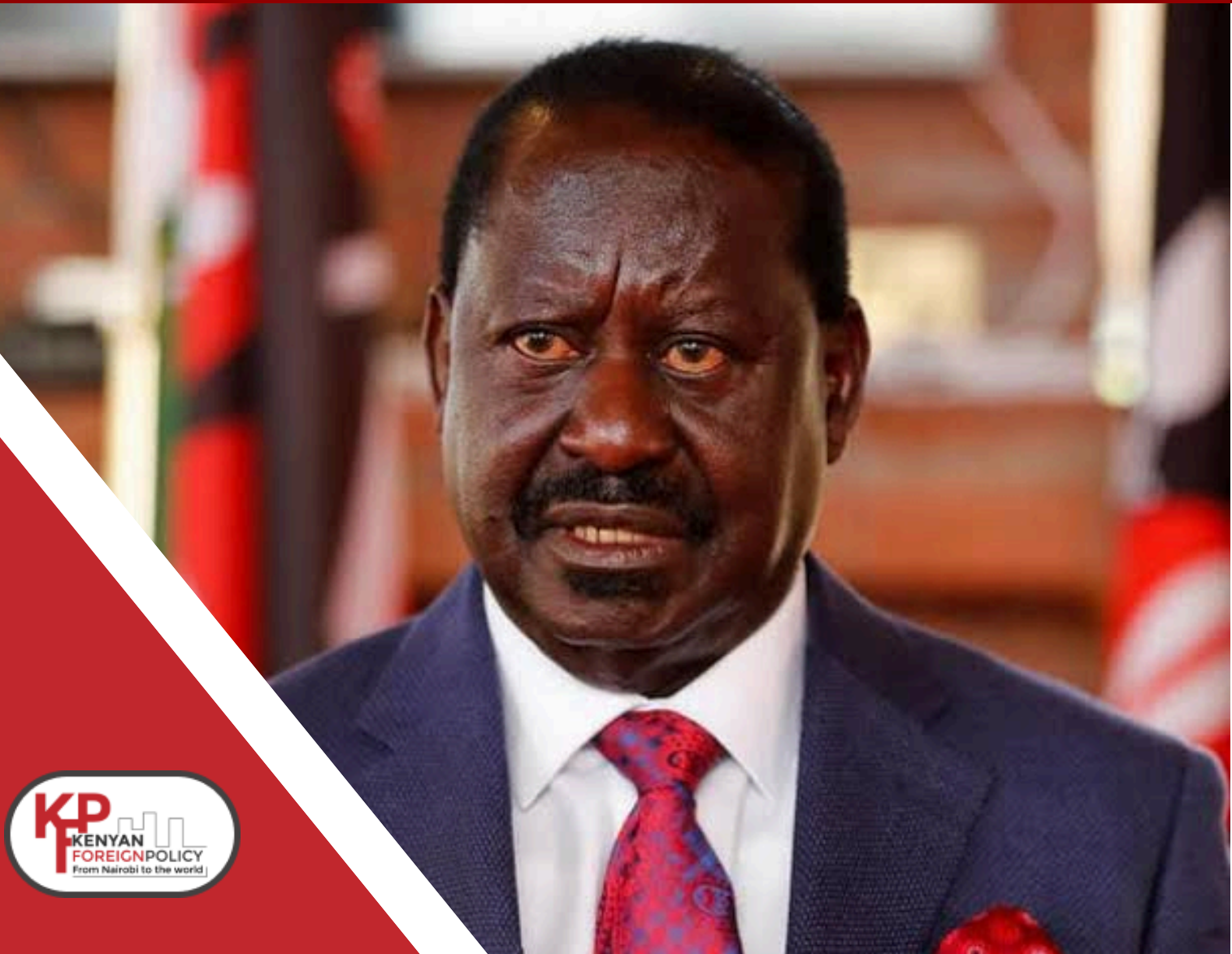


POLICY BRIEF

IMPLICATIONS OF PRESIDENT RUTO'S ENDORSEMENT OF RAILA ODINGA FOR THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION CHAIRMANSHIP

FROM BITTER RIVALS TO A POLITICAL COUPLE

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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief examines the strategic implications of President William Ruto's endorsement and funding of Raila Odinga's bid for the African Union Commission (AUC) chairmanship. Raila Odinga, a veteran opposition leader with four unsuccessful presidential campaigns, is now aiming for the continent's top diplomatic position, seeking to succeed Chadian Moussa Faki, whose term ends next year. The analysis focuses on the potential domestic political impact of this move, particularly in relation to the upcoming Kenyan presidential election in three years.

