

Captured Economies: A Psychopolitical Model of Puppet Governance in Postcolonial States

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Abstract

This paper proposes that many postcolonial states do not primarily suffer from “corruption” in a vague cultural sense, but from a repeatable *political-psychological architecture* that converts formal sovereignty into obedience rents for external powers. I call this architecture **puppet governance**, and its output **obedience economies**: systems in which the main comparative advantage of the ruling bloc is its willingness to sacrifice local welfare, law, and memory in exchange for external protection and flows of credit.

To formalise this, the paper introduces the **Imperial Selection Model (ISM)** and a **Trait–System Fit Index (TSFI)** based on four well-documented dimensions of destructive leadership: narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism (the “Dark Tetrad”). In the ISM, external powers do not randomly “support strongmen.” They *select and groom* leaders whose trait profile best fits the structural needs of the imperial system: resource access, population demobilisation, and legal self-mutilation.

The model generates concrete, falsifiable hypotheses: leaders with high TSFI scores should be more likely to (1) attract disproportionate foreign backing, (2) preside over legislative changes that erode economic and legal sovereignty, (3) normalise neglect that produces elevated excess mortality and infrastructural decay, and (4) sign highly asymmetric, creditor-friendly or extractive deals. The paper proposes a coding scheme for TSFI, a **Puppet Diagnostic Index (PDI)** at regime level, and a set of empirical tests that can confirm or falsify the central claims.

Keep in mind, the framework does **not** focus on individuals but it evaluates *policies and ruling styles*, not souls. A head of state remains fully responsible for their choices, precisely because the model assumes that they can behave differently.

1. Introduction: From “corrupt culture” to engineered obedience

Over half a century after formal independence, many African, Caribbean, Asian and Latin American states remain trapped in a familiar pattern: rich soil, poor people; heroic flags, imported decisions; “national” parliaments, foreign vetoes.

The dominant explanations still circulate around three easy narratives:

1. **“Culture of corruption.”**
People supposedly “love bribes,” “fear change,” or “lack civic spirit.”
2. **“Ethnic fragmentation.”**
The problem is framed as tribal rivalry and irrational hatred, as if colonial borders and divide-and-rule strategies were a minor detail.
3. **“Weak institutions.”**
Institutions are treated as neutral machines that have simply not been “strengthened” enough through training and donor programmes.

All three narratives divert attention from a simpler, more uncomfortable question:

Who gets selected to rule, by whom, with what psychological profile, and for whose strategic benefit?

This paper starts from a blunt observation that many citizens already make in dry everyday language:

“They do not govern us. They *keep* us for someone else.”

The hypothesis is that this intuitive statement can be formalised. External powers do not only shape the *policies* of postcolonial states. They also shape the *personality profile* of those who are allowed to reach and keep the top seat. The result is a repeatable pattern of leadership that treats local life as expendable and external satisfaction as sacred.

I call this pattern **puppet governance** and the resulting configuration of incentives **obedience economies**.

The purpose of this first paper in the series is to:

- define these concepts precisely;
- propose a measurable index of “imperial suitability” (TSFI);

- outline how to score leaders and regimes;
- derive testable predictions; and
- specify clear falsification criteria and ethical boundaries.

A second paper (*Obedience Economies II*) then applies the framework to concrete cases and validates or refines it against real trajectories.

2. Concepts and theoretical foundations

2.1 Puppet governance

By **puppet governance** I mean a ruling configuration where:

1. **Strategic decisions** in security, mining, trade, and finance are effectively constrained or dictated by external powers.
2. **Local elites** accept this constraint, and actively reproduce it, in exchange for protection, prestige, and access to rents.
3. **The population** is managed as a resource and a risk, not as a constituency whose welfare is central.

This is not new. Classic works in anti-colonial thought already described the “comprador bourgeoisie,” the “neo-colonial state,” or “indirect rule” by local intermediaries. What is new here is the attempt to model, with some precision, the *psychological* fit between the leader and the imperial system, and to link that fit to observable macro-outcomes.

2.2 Obedience economies

An **obedience economy** is one where the core competitive advantage of the regime is not productivity, knowledge, or technological innovation, but its proven willingness to:

- under-price strategic resources,
- under-value local labour and life,
- over-protect foreign capital, and
- neutralise domestic resistance.

