-personalisation) events that occur within a given time frame, as well as the resulting levels of personalised rule, into a single “personalisation index.”

Third, the present study is focused on developing a conceptual framework on the ontological question of what the personalisation of executive power is. It has not, however, formulated arguments that could explain the occurrence or non-occurrence of such personalisation. Consequently, in future, we will develop a theory of why chief executives attempt to personalise, which mechanisms they choose to draw on if they decide to go down this route, and under what circumstances this succeeds or fails.

Fourth, next to the “why” question, future work will also need to address the “so what” one on the effects of the personalisation of political power, and especially its contribution to the erosion of democratic norms, principles, and institutions, as well as to the autocratisation of political regimes (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Our case studies of El Salvador and Zimbabwe, for instance, suggest that personalisation vis-à-vis both authority and oversight led to more extensive human rights abuses. In addition, another conceptual issue presents itself here: as autocratisation includes (but is not limited to) the elimination of constraints on the chief executive, our definition and conceptualisation of PEXP is closely related to that concept – and it might be difficult to differentiate the two empirically. Consequently, we will need to clearly delineate the potential conceptual and empirical both overlaps and differences between the concepts and identify the specific contribution of our PEXP framework compared to other, related notions.



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