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TWP in the Hotseat: Hard Lessons from the Frontline

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Currently a Principal at The Policy Practice, Wilf was Chief of Party of USAID's Local Impact programme in Zambia until May 2025, prior to which he was a senior governance adviser at the then UK Department for International Development (DFID), where he designed and oversaw politically informed public-sector reform, decentralisation, and democratic governance programmes.

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Acronyms

CENI	Independent National Electoral Commission [DRC]
CSO	Civil society organisation
DFID	Department for International Development [UK]
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EU	European Union
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office [UK]
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [UK]
MNCH	Maternal, New-born and Child Health [Nigeria]
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEA	Political economy analysis
PERL	Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn [Nigeria]
PWD	Person with Disabilities [Nigeria]
SAVI	State Accountability and Voice Initiative [Nigeria]
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy

1. Introduction

Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) has won the argument – at least rhetorically, there is widespread agreement that context matters and that efforts to promote change need to be rooted in a sound understanding of realities on the ground. Yet, in practice, TWP too often disappears where it matters most: in the hotseat – under pressure when practitioners must make consequential choices with incomplete information and competing incentives, and at a personal or political cost.

But the missing ingredient to thinking and working in more politically aware ways is not more analysis. It is political judgement, or the capacity to act when evidence collides with incentives, when system rules block reform, and when credibility is on the line. This is the 'Working' element of TWP: the craft of turning analysis into consequential action. Political judgement means reading shifting power dynamics in real time, knowing when to step back so local actors can lead, when to bend donor categories, and when to push despite risk. It is the craft of navigating hybrid systems where formal institutions, patronage networks, customary authority, and civic coalitions operate on the same terrain.

This judgement matters not only in development programming but also across the full spectrum of diplomatic engagement. A programme intervention, such as supporting electoral logistics for example, may likely serve other, larger diplomatic goals around legitimacy and transition. When traditional programme funding shrinks or disappears, political judgement becomes the primary tool for exercising influence. As aid budgets decline and donors shift toward transactional national interest, the ability to use political judgement across both programme and diplomatic spaces becomes essential.

I write as a Zambian practitioner with 25 years in the hotseat: working with the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), and later the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), leading delivery on a large United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programme from 2021 to 2025; and now that USAID has been dismantled, advising frontline reformers. Across these roles, the pattern is clear. Reform moves when practitioners exercise political judgement. It stalls when donor systems suffocate such judgement with metrics, log frames, and procurement rules.

This paper asks two hard questions. What does it mean to work politically when the very systems funding you have not built politics into their operating model? And how does TWP make a difference in an environment where aid is shrinking, compliance is tightening, and national interests trump ambitions to promote global good?

I address these questions based on my experience of overseeing and running programmes in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zambia. My argument is blunt: unless TWP can live in the hotseat, it will remain hollow orthodoxy. The 'Thinking' part of TWP – political economy, power

mapping, and other forms of analysis – matter. But without the 'Working' part – political judgement made under pressure – analysis runs the risk of going nowhere. At their best, efforts to promote reform are the yeast in making bread: their value lies not in volume but in their catalytic effect when they are combined with the right political ingredients.

2. The Missing Ingredient: From Analysis to Judgement

Political Economy Analysis (PEA) has spread widely. Every major donor now uses or commissions this kind of analysis to better understand the context. Yet much of the evidence base for TWP's effectiveness consists of recycled anecdotes rather than robust empirical evidence. Establishing a direct causal relationship between TWP and reform achievements remains difficult (Teskey, Marquette, & Churches, 2018).

The problem is structural. Contracts reward predictability and lock practitioners into fixed outputs despite messy realities. Programme culture privileges producing analysis over applying it. As aid budgets shrink, donors commission PEAs while cutting the programmes that could act on them.

PEA is the 'Thinking' part of TWP: it maps terrain, identifies potential allies and brokers, and exposes risks. But analysis alone changes nothing. Reform depends on the 'Working' part: political judgement that turns analysis into action. This means choosing whom to support, when to act, when to step back. The gap between analysis and action is where most reform efforts stall. The following section shows how my former colleagues and I sought to exercise judgement in three settings – the choices we made, the compromises we struck, and the costs we paid.