In such economies, obedience itself is a commodity. It is traded for loans, military support, diplomatic cover, and personal enrichment of the elite.

2.3 The Dark Tetrad and political selection

Psychology has identified four clusters of traits that repeatedly correlate with exploitative and destructive leadership:

- **Narcissism:** grandiosity, need for admiration, fragility behind the mask.
- **Machiavellianism:** instrumental manipulation, secrecy, cynicism.
- **Psychopathy:** lack of empathy, impulsivity, shallow affect.
- **Sadism:** enjoyment of others' suffering, attraction to humiliating others.

In a healthy political culture, these traits are filtered out or at least constrained. In a **puppet selection environment**, they become *assets*:

- Narcissism makes the leader dependent on foreign praise and international stages.
- Machiavellianism makes them skilled at betraying local allies and signing opaque deals.
- Psychopathy makes them indifferent to the predictable suffering caused by austerity, diversion of public funds, and collapsing services.
- Sadism makes them enjoy symbolic cruelty toward critics and the poor, which disciplines the population.

The central claim of the ISM is:

External powers systematically *prefer* leaders whose trait configuration makes them reliable servants of extraction and control.

This is the **Imperial Selection Model**.

3. The Imperial Selection Model (ISM)

3.1 Trait–System Fit Index (TSFI)

We define four trait scores for a given leader:

- (N): narcissism
- (M): Machiavellianism
- (P): psychopathy
- (S): sadism

Each trait is scored on a 0–1 scale based on observable political behaviour, not on clinical interviews. For example:

- public lying to protect image;
- documented betrayals of allies;
- policy indifference to preventable suffering;
- deliberate humiliation of opponents or communities.

We then assign weights (w_N, w_M, w_P, w_S) representing how important each trait is for imperial convenience in a given context. The **Trait–System Fit Index** is:

$$[TSFI = \frac{w_N N + w_M M + w_P P + w_S S}{w_N + w_M + w_P + w_S}]$$

By construction, $(0 \leq TSFI \leq 1)$.

We define three zones:

- **Low imperial suitability:** $TSFI < 0.40$
- **Intermediate:** $0.40 \leq TSFI \leq 0.75$
- **High imperial suitability zone:** $TSFI > 0.75$

The model's stark prediction is that leaders in the **high** zone will, other things equal:

1. Attract stronger and more resilient external backing.
2. Be offered more protective diplomatic and military umbrellas.
3. Be more willing to sacrifice internal welfare for external approval and personal gain.

3.2 Puppet Diagnostic Index (PDI)

The TSFI describes *one leader*. To capture the behaviour of the whole regime, we define a **Puppet Diagnostic Index (PDI)** at the system level. It aggregates:

1. **Leadership TSFI** (head of state, key ministers).
2. **Structural alignment** (foreign bases, debt dependence, treaty asymmetry).
3. **Policy outcomes** (sovereignty erosion, excess mortality, public-goods decay).

A simplified version can be written as:

$$[PDI = \alpha \cdot TSFI_{leader} + \beta \cdot A + \gamma \cdot H]$$

where:

- ($TSFI_{leader}$) is the head of state's TSFI,
- (A) is an alignment score (0–1) based on treaties, bases, and voting patterns,
- (H) is a harm score (0–1) derived from neglect-sensitive indicators (excess mortality, collapse of basic services),
- (α, β, γ) are weights summing to 1.

High PDI indicates a mature obedience economy: the traits, the alignments, and the harms are all pointing in the same direction.

4. Methodology: How to measure puppetness without guessing souls

4.1 Behavioural coding of traits

This framework deliberately **avoids** armchair clinical diagnosis. We do not have access to the leader's inner life. We have access to their *actions and patterns*.

