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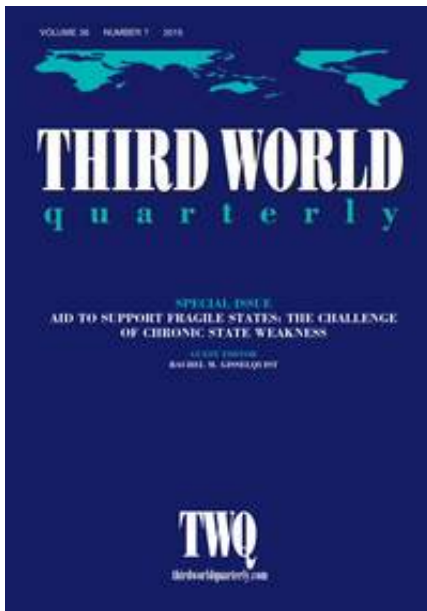
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Articles

# Towards a theory of fragile state transitions: evidence from Yemen, Bangladesh and Laos

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# Abstract

This article uses the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) fragile states framework to evaluate fragile state transitions. Our objective is to find out why some states considered fragile have recovered, while others remain fragile for long periods. We identify three categories of countries: those in a fragility trap, those that have exited it, and those that fluctuate between fragility and stability. CIFP data are used to examine state transitions for each category. One state from each category is then subjected to further country-level analysis. Our findings reinforce the view that state transitions do not follow a unique path and that effective engagement in fragile states requires different approaches across cases.

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## Abstract

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This article uses the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) fragile states framework to evaluate fragile state transitions. Our objective is to find out why some states considered fragile have recovered, while others remain fragile for long periods. We identify three categories of countries: those in a fragility trap, those that have exited it, and those that fluctuate between fragility and stability. CIFP data are used to examine state transitions for each category. One state from each category is then subjected to further country-level analysis. Our findings reinforce the view that state transitions do not follow a unique path and that effective engagement in fragile states requires different approaches across cases.

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## Introduction

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The majority of research on state fragility has, thus far, focused on its causes and consequences.<sup>1</sup>

1. Rotberg, When States Fail; Starr, Dealing with Failed States; Ghani and Lockhart, Fixing Failed States; and

Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu, “The OECD’s Discourse on Fragile States.”[View all notes](#)

Policy responses have been purely reactive, leading to costly, ineffective outcomes and often-irreversible situations which require massive amounts of resources and sustained engagement to remedy.<sup>2</sup>

2. Carment et al., “State Failure”; and Brinkerhoff, “State Failure and Fragility.”[View all notes](#)

Our objective in this article is to determine why some countries that were once considered fragile have successfully recovered, while others remain fragile for long periods of time. If successful, such a comparison could provide valuable insights on how states that are slipping into deeper fragility can be prevented from doing so.<sup>3</sup>

3. Carment, “Assessing State Failure.”[View all notes](#)

We use the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) fragile states framework to evaluate state performance over time.<sup>4</sup>

4. The methodology, data and indicator descriptions and results from research can be found at

[www.carleton.ca/cifp](http://www.carleton.ca/cifp). Data for the period 1980–2012 were used.[View all notes](#)

We argue that transitions are a function of the sequencing of changes in key structural features of ‘stateness’. For states that successfully exit fragility, not only do we observe improvement in these key features, we also see specific causal sequences. Understanding the underlying causal features of these changes generates theories about fragility dynamics. Only a few studies have attempted to track state fragility. Some are driven largely by theoretical insights;<sup>5</sup>

5. Goldstone, “Pathways to State Failure”; and Bates, “The Logic of State Failure.”[View all notes](#)

others, like ours, are informed by empirical analysis.<sup>6</sup>

6. Marshall and Cole, Global Report 2014.[View all notes](#)

The policy import is clear. Donors need to better understand the kinds of resources to allocate as states transition. For example, fragile states often have short-term vulnerabilities that make transition to effective democratic governance extremely problematic, and even destabilising.<sup>7</sup>

7. Naude et al., Fragile States.[View all notes](#)

Thus, any strategy advocating democratisation, good governance and rapid economic modernisation must take into account the possibility that such efforts may, in the short run, trigger instability.<sup>8</sup>

8. Cordell and Wolff, Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict; and Newman and DeRouen, Routledge Handbook of Civil Wars.[View all notes](#)

In the subsequent sections we explain the CIFP framework. We then extract three types of countries from our data, discuss their broad structural features, and examine the sequencing of changes across these country types.<sup>9</sup>

9. For our purposes the term ‘sequencing’ means the order in which authority, legitimacy and capacity change over time. Timing, on the other hand, refers to the engagement by a third party (a donor or intervening force for example) to respond to these changes. Strategic timing is therefore a response to a sequence of changes within a fragile state, in which a decision is made to allocate resources with the full understanding of the consequences of that resource allocation.[View all notes](#)

Our conclusion considers theory-building implications and highlights directions for future work.<sup>10</sup>