3. What I Saw in the Hotseat

This section draws on my experience working in different initiatives in the DRC, Nigeria and Zambia. In all three, teams used PEA to identify opportunities, brokers, and risks. But beyond analysis, we had to make judgement calls under pressure, adjust strategies mid-stream, and accept trade-offs: visibility, career risk, accusations of complicity.

3.1 Zambia: The Decentralisation Pivot

USAID Local Impact Governance Project (Zambia)

USAID's five-year Local Impact Governance Project, implemented by DAI (an international development firm), was intended to support the government of the Republic of Zambia to make decentralisation a reality through three tracks: (i) stimulating citizens' engagement; (ii) expanding local authority capabilities; and (iii) capturing learning for sustainability.

The Local Impact team's original contract was aimed at achieving district-level results. But PEA showed the problem with this kind of approach: districts did not have the mandate to make decisions that mattered. Authority sat with the Cabinet Office and central ministries. Exercising our judgement meant breaking the contract script – building relationships at the centre, supporting the Cabinet Secretary, and deliberately stepping back so that the Zambian government could lead.

The incoming government distrusted the previous administration, creating real risk of wholesale overhaul. The USAID Local Impact (Zambia) team worked at arm's length, supporting the government to hire consultants and helping the Cabinet Secretary to lead consultations with the cabinet on the revised decentralisation policy and implementation plans. USAID would have preferred to have its team in the cabinet meetings, but we knew that government ownership of the reform process was the only way to gain acceptance.

This mattered because change happened in this hybrid space where formal authority met informal influence; and only government could navigate all three simultaneously.

Decentralisation advanced only once ministries, party networks, and labour unions aligned. Our team's approach was risky, but it was worth it. The payoff? Cabinet Circular No. 2 of 2023, which devolved 13 functions and enabled around 35,000 staff to be integrated into councils (Cabinet Office, 2024). This reset Zambia's decentralisation agenda after years of drift. A national policy had existed since 2004, a constitutional amendment in 2016 provided the legal mandate, but progress had stalled. By 2021, there was a real danger of that reform efforts would be completely overhauled. But timely, politically smart support helped to avoid that outcome.

None of this was in the log frame. All of it depended on political judgement.

3.2 Nigeria: Protecting an Outlier

State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI) (Nigeria)

SAVI, launched in 2008, supported State Houses of Assembly, media, and civil society organisations (CSOs) through facilitation rather than grants. The programme prioritised locally led issue coalitions, light donor branding, and retrospective assessment of results – an early example of politically smart, locally led practice in Nigeria.

As the DFID Governance Adviser based in Nigeria, I inherited SAVI – an adaptive programme that deliberately avoided grants and donor branding, opting for facilitation and coalition-building through Nigeria's hybrid terrain: faith-based organisations (FBOs), traditional rulers, and civic coalitions alongside formal institutions. This clashed with DFID's head office's demand for early, measurable results and clear attribution.

The programme survived because senior DFID staff provided 'top cover'. Between 2010 and 2011, with growing demands for 'fuller justification of value for money', SAVI came under intense scrutiny. DFID Headquarters wanted clean attribution; but SAVI navigated messy coalitions across formal and informal authority. Similar tensions emerged in SAVI's successor, the Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL), another UK-funded programme in Nigeria that struggled with demands to produce quick results based on donor-acceptable metrics (Rocha Menocal & Aston, 2021). But while each new DFID leader brought fresh risk that they would not tolerate this approach, a small group of us managed to shield SAVI from the results agenda, insisting that impacts be judged in hindsight.

That carried career risk: if SAVI had failed, we would have been held responsible for protecting an unorthodox programme. Luckily, the approach paid off. SAVI's gains included Jigawa adopting the North's first gender policy and later a disability policy and law; strengthened PWD financing frameworks in Kaduna; new financial-autonomy laws for State Houses of Assembly; sharper budget scrutiny; institutionalised procurement monitoring in Jigawa with real power to enact sanctions ; and advocacy that increased health budgets and funded free maternal, new-born and child health (MNCH) services (Booth & Chambers, 2014).