For each trait (N, M, P, S), we construct behavioural indicators. Examples:

- **Narcissism (N)**

- Systematic inflation of achievements, denial of obvious failures.
- Obsession with international awards, photo-ops, foreign media.
- Persistent fraud around diplomas, honours, or biography.
- **Machiavellianism (M)**
 - Sudden alliance flips without coherent programme justification.
 - Use of legal tricks to neutralise rivals after promising inclusion.
 - Consistent pattern of secrecy in economic and security deals.
- **Psychopathy (P)**
 - Indifference to repeated reports of preventable deaths (e.g. hospital shortages, epidemics) without corrective action.
 - Calm implementation of policies whose lethal effects on the poorest are predictable and publicly flagged.
 - Habit of laughing or minimising tragedies in public statements.
- **Sadism (S)**
 - Public humiliation of critics, especially poor or marginalised groups.
 - Tolerated or ordered use of torture, sexual violence, or collective punishment by security forces.
 - Symbolic acts of cruelty (destroying homes without compensation, evicting patients, mocking victims).

Independent coders can rate each indicator on a 0–3 or 0–5 scale, then rescale to 0–1. Average across indicators to obtain N, M, P, S.

4.2 Alignment and harm indicators

For the regime-level components:

- **Alignment (A)** might include:

- Number and scope of foreign military bases or status-of-forces agreements.
- Degree of dependence on a narrow set of creditors or donors.
- Voting patterns in international fora on issues where core Western interests are at stake.
- Provisions in investment or mining codes that give foreign capital legal supremacy.
- **Harm (H)** focuses on neglect-sensitive outcomes:
 - Trends in child and maternal mortality.
 - Coverage of basic vaccinations and primary care.
 - Access to potable water, sanitation, and basic infrastructure in poor regions.
 - Excess mortality estimates during crises compared to structurally similar countries.

The goal is not perfection. The goal is to anchor the discussion in *measurable patterns* rather than moral impressions.

4.3 Case selection

To test the model, we consider three kinds of regimes:

1. **High-TSFI puppet candidates**
Leaders widely perceived as “aligned” with former colonisers or current hegemons, with long records of asymmetric deals and internal neglect.
2. **Low-TSFI, high-conflict leaders**
Leaders who confront imperial interests and face sanctions, coups, or wars. They may have other flaws, but their main conflict is with external control, not with their own people’s existence.
3. **Intermediate or ambiguous cases**
Regimes that oscillate between gestures of autonomy and obedience, or where leadership traits and systemic constraints contradict each other.

In this first paper, we do not walk through all cases. We only specify the criteria. Obedience Economies II performs the actual scoring and analysis.

5. Predictions of the ISM

The ISM produces a set of empirical predictions that can be tested and falsified.

5.1 Selection and survival

Prediction 1:

In regions of high strategic interest (oil, gas, rare earths, key corridors), leaders with higher TSFI scores will:

- receive more consistent diplomatic backing,
- survive scandals and electoral crises more often,
- experience quicker and more generous access to IMF/WB programmes and military aid.

Prediction 2:

Leaders with low TSFI who attempt genuine sovereignty moves will face:

- coups, assassination attempts, or judicial removal;
- sanctions and financial strangulation;
- intense media campaigns of delegitimation.

The model does *not* say that every deposed leader is a hero, or that every surviving leader is a puppet. It says that TSFI should correlate with *how the international system treats them*.

5.2 Law, debt, and corridors

Prediction 3:

High-TSFI regimes will be more likely to:

- rewrite mining, investment, and tax codes to grant extraordinary stability and privileges to foreign capital;
- sign “corridor” and “partnership” agreements that prioritise export routes over local development;

- accept arbitration regimes that place them at a legal disadvantage (ISDS, investor-state dispute settlement).

Prediction 4:

Such regimes will tend to increase *net* external dependence: even when GDP grows, the substance of control over land, resources, and law increasingly moves offshore.

5.3 Neglect and excess mortality

Prediction 5:

Holding structural poverty and initial conditions constant, high-PDI regimes will exhibit **higher neglect-related excess mortality** than comparable regimes with lower PDI. The deaths will not come mainly from spectacular massacres, but from:

- preventable diseases,
- collapsed infrastructure,
- hunger in regions that could be fed,
- disasters made lethal by lack of preparation.

If a regime systematically normalises carelessness toward its population but *does not* show elevated excess mortality and infrastructural decay, then the model's core claim is falsified or incomplete.