10. Consider, for example, Brinkerhoff, “State Fragility and Failure”; Marshall and Cole, Global Report 2014; and Van de Walle, “The Economic Correlates of State Failure” for approaches similar to ours, in that they focus on first causes. On the other hand, works such as Kasfir, “Domestic Anarchy”; and Klare, “The Deadly Connection,” with their focus on armed conflict, state predation and anarchy, are representative of studies in the literature that we think provide analyses of symptoms that are a function of a larger set of underlying structural problems.[View all notes](#)

# The CIFP fragile states framework

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With its emphasis on a state's structural properties, the CIFP approach to fragility is intended to capture and integrate a number of distinct academic and policy frameworks.<sup>11</sup>

11. For a description of the methodology, see Carment et al., Security, Development, and the Fragile State. Following consultations with a panel of experts, CIFP decided at the outset to classify each of its indicators into one of the A, L or C clusters [View all notes](#)

Our approach follows a number of studies, including work by Naude et al, who conclude that fragility's causes can be traced to low development status, vulnerability and the lack of a developmental state.<sup>12</sup>

12. Naude et al., Fragile States, 5. See also Carment et al., "Fragile States and Aid Effectiveness." [View all notes](#)  
The methodology underpinning the framework is based on three core assumptions of stateness.<sup>13</sup>

13. For details, see Carment et al., Security, Development, and the Fragile State. [View all notes](#)

Authority (A) captures the extent to which a state possesses the ability to enact binding legislation over its population, to exercise coercive force over its sovereign territory, to provide core public goods, and to provide a stable and secure environment for its citizens and communities. Legitimacy (L) describes the extent to which a particular government commands public loyalty and generates domestic support for legislation and policies. Capacity (C) refers to the potential for a state to mobilise and employ resources towards productive ends, similar to the focus on progressive service delivery.<sup>14</sup>

14. Stewart and Brown, "State Fragility." See also Balamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, "State Fragility." [View all notes](#)

Our data cover 190 countries with 80 distinct indicators that are aggregated and indexed to produce lists of country rankings, including ALC scores, an overall fragility index and six clusters (economic development, human development, governance, security and crime, demography, and environment). These rankings reflect a country's performance relative to a global sample of countries. A key aspect of this approach is that we can make valid comparisons across states using identical measures of performance and compare any country against the larger sample. This approach is consistent with a number of recent studies focusing on the relative aspects of state fragility.<sup>15</sup>

15. See, for example, Balamoune-Lutz and McGillivray's critical exposé of the CPIA rankings used by the World Bank. Balamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, "State Fragility." [View all notes](#)

## A typology of countries

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In order to understand state transitions, we identify three types of countries from our data. In view of the critical importance of context, we use a baseline of 1980 to establish the core drivers of fragility. To get a sense of magnitudes, in 2012 the 10 worst performers had fragility scores of 6.7 or higher (with Somalia being the worst performer at 7.8). The next 10 worst performers had fragility scores of 6.3 or above. The first 38 countries in our sample had a fragility score of 6.0 or higher.

The three types are those caught in a fragility trap, those that have successfully exited and stabilised, and those that fluctuate between extreme fragility and stability. In our typology we considered both the ranking of countries and their fragility scores. Countries that are caught in a fragility trap (Type 1) were selected based on the number of times they appeared in the top 20 fragile states; they are also countries that rank among the worst average performers over the whole period, with fragility scores of 6.5 and above over several years. For countries that have ‘exited’ fragility (Type 2), we use our yearly rankings to identify those that were able to exit the top 40 for most of the past 10 years. These are countries that showed a clear improvement in fragility scores over the whole period, with scores that have never exceeded 6.0 in recent years. Finally, for the group of countries that have been in and out of fragility (Type 3), we considered those that had moved in and out of the top 40 ranked countries in terms of fragility, and whose scores oscillated below and above 6.0 for the whole period. This comparison yielded the following countries (Table 1).

### **Table 1. Typology of cases.**

[CSVPDF](#)Display Table

Table 2 provides statistical information about the three types of countries identified above. In the case of Type 1 countries, authority scores are the highest (worse) on average and are also the most volatile. These countries have also seen their ALC scores worsen over time. Countries that exited fragility (Type 2) have the most volatile authority scores with some improvement over time. However, for these countries, improvements in authority and legitimacy scores have more than made up for the worsening of capacity scores over time. Type 3 countries have seen their ALC scores worsen over time but it is mostly the larger increase in authority scores (which happen to be also the most volatile) compared with relatively stable (even if increasing slightly) legitimacy and capacity scores that has prevented them from exiting fragility indefinitely. Authority scores, whether in terms of levels or volatility, play a key role across the different country types.