3.3 Democratic Republic of the Congo: Where Programme Meets Diplomacy

By 2018, national elections in the DRC had already been repeatedly postponed, and public trust in the electoral process was extremely low. To cut costs and speed up the vote count, the DRC government proposed introducing Korean-supplied electronic voting machines nationwide, rather than relying solely on paper ballots. But this raised concern among opposition parties and civil society organisations (CSOs), who argued that the machines were vulnerable to manipulation. They also suggested that it would be difficult to audit the machines, and that it would be almost impossible to deploy credibly at scale in such a short time. From their perspective, the efforts to introduce voting machines were a deliberate attempt by the Kabila regime to predetermine the outcome, and they threatened to boycott the polls as a result. On the other hand, the UK governance team had credible intelligence that the regime would not back down on the use of machines. So, we faced a stark dilemma: how to navigate the complexities of a landscape where the opposition was threatening a boycott and the government was determined to proceed?

Working with UK colleagues in the former Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the DFID team decided to commission a technical review of the voting machines from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) – not to endorse or block them, but to inject evidence into a highly polarised debate in which the DRC's Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI)

argued that the machines were essential to reduce costs and speed up counting, while opposition and civil society groups warned that they were illegal, insecure, and open to manipulation. The review documented risks and proposed safeguards. Our goal was strategic: to shift the conversation from a binary 'yes' or 'no' to the machines, towards a more nuanced conversation assessing 'under what conditions' they could be used.

This commissioned review was a programmatic intervention that also served a diplomatic end. It gave the Catholic church and civic monitoring networks concrete standards for how the machines should function in practice – from set-up and testing through transmission and auditing of results – so that they could judge whether CENI's deployment met minimum safeguards. The review equipped opposition parties with evidence-based grounds to press for specific protections, such as paper trails, independent audits, and limits on connectivity. And it gave UK and other international diplomats a shared technical reference point they could use in initiatives and quiet lobbying with CENI and the DRC Executive. In a context where trust in CENI was low and church-led observation was pivotal to public confidence, the machines' credibility rested as much on church and civic actors being able to endorse the process as on the commission's formal mandate.

The decision to commission a technical review of the voting machines split the core UK team working on the DRC elections across DFID and the FCO. Some colleagues argued that any engagement with the machines risked legitimising what they saw as a fundamentally rigged process and capitulating to Kabila's strategy. Others, myself included, treated the review as pragmatic harm reduction: if the regime was not going to abandon the machines, then the least we could do was help domestic actors push for tighter safeguards. Managing that internal divide proved almost as delicate as navigating politics in Kinshasa.

Evidence of serious irregularities undermined the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes. The Carter Center documented significant problems with how the voting machines were stored, transported, and deployed on election day, alongside wider weaknesses in voter registration and results transmission. The observation mission of the Catholic church reported that the presidential results announced by CENI did not match the tallies its observers collected at polling and counting stations. On the basis of the church's data and leaked CENI figures, a wide range of analysts and observer groups have since argued that opposition candidate Martin Fayulu almost certainly won the election but was denied victory in the official results (Carter Center, 2019).

Yet, even if the electoral process was far from perfect, it opened space for a transition of power in the DRC. After 18 years in power, Kabila stepped down. The voting machines did not make the

election results credible, but the process provided sufficient cover for domestic actors to sit down and agree on a negotiated succession. So not a bad outcome.

This case illustrates political judgement operating at the nexus of diplomacy and development programming. The UK chose to use programmatic resources strategically – not to fix a flawed process, but to nudge it toward the least-bad outcome. We got it partly wrong: the safeguards to maintain electoral integrity were insufficient, and the results were manipulated. But the alternative – opposition boycott, no elections, extended Kabila rule, and probably violent confrontation – would have likely been much worse, and we managed to avert that.

As traditional aid shrinks and diplomatic engagement becomes more important, this kind of judgement – and the ability to recognise that things are rarely binary, and that tensions and difficult trade-offs are often involved – becomes essential.