5.4 Popular demobilisation

Prediction 6:

High-TSFI leaders will invest heavily in symbolic politics that demobilise citizens:

- permanent “dialogues,” “transition forums,” and “national consultations” that lead nowhere;
- co-opting religious, traditional, and intellectual elites into ceremonial roles;
- using security forces not mainly to defeat external enemies, but to manage internal frustration.

They will talk constantly about democracy, unity, and development while structurally disabling all three.

6. Falsifiability and limits

A model that cannot be wrong is useless and dangerous. The ISM can be falsified in several ways.

6.1 Falsifier A: Careless regime without excess mortality

If we find a regime that:

- clearly institutionalises carelessness (underfunded health, ignored warnings, normalised negligence),
- scores high on PDI,

yet,

- does *not* generate higher neglect-related excess mortality and infrastructural decay compared to similar states,

then the model's link between carelessness and death is broken or at least overstated.

6.2 Falsifier B: High-TSFI leader who increases sovereignty and welfare

If we find a leader who, despite a high TSFI score:

- increases strategic independence (diversified alliances, reduced debt dependence, stronger domestic ownership of key sectors),
- measurably improves basic services and reduces poverty,
- resists signing asymmetric deals,

then the current assumption that imperial selection reliably favours harmful outcomes must be revised. Either our coding of traits was wrong, or the system allowed an exception.

6.3 Falsifier C: Puppet outcomes without puppet traits

If obedience-economy outcomes (sovereignty erosion, corridor obsession, massive neglect) appear under a leadership with genuinely low TSFI and low PDI, we must look harder at structural constraints beyond leadership psychology: IMF conditionalities, inherited legal traps, internal oligarchies.

In all three cases, the model does not collapse. It improves. The point is to be *disprovable*, not to create a new faith.

7. Ethics: Policies, not souls

The most dangerous misuse of Dark Tetrad language is to turn political conflicts into clinical hunting: “Our enemies are psychopaths, therefore anything we do is justified.”

This framework refuses that path.

1. **We evaluate conduct, not essence.**

A president can govern like a narcissist while being a loving parent; he can sign sadistic policies while crying at a funeral. We do not pretend to know his heart.

2. **We keep accountability at the centre.**

Saying that a ruling style maps onto narcissism and psychopathy does *not* excuse it. On the contrary: if you know that copying certain behaviours predictably kills people, and you persist, your responsibility increases.

3. **We reject pathologising whole peoples.**

The problem is not “African culture,” “Arab mentality,” or “Latin temperament.” The problem is a selection machine that rewards certain traits at the top and punishes others.

4. **We submit the tool to democratic control.**

Any real-world use of PDI or TSFI should be overseen by independent civic assemblies, unions, professional bodies, and communities, not by donors or secret services.

The aim is simple: give ordinary people a language and a set of tools to describe what they already sense, so that they are harder to gaslight.

8. Conclusion: From description to prevention

This first paper has done three things:

- Named **puppet governance** and **obedience economies** as specific, structured phenomena.
- Proposed the **Imperial Selection Model**, with a **TSFI** for leaders and a **PDI** for regimes.
- Derived clear predictions and falsifiers, while framing strict ethical limits.

It has not yet answered the question that matters most to those who live under these systems:

How do we stop the next puppet from being selected, and how do we limit the damage when one already sits on the throne?

Those questions require a different set of tools: institutional design, mass education, economic alternatives, and parallel sovereignty structures that can say “no” and make it stick. They also require a brutally honest look at our own elites, including those who speak the language of resistance while living the life of the relay.

Obedience Economies II applies this model to concrete cases and shows that, in at least one instance, the predictions of the ISM were confirmed with unusual precision. A third step, beyond description and validation, is to build **practical diagnostics** that movements, unions, churches, and communities can use before elections and appointments:

- scoring candidates,
- flagging early warning signs,
- identifying structural traps where even a low-TSFI leader would be forced into obedience.

The lions were never toothless.

They were trained not to bite the hand that built the zoo.

The task now is not to beg the zookeeper for sharper teeth. It is to map, with scientific honesty, how the training works – and then to organise, outside the fence, the structures that make that training impossible.

Selected references

(All references are illustrative; you can adjust, expand or replace them to fit your final bibliography strategy.)

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