### **Table 2. ALC characteristics of country types.**

[CSVPDF](#)Display Table

With these basic findings in mind we examine the sequencing dynamics present in a country of each type.<sup>16</sup>

16. Eisenhardt, “Building Theories from Case Study Research.”[View all notes](#)

In this particular study we highlight the differences among the three types through a structured comparative approach, by isolating and comparing common variables such as the ALC clusters and an identical time period for each. Subsequent cases can hence be held up for comparison in order to determine whether the findings from these three cases hold true more generally.<sup>17</sup>



17. Ibid. [View all notes](#)

We will refine the initial insights regarding transitions and sequencing through an even greater sample of cases and subsequent data analysis in future studies. <sup>18</sup>

18. See Tikuisis et al., “Typology of State Types,” for a similar treatment of the data. [View all notes](#)

Specifically, we examine Yemen (Type 1), Bangladesh (Type 2) and Laos (Type 3) as exemplars of each particular type of state identified in Table 1. Because of the small sample size from which the cases are being selected, random selection is an inappropriate technique. <sup>19</sup>

19. Seawright and Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques.” [View all notes](#)

We use instead, a ‘typical-case approach’. <sup>20</sup>

20. Gerring, Case Study Research, 91. [View all notes](#)

This methodology is based on the idea that the case selected is representative of the broader set of cases within the given category, and is used to identify and explain causal mechanisms as evidence for or against a given theory to be tested using a large sample. <sup>21</sup>

21. Seawright and Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques.” [View all notes](#)

Yemen represents an ideal case of a country stuck in fragility for a significant time with periodic bouts of conflict; it has not been subject to discrete international intervention, and it sits at the ‘middle of the pack’ statistically when compared to the other candidate countries in its category. Bangladesh has seen positive transformation through effective leadership choices and the allocation of international aid, despite being a relatively young and vulnerable state. Laos moves in and out of extreme fragility numerous times over the period examined.

## Analysis of cases

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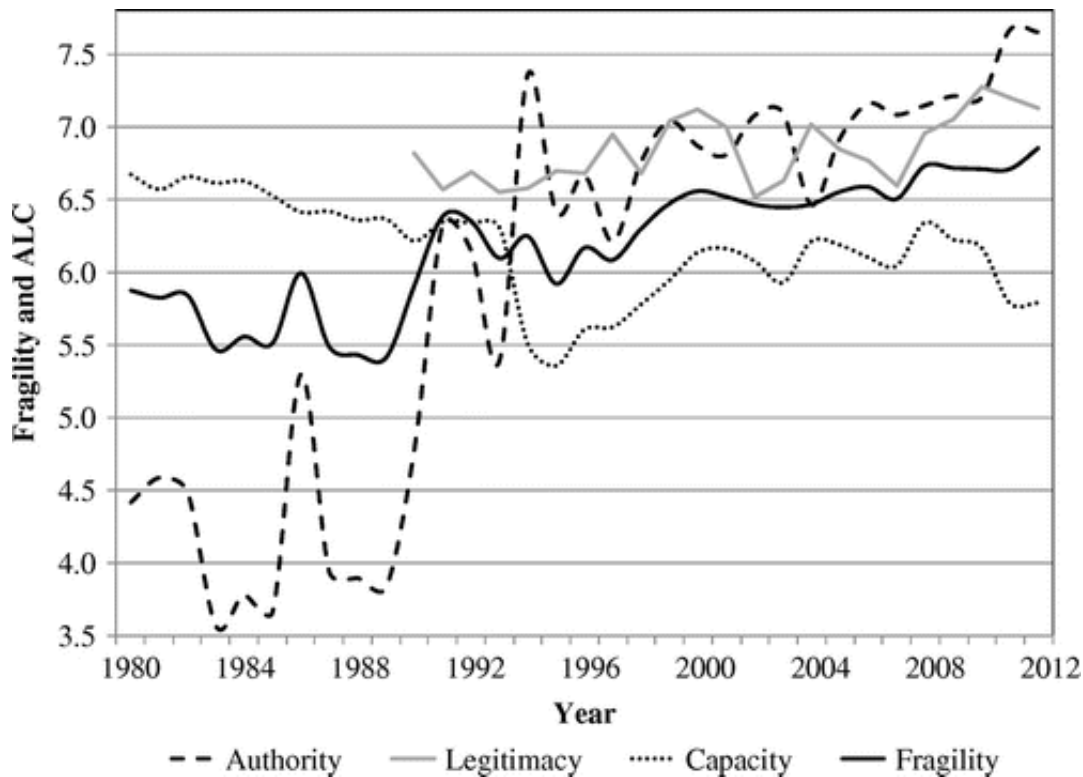
### Type 1: Yemen

Yemen’s fragility trajectory has been almost uniformly negative for the entire period of study (1990–2012), <sup>22</sup>

22. In the case of Yemen the data for legitimacy are only available from 1990 onwards. [View all notes](#)

even deteriorating recently with the collapse of the government in 2015. This pattern is led by volatility in authority, characterised by significant divisions between regional and tribal identities, divisions that former President Abdullah Saleh aggravated by favouring northerners for political posts and oil revenue sharing. Legitimacy appears to have followed authority in deteriorating over time, suggesting a relationship between the two. There were modest improvements in capacity, thanks mainly to oil revenues, but these were not enough to overcome the significant deteriorations in authority and legitimacy (Figure 1). A more focused analysis of A, L, and C within the six clusters (governance, economic development, security and crime, human development, demography, and environment) identifies authority as the primary driver, which then creates a feedback loop where legitimacy deteriorates and capacity is limited as a result.