4. Lessons from the Hotseat

Drawing from the experiences mentioned above, here are some lessons that have emerged for me from the hotseat:

- Analysis informs, judgement decides. PEA maps the terrain; practitioners choose the route under fire.
- Judgement carries risk. Push too hard and you risk alienating key stakeholders. Move too slowly and momentum dies.
- Judgement often means staying invisible. You may do a lot of work behind the scenes, but you cannot and should not be a protagonist. This means that there will be convened meetings that you cannot attend, even if you help to organise them. And you need to let others take credit.
- System cover matters. Institutional cover that can defend adaptive practice when challenged is essential. SAVI survived because allies shielded it. Zambia's decentralisation moved because USAID leadership gave protection.
- Hybridity is the operating system. Reform happens where formal authority meets informal influence. Design for that fusion, not imagined purity, and recognise the tensions, dilemmas and trade-offs involved.

- **Development programming and diplomacy blur in practice.** The DRC case shows how programme interventions can serve diplomatic ends. As aid budgets shrink, political judgement becomes the primary tool for influence (more on this below).

5. When Aid Shrinks, Judgement Becomes Essential

The post-Cold War consensus cast aid as a global good. That era is over (see, for example, Bedasso, 2025). In 2015, DFID colleagues spoke about poverty reduction as a moral imperative. By 2020, conversations centred on migration control and strategic competition. Official development assistance from EU member states increasingly serves national self-interest (CONCORD, 2024).

Donors take political risks only when aligned with domestic priorities: controlling migration, countering China, securing trade routes. Governance reform delivers no quick wins. Between 2023 and early 2025, Official Development Assistance (ODA) to governance and civil society is projected to decline by 21–36%, which is among the steepest reductions across all sectors (OECD, 2025).

Recipient governments can now brush off conditionalities as alternative financiers offer infrastructure and security packages with few governance strings. Chinese aid for infrastructural development correlates with weakened accountability (Bluhm et al., 2022; Dreher et al., 2011). Similar dynamics appear with financing from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, and Tükiye.

Both dynamics – geopolitical competition and shrinking budgets for governance reform – reinforce why **TWP is not less relevant but remains more essential than ever in the current environment. Judgement as Diplomatic Currency.**

This is where the 'Working' part of TWP matters most. Political judgement is not analysis, but the craft of acting when analysis collides with reality. As traditional aid budgets continue to shrink globally – with recent US policy shifts suggesting this trend will accelerate (see, for instance, O'Sullivan & Puri, 2025) – **judgement** becomes the **primary currency of influence**. Without political savvy, aid becomes inert. Without judgement, diplomacy becomes performative.

The skills remain identical: reading power dynamics, building coalitions, knowing when to step back, and timing interventions. What changes is the operating context. In conventional development programme settings, judgement is exercised mainly through money: which partners to fund, which reforms to back, when to shift budgets. In diplomatic settings, judgement is exercised mainly through influence: which actors to bring together, which stories

about the situation to reinforce, and when to use programme funds as a tool to support a diplomatic objective rather than just to implement a project.

The DRC case shows this clearly. The voting-machine review was not fundamentally a development programme intervention; it was diplomatic craft using development resources. The costs of the technical review were modest. Its value lay in shifting political dynamics: the Catholic church gained evidence-based standards for assessing whether the machines and results management met minimum safeguards; opposition parties gained firmer grounds for negotiation; and diplomatic actors gained leverage in their engagements with CENI and the presidency. DFID had room to manoeuvre because elections in DRC mattered strategically to London. Our programme funds were limited, but they served larger diplomatic ends regarding succession and stability.

Political judgement can only thrive when it is shielded from, or aligned with, donor national interests. In contexts without geostrategic value, that space rapidly evaporates. So, the task is about finding overlaps between reform momentum and donor priorities, and exercising judgement within those narrow windows.

This is TWP's future: less about managing adaptive programmes, and more about political craft enabling influence. The 'Thinking' part – PEA, power analysis – matters. But without the 'Working' part – judgement to act under pressure, to bend systems, to make consequential choices – it remains hollow orthodoxy.

The question then becomes: where do practitioners find room to manoeuvre when systems actively resist the very political practice they rhetorically endorse?

6. Space to Act: Two Practical Shifts

The easy conclusion is despair: donors cut governance spending while praising TWP; localisation is often hollow; national interest trumps development. But despair is lazy. There is always room to act – provided that systems can make two specific shifts.