BACKGROUND

Raila Odinga, the son of Kenya's founding Vice President Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, has a long history of political maneuvering that often involves aligning with those in power to secure influential positions. In 2001, Raila merged his National Development Party (NDP) with then-President Daniel Arap Moi's ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). This merger was part of Moi's strategy to consolidate power and prepare for his succession. As a result, Raila was appointed Minister for Energy, effectively joining the government. However, the alliance soured when Moi chose Uhuru Kenyatta as his preferred successor over Raila, prompting Raila to leave KANU and join the opposition. This move led to the formation of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and eventually the Orange

Democratic Movement (ODM).

A similar scenario played out in 2008, when Raila lost the 2007 presidential election to Mwai Kibaki. Despite the contentious election, which led to widespread violence, Raila joined the coalition government as Prime Minister from 2008 to 2013. Once again, he leveraged his position within the government, despite initially being in opposition.

The pattern repeated itself in 2018 when Raila and then-President Uhuru Kenyatta surprised the nation with a reconciliation that became famously known as "The Handshake." This move, announced at Harambee House in Nairobi, was framed as an effort to put aside political differences for the sake of national unity and peace. While this gained support among Raila's followers, it also strategically aimed to sideline William Ruto, who was then the Deputy President.

Raila's history of aligning with the government, even after losing elections, demonstrates his pragmatic approach to politics, often positioning himself where he can maintain influence and relevance.



ANALYSIS

1. Political Annihilation of Raila Odinga:

- **Strategic Removal:** Endorsing Raila for the AUC role effectively sidelines him from the Kenyan political scene for at least four years, possibly longer, depending on his success in the continental role. This move significantly reduces the chances of Raila posing a serious challenge to Ruto in the next presidential election.
- **Age Factor:** Raila, who would be in his eighties by the time of the next Kenyan election, might find it challenging to re-enter the political fray after serving a term at the AU. Africa, as a young continent, might not favor an older candidate for leadership roles, making Raila's political future uncertain.

2. Public Perception and Criticism:

- **Criticism from Supporters:** Raila's bid has received a lukewarm response from the Kenyan public, particularly from his base, who feel betrayed by his cooperation with Ruto's government. The perception that Raila has repeatedly "conned" his supporters by leveraging his political influence to gain favor with his rivals may further alienate him from his core base.
- **Online Backlash:** The younger population, in particular, has expressed dissatisfaction with Raila's actions, feeling that he has compromised his principles. This discontent could diminish his influence, regardless of the outcome of the AUC bid.

3. Ruto's Strategic Positioning:

- **Win-Win Scenario:** Whether Raila wins or loses the AUC bid, Ruto stands to benefit. If Raila wins, Ruto will have successfully removed a significant rival from the domestic political scene. If Raila loses, Ruto can distance himself from the failure, positioning himself as a leader who gave Raila a fair chance but was ultimately not responsible for the loss.
- **Leverage in Future Political Narratives:** In the event of a fallout between Ruto and Raila, Ruto could use Raila's potential failure at the AU as a political weapon, painting him as ineffective and incapable of securing broader African support, thereby weakening Raila's standing in Kenya.

CONCLUSIONS

President Ruto's endorsement of Raila Odinga for the AUC chairmanship is a masterstroke in political strategy. It serves to neutralize a domestic rival and reshapes the political landscape in Kenya ahead of the next presidential election. Regardless of the outcome at the AU, Ruto's move positions him advantageously, allowing him to either claim credit for Raila's success or leverage his failure for political gain. This policy brief concludes that the endorsement is a calculated move that will have significant implications for Kenya's domestic politics, reinforcing Ruto's position while potentially diminishing Raila's influence.