Figure 1. Yemen, fragility and ALC, 1980–2012.



[PowerPoint slide](#) [Original jpg \(115.00KB\)](#) [Display full size](#)

The security and crime cluster is the most volatile of the six clusters, given Yemen's history of conflict since 1994. This is evident in the consistently high terrorism indicators, as well as extremely high military expenditures. Civil war erupted immediately after unification, while secessionist movements have plagued the country ever since. Significant armed conflict and crime have been almost ever-present and have continued to grow as separatist movements and Islamist groups increased their ties in the region. As a result, the state has never been perceived (across the country) as being the only legitimate source of security. The increasing northern 'colonisation' of the south after the 1994 conflict has exacerbated these tensions. Support for, and security assistance from, the USA has compromised further the legitimacy of the security forces in the eyes of many Yemenis.<sup>23</sup>

23. Katz, "Yemen," 1–3. See also Boucek, Terrorism out of Yemen. [View all notes](#)

Governance scores remained consistently poor and worsened under Saleh's rule. Authority in this sector has been consistently weak, as demonstrated by the consistent deterioration in government effectiveness and poor rule of law scores. Yemenis by and large have been, and continue to be, more loyal to their kinship, tribal and regional identities than to the state, and have thus often refused to recognise the authority of the government.<sup>24</sup>

24. Bertelsmann, BTI 2012: Yemen Country Report, 6. [View all notes](#)

To compensate for instability, Saleh built a patronage regime, funded by oil wealth; many of those who recognised his rule did so because they were attached to this system. Authority challenges are also linked to a decline in legitimacy indicators. Level of democracy, in particular, declines over the entire period.

Although Yemen's constitution provided for pluralist democratic institutions, in reality power was held by Saleh and his allies.<sup>25</sup>

25. Ibid., 3–5. [View all notes](#)

Indeed, voice and accountability in decision-making scores deteriorated significantly over the period. The patronage system was expensive to maintain, and cleavages in Yemeni society (familial, tribal, regional affiliations, etc) made it even more so. Saleh had to increasingly rely on repression, reducing his legitimacy. This can be seen in the correlation between improvements in permanence of regime type scores and generally stagnant or

deteriorating restrictions on civil liberties and political rights scores.

The economic situation in Yemen has been poor, with very little improvement. Tax evasion is rampant in the country (taxes account for only 7.3% of the country's GDP).<sup>26</sup>

26. Phillips, Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 62.[View all notes](#)

The government compensated by raising corporate tax rates, encouraging corporate actors to participate in the corruption network. Poor regulatory quality and paying taxes indicators are evidence of this. Capacity problems also plague the economy. Proximate indicators such as reserve holdings, trade balance and trade openness fluctuated wildly over the period of study, indicating sensitivity to shocks. The government has relied on oil exports to prop up the economy but this does not offer many prospects for Yemen's large, low-skilled labour force. Unemployment in particular has steadily deteriorated. Legitimacy is weak because the majority of the economic benefits in Yemen are redistributed among corrupt patronage networks. There is very little economic activity outside of this (with the exception of qat farming). Government management of the economy is seen as mostly illegitimate.

The human development cluster has shown little or no improvement. As a result of its challenges in projecting authority, Yemen has been unable to provide basic support for human development. Many services are locally provided, especially by Islamist organisations. Lack of country control has impeded service delivery. Poor infrastructure indicators and a continued underfunding of health and education are important. A significant amount of education comes through religious institutions, with variable standards.<sup>27</sup>

27. Mitchell, "What the Social Sciences can tell Policy-makers."[View all notes](#)

All education completion indicators remain poor, with no long term improvement. Again, the competing nature of service provision by non-state actors (including Islamist groups and tribal militants) reduces the legitimacy of government service provision. While capacity is the primary driver of fragility in this cluster, the problems associated with it are a result of the inability of the government to project its authority over the country.

The demography indicators for Yemen have been poor for the period of study, and are getting worse. In authority terms, the government has been unable to ease demographic and population pressures through policy. There are few opportunities for the growing Yemeni youth population, because of the continued reliance by the government on oil revenues. Yemen has experienced rapid population growth, as well as a growing youth bulge.<sup>28</sup>

28. "Analysis."[View all notes](#)

Furthermore, life expectancy (62 for males and 67 for females) has barely improved. Increasing population pressures further reduce the legitimacy of the government. The demography sequencing is similar to the human development one, in that poor capacity is the main driver but is largely the result of the inability of the government to project its authority through effective policy.