First: re-engineer contracts for political practice. Rigid, input-driven contracts suffocate adaptation. The fix is not more toolkits but commercial and bureaucratic arrangements that reward judgement and learning. Adaptive bureaucracies use relational contracting that emphasises partnership, specifies principles and high-level outcomes rather than detailed activities; and gives front-line teams room to experiment within broad guardrails (Sharp, 2021).

On the USAID Local project, shifting from a traditional cost-reimbursement model to a performance-based contract, combined with deliberate 'pause-and-reflect' cycles, created space to shift politically and tackle more challenging reforms. Elsewhere, alliance-style contracts and longer, flexible agreements with break clauses have been used to share risk and focus on justifying decisions, not just ticking off outputs (Sharp, 2021). In this light, FCDO's Payment by Results contracts are simply one tool in a wider repertoire: they can support TWP when tied to higher-order governance outcomes and backed by tolerant leadership – but they can just as easily generate reporting burdens and risk-aversion when overloaded with narrow milestones (Rocha Menocal & Aston, 2021).

Second: replace box-ticking with learning-oriented accountability. Adaptive bureaucracies design monitoring and review processes that prioritise explaining decisions and iterating strategy over reporting activity counts. Peer review or learning panels that periodically bring together, for example, diplomats, programme staff and local partners can scrutinise major course corrections, surface political intelligence, and document why choices were made; without turning every adaptation into a new indicator. The aim is an assurance system that protects space to learn by doing, rather than one that penalises programmes for responding to how power and incentives shift (Sharp, 2021).

7. Practising in the Grey Zone

Most political work lives in the grey zone—the space between strict external rules and the messy realities that shape reform. Formal procedures rarely capture the informal dynamics that determine whether change sticks: procurement rules may require competitive bidding, but the most politically effective local partner often loses because they lack the compliance machinery external partners expect. Living in this gap between 'how the system says change should happen' and 'how it actually happens' is daily reality for anyone trying to think and work politically.

7.1 Guerrilla craft inside misaligned systems

Survival of reform efforts in this space depends on what can be called guerrilla craft—small, tactical practices that buy time, create cover, and keep political work alive inside systems designed for predictable delivery rather than political judgement.

Five moves matter most (Sharp, 2021):

- Prioritise storytelling over metrics. Output indicators do not, on their own, protect reform space—compelling stories do. In Zambia, Cabinet approved a revised decentralisation

policy, but momentum for implementation only came once it was possible to frame a concrete story of what decentralised services could mean in practice: local revenues visibly funding better local services, delivered by councils rather than distant ministries. For the USAID Local Impact team, finding and amplifying that kind of story created more political cover for turning policy into action than any logframe target ever could.

- Adapt the box, don't fight it. External categories are often hollow—'capacity development', 'stakeholder engagement', 'research and learning'. Fight them head-on and you lose; bend them and you gain room to act. Capacity building becomes consensus-building, stakeholder engagement becomes coalition support, research becomes political cover for reformers who must defend decisions to sceptical principals (Sharp, 2021).

- Start with local actors. Strong ideas usually start locally. The craft lies in shaping those ideas with domestic reformers and only then handing them to partners as ready-made solutions. In Zambia, central government led its own decentralisation consultations, with Local Impact working at arm's length; in Nigeria, SAVI and PERL enabled state-level coalitions to define priorities that external partners then backed rather than directed (Piron et al., 2021).

- Don't rely on a single champion. One hero dies; a network survives. Adaptive reform does not last on lone heroics but on insiders who coordinate protection across government, civic actors and external partners. SAVI's durability in Nigeria rested on a loose coalition that quietly kept space open even as personnel and politics shifted.

- Recognise a judgement moment. Most work can follow the contract script—and should. But sometimes politics and paperwork diverge. The craft is spotting those moments: when the contract path clashes with what politics requires, when preset indicators risk derailing reform momentum, and when there is enough political cover to pivot. When those conditions align, the question is no longer technical compliance but political judgement.

7.2 Institutional insurgents in a donor-shaped world

Working politically in systems that have not built politics into their routines means acting as an institutional insurgent: speaking the language of compliance while practising the craft of judgement. The job description may say 'programme manager'; the real work is protecting reform space through strategic translation. A routine 'stakeholder workshop' becomes the convening that quietly brings opposition MPs and ruling-party reformers into the same room. A

standard 'research study' becomes the evidence a permanent secretary needs to resist an unhelpful instruction while preserving the appearance of technocratic decision-making.