Yemen's environmental indicators are the most positive, but this is thanks to low economic activity, not deliberate policy. Key environmental problems continue to remain unaddressed and are symptomatic of weak authority. Water management remains the most pressing environmental issue in Yemen but there has been little action on it. Fearful of closing one of the few economic 'safety valves' for Yemenis, the government has not cracked down on qat production, which is extremely water-intensive.<sup>29</sup>

29. Heffez, "How Yemen chewed itself Dry."[View all notes](#)

Water (and air) quality are also further affected by loose pollution regulation of the oil and gas sector. This reluctance to address environmental issues has had an impact on the capacity and legitimacy aspects of this cluster as well. Capacity indicators such as arable land availability and forest area have neither improved nor deteriorated, suggesting a relative absence of government policy.

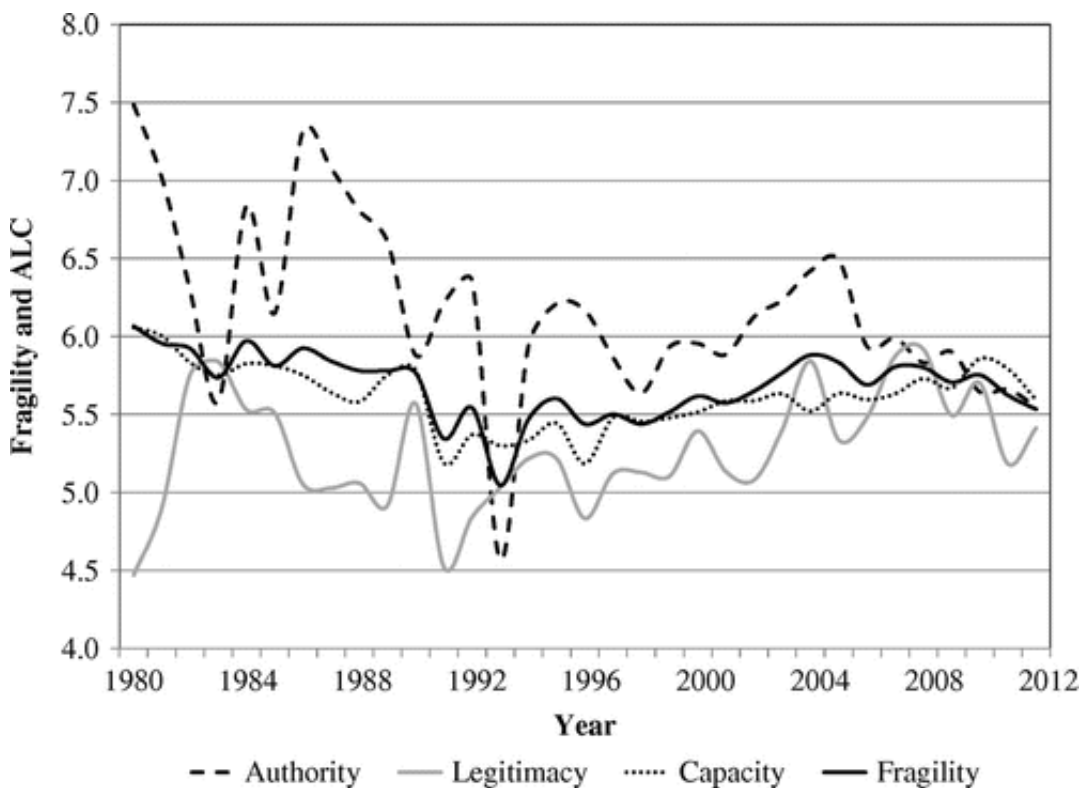
The cluster analysis above identifies authority as the primary driver of fragility in Yemen. Two (security and crime, and governance) of the six clusters showed a clear authority-legitimacy linkage, two (economic

development and environment) gave primacy to authority, and the remaining two (human development and demography) indicated an authority–capacity feedback loop as the primary driver. Thus, the continuing volatility in authority has both prevented meaningful improvements in capacity and is also tied to a decline in legitimacy. The sequence for Yemen, then, is: A, L, with C operating independently to some extent. This suggests that the entry point for engagement should primarily be aimed at Yemen’s authority structures, but that a dual improvement in capacity may also be required.

## Type 2: Bangladesh

Bangladesh’s fragility scores have improved over the past three decades and it has exited the top 40 rankings in recent years. Not only did authority scores improve, we can also see a decline in volatility over time. Compared with Yemen, there seems to be less dependence between authority and legitimacy. While legitimacy deteriorated, improved capacity together with authority allowed the country to improve its fragility scores (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Bangladesh, fragility and ALC, 1980–2012.



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The security and crime cluster is the most volatile. Bangladesh has had a tumultuous history of political violence – usually surrounding transitions of political power. Henry Kissinger famously termed the country a ‘basket case’ and, while in terms of development it appears to be improving, political violence has continued to plague it over the past three decades.<sup>30</sup>

30. Khan, “Aid and Governance in Vulnerable States.”[View all notes](#)

National strikes and other forms of dissent have been the rule rather than the exception. From 1975 to 1990 the country was under military rule, whereas after 1991 a democratic system was brought into place.<sup>31</sup>

31. Van Schendel, A History of Bangladesh.[View all notes](#)

In parliament, power has swung back and forth repeatedly between the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party during highly contested elections. These problems continue to arise in the present day and represent mainly a challenge to authority.

Numerous contested elections, along with rioting, voter intimidation and terrorist activity have all played a role in driving the country's precarious security situation. Politically motivated terrorist attacks plagued Bangladesh throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the worst of which occurred in 2005 as over 500 bombs exploded across virtually all areas of the country simultaneously.<sup>32</sup>

32. Ibid. [View all notes](#)

Overall incidents of terrorism reached a peak in 1996 (more than 150 incidents) and have since dropped to a much lower level (fluctuating between 10 and 30 incidents per year). In terms of military spending Bangladesh has remained relatively constant, staying at between 1% and 1.5% of GDP during the 1990s and 2000s.

Spending peaked in 2012 but looks to be on the decline for 2013.<sup>33</sup>

33. World Bank, World Development Indicators. [View all notes](#)

The sequencing pattern here is driven first by authority and legitimacy, as the bitter political rivalries impede the government's ability to enforce the law, while perceptions of the ruling party as illegitimate undermine credibility. The governance cluster hit a low in the 1980s, improved during the 1990s but began to worsen in the past decade. Extremely partisan politics – wherein citizens are more loyal to their own political party than to the state as a whole – have led to crises in government effectiveness and the rule of law, as evidenced by the poor scores in both areas. Stronger and more ingrained checks and balances within government institutions are slowly but surely beginning to reverse the trend. Fortunately, there is a growing sense of Bangladeshi identity that needs to be cultivated in order to improve the effectiveness of parliament and the institutions required to enforce laws and norms.<sup>34</sup>

34. Zafarullah and Rahman, "The Impaired State." [View all notes](#)

Here legitimacy is the primary driver of instability, leading to problems with authority downstream.

Turning now to the economic situation, it is interesting to note Bangladesh's unique standing among other countries which have escaped extreme fragility: it has managed to do so despite not having a distinct inflection point occur, such as the end of a civil war. After gaining independence in 1971 Bangladesh quickly developed its burgeoning textile and garment industries, a decision which helped to propel the country's economic growth.<sup>35</sup>

35. Ahmed, "Sustaining Ready-made Garment Exports." [View all notes](#)

The country's economic performance has been impressive, particularly over the past decade, which saw an average annual growth rate of nearly 6%.<sup>36</sup>

36. World Bank, World Development Indicators. [View all notes](#)

The government taxation regime has also continued to advance, taking in 8.1% of GDP in 2004 and rising to 10% by 2011. Finally, unemployment has remained steady, hovering between 4% and 5%.<sup>37</sup>

37. Ibid. [View all notes](#)

One of the key lessons emerging from this case is that economic development can act as a driving force for greater stability.<sup>38</sup>

38. Khan, "Aid and Governance in Vulnerable States." [View all notes](#)

This finding is perhaps the most important, in that we see capacity improvements leading the overall decrease in fragility, with authority and legitimacy following behind in sequence.

Bangladesh is a unique case where export growth (especially in the textile and garment sectors) and increases in remittance flows have driven the country's impressive economic performance, enabling improvement in development indicators. Human development showed a marked improvement in the early 1990s but has worsened in recent years. About one-third of people live in 'extreme poverty' and more than half live below the World Bank's poverty line.<sup>39</sup>

39. World Bank, World Development Indicators. [View all notes](#)

Unfortunately Bangladesh scored poorly in the areas of infant mortality, life expectancy, education, income,



access to sanitation and gender equality throughout this period. On the other hand, it has a low rate of HIV infection and also does reasonably well on food security issues. While these issues are closely related to capacity, from the data it does not appear that the human development cluster had a major impact on the transition observed; this is most probably because of the overshadowing by other capacity indicators represented in the economic cluster.