That role brings constant tensions around identity (visible deliverables versus invisible politics), documentation (the work that can never fully appear in reports), coalitions (the need for allies across agencies, reformers and external partners), and exit (knowing when adaptive work has become impossible, or when domestic actors no longer need external backing). Living with these tensions means accepting that the work that matters most is often the least visible and the least rewarded. Institutional insurgency keeps reforms alive in the short term—but it is not a sustainable model for systems that claim to value politics.

7.3 From guerrilla craft to partnership fit for purpose

Seen from this angle, institutional insurgency is a symptom of system failure. When practitioners must routinely work around formal rules to deliver the outcomes external partners say they want, the problem is not individual judgement but institutional design. Evidence from PERL and other cases shows that reforms endure when domestic reformers hold design authority and operational control and when external partners underwrite risk, facilitate coalitions and fund citizen-demanded data, rather than directing systems themselves.

In a financing landscape where governance ODA is contracting even as climate finance, private capital and South–South flows expand, these shifts are not optional. Governance now functions as enabling infrastructure for access to larger flows; political judgement is becoming as central to diplomacy and geoeconomics as it has been to governance programmes. For traditional donors and foreign ministries, this means moving from 'donor-driven performance theatre' towards genuine partnership—platforms that domestic reformers control, risk that partners underwrite without steering decisions, and accountability systems that protect learning rather than punish adaptation—and treating TWP skills such as reading elite bargains, brokering coalitions and timing interventions as core diplomatic capabilities, not niche governance-programme tools. For practitioners and the TWP community, the task is to keep documenting what it takes to survive in the grey zone, while using that evidence to press for systems in which political judgement is no longer a quiet act of insurgency, but a supported professional norm.

8. Conclusion: TWP's Catalytic Imperative

The hotseat reveals TWP's real value: political judgement can unlock significant change from modest inputs; when analysis sits on shelves, technical fixes pretend politics can be bypassed, or systems default to compliance, reform stalls. Across Zambia, Nigeria and the DRC, reform moved when judgement was exercised under pressure and political cover created space for adaptive

practice, often by aligning diplomatic, development and domestic reform efforts. It stalled when contracts rewarded outputs over outcomes and practitioners were censured for underspending or deviating from activity plans, even when those deviations advanced reform.

Reform advances when political judgement is exercised in protected spaces—when practitioners bend external categories, work in grey zones and prioritise outcomes over compliance, and when diplomatic and development levers are pulled in combination rather than isolation. The TWP community has devoted much of the past two decades to frameworks and adaptive programming; that chapter is now shifting towards political craft in diplomatic contexts, where programme budgets may be thin or absent but the need for judgement is greater, not less. The same core insight—that politics shapes reform more than technical fixes—applies when the tool is a diplomatic relationship, a climate-finance negotiation or a security dialogue as much as when it is a governance programme.

Three lessons stand out.

- First, hybridity is the baseline. As the cases from Zambia, Nigeria and the DRC showed, reform never unfolds in purely formal or purely informal systems; law, party networks, religion, norms and markets fuse into single operating systems. Diplomatic and development engagement must be designed for this fusion, not for imagined institutional purity.

- Second, judgement must be protected. Reforms succeed when frontline teams and country missions have structural cover to exercise political judgement—when contracts, risk frameworks and diplomatic mandates shield them from purely compliance-driven incentives; they fail when systems punish deviation, even when deviation is what politics requires. As aid shrinks and non-ODA flows grow, this protection becomes more critical, because judgement becomes the main lever of influence when money is tight.

- Third, aid and diplomacy are catalytic, not primary drivers. Their value lies in leverage—whether a workshop that shifts Cabinet positions, backing that shields an innovative coalition, or electoral support that manages a transition crisis—and those catalytic moves only land when guided by political craft.

The evidence suggests that reform survives when grey zones are protected: when hybrid coalitions and reformer-controlled platforms endure, when adaptive networks outlast project cycles, and when there is space for judgement that is more durable than any single programme. In this context, international engagement—however modest—can be the yeast that helps

politics rise, if it is anchored in reformer agency and exercised with political craft. Without judgement, it is just inert dough.

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