While the demography cluster demonstrated a slight improvement from 1990 to 2012, with a population of over 162 million people in an area just slightly larger than that of England, Bangladesh faces extreme population pressures.<sup>40</sup>

40. Streatfield and Karar, "Population Challenges for Bangladesh." [View all notes](#)

The exponential nature of population growth means that the country is going to face pressures in terms of unemployment and competition for resources. Human capital is one of the country's key assets, creating a dilemma for policy makers. While cheap labour has driven the country forward economically, in coming years these pressures may create more problems, leading to worsening capacity. The country is extremely diverse yet luckily religious and ethnic tensions do not seem to play a major role in terms of being a flashpoint for conflict. This may be as a result of the patriotism that came from splitting from Pakistan and becoming independent. Bangladesh is located within an ecologically unstable but highly fertile region. The country scores relatively well on consumption levels, energy usage and pollution. Conversely, when it comes to availability of arable land and forest area, Bangladesh has troublingly negative scores and the trend line is continuing to worsen. Indeed, about 95% of the natural forests and 50% of freshwater wetlands are already lost or degraded.<sup>41</sup>

41. Aminuzzaman, "Environment Policy of Bangladesh." [View all notes](#)

Agricultural activities have been a major driver of this depletion, as high use of fertilisers, increased pollution and the contamination of groundwater have all occurred. An extremely small proportion of the forest is protected by law (1.4%) and a great deal of species of wildlife and fish have been driven to extinction in the past several decades.<sup>42</sup>

42. Ibid. [View all notes](#)

Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change, as rising sea levels threaten a massive proportion of its viable landmass. High population density and rapid development mean that environmental concerns may very well come to play a larger part in Bangladesh's fragility over time. In terms of sequencing trends, the environmental cluster has continually worsened and may eventually reach a breaking point.

On the whole, Bangladesh's ALC sequencing pattern has been mainly driven by upswings and downswings in authority. Legitimacy has also been somewhat volatile but not nearly to the same extent. Capacity has remained generally stable and has shown modest improvement over time. While the situation is still far from perfect, the level of political violence has decreased gradually over the decades. Coupled with the improvements in capacity the country is on a path out of fragility. It is becoming less reliant on foreign aid and more reliant on international remittances.<sup>43</sup>

43. Maimbo and Ratha, Remittances, 125. [View all notes](#)

Indeed, the latter reached US\$14 billion (more than 10% of GDP) in 2012. Perhaps as impressive is the fact that remittances have been six to eight times higher than aid flows to the country in the past several years.

In the sequencing pattern for Bangladesh three of the clusters examined were driven by changes in authority (security and crime, demography and population, and environment). Both the human development and economic development clusters were directed by changes in capacity, while the governance cluster gave primacy to legitimacy. Hence the sequencing pattern for Bangladesh is mainly dependent on shifts in authority first, with capacity improvements bolstering both authority and legitimacy over time. Although legitimacy only takes the lead in one cluster, it is nevertheless critical to the successful stabilisation of Bangladesh because of the political turmoil that the country has consistently faced. Strategies for engagement should focus on authority first, and legitimacy

second. Capacity is improving steadily without external interference and does not require significant intervention.

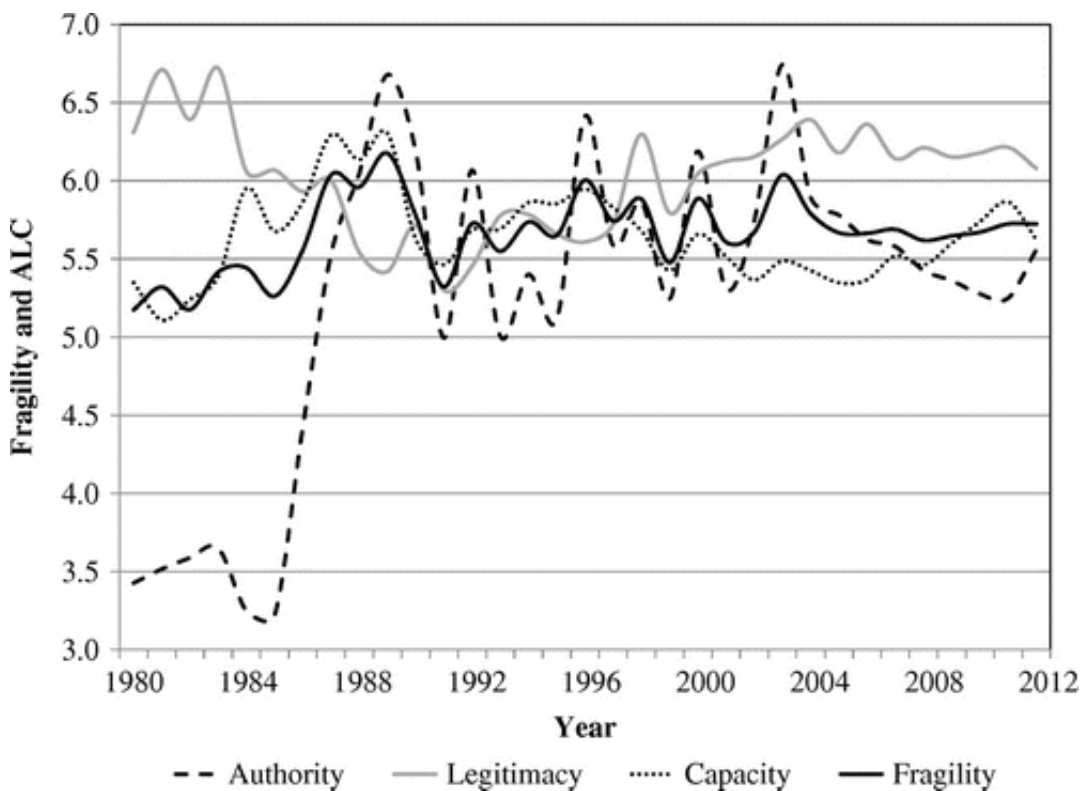
### Type 3: Laos

The picture of Laos's stability from 1980 to 2012<sup>44</sup>

44. Because of a lack of data, the analysis for Laos stops in 2009. [View all notes](#)

is of a country that continually 'exits' fragility (Top 40), only to re-enter it further down the road. While certain shocks are responsible for temporary increases in fragility, there are structural factors which limit the ability of Laos to capitalise on recoveries and translate these into longer-term stability. Authority changed significantly over the period, while legitimacy and capacity did not deteriorate by much when authority scores did, nor did they improve significantly when authority scores recovered (Figure 3). A more focused analysis of A, L, and C within the six clusters identifies authority and capacity as the primary (and self-reinforcing) drivers, with legitimacy playing a secondary role.

Figure 3. Laos, fragility and ALC, 1980–2012.



[PowerPoint slideOriginal.jpg \(117.00KB\)Display full size](#)

The fragility trend line for the security and crime cluster is by far the most erratic. Terrorism indicators, and to a lesser extent conflict indicators, have led the changes, mostly as a result of clashes with insurgent (royalist and Hmong<sup>45</sup>

45. The Hmong are an ethnic group concentrated in the north of Laos who have fielded groups to fight Communist forces in the country since the early 1960s. These groups were supplied and supported by the USA during the Vietnam war, but since the American retreat have become weaker, with most militants having surrendered by 2006. Royalist insurgents are referred to here as non-Hmong groups within Laos that have sought to resist the LPRP in favour of some form of return of the Royal Lao Government (RLG), which was ousted by the LPRP in 1975. [View all notes](#)

) groups and bombings by political factions. The majority of the country has been under Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) control since 1975, with the exception of isolated northern areas and the border

with Thailand. Since the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops (who often provided assistance to the LPRP), the Laotian military has gradually increased its control over the country.<sup>46</sup>

46. Rosser, “Lao People’s Democratic Republic.” [View all notes](#)

On the legitimacy side there have been little to no changes to increase the protection of vulnerable populations and human rights in general. Empowerment remains low, and physical human rights are generally only respected when the populations are not considered a security threat. The formal justice system in Laos remains heavily corrupt.<sup>47</sup>

47. Bertelsmann, BTI 2012: Laos Country Report, 10. [View all notes](#)

In sequencing terms the security and crime cluster is primarily authority-driven. Authority has generally been fairly volatile, which has precluded improvements in capacity.

The governance cluster remained relatively stagnant throughout the period. This is understandable given that the same regime has been in power and relatively unchallenged for the entire period, and can be seen in the steady improvement in permanence of regime type scores. The LPRP has historically found itself almost continually challenged in enforcing decisions and policies outside of Vientiane, especially in the remote north and the border regions with Thailand. There have been controlled elections, such as in 1988, but these have not led to greater democratic participation. Both civil society and the media remain state-controlled. The sequencing in the governance cluster, then, is that continuing volatility in authority prevents meaningful improvements in capacity and legitimacy.

The economic development cluster trend follows the overall fragility trend closely, with major departures appearing at expected moments: spikes in fragility occur from 1987 to 1989, during a period of droughts and border clashes (and resulting trade decreases) with Thailand, and from 1996 to 1998, during floods and the Asian financial crisis. While scores generally recover, they do not show significant improvement thereafter, which indicates capacity problems. Ineffective government regulation of the economy was revealed during the Asian financial crisis, with the central bank being unable to operate financial levers independently to mitigate the impact on Laos.<sup>48</sup>

48. St. John, “The Political Economy of Laos.” [View all notes](#)

The state was interventionist in the early years of LPRP rule, but quickly moved towards market-based policies as a result of internal resistance. The economic development cluster is thus mainly capacity-driven. A continual failure to improve government capacity to manage the economy leaves it vulnerable to exogenous and endogenous shocks, especially those resulting from authority challenges. Furthermore, the massive scale of corruption both limits legitimacy and encourages the development of an informal economy.<sup>49</sup>

49. Stuart-Fox, “The Political Culture of Corruption.” [View all notes](#)

The human development cluster is one of the most consistent clusters, with very little deviation from its high trend line. Laos remains an aid-dependent nation and relies on many NGOs and Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) to assist in human development-related projects. Human development services have generally been located in Vientiane and some other major urban centres. The state has the capacity to target specific initiatives, such as maternal and neonatal health, and primary school enrolment, but continues to underfund both the health and education sectors.<sup>50</sup>

50. WHO, Health Service Delivery Profile. [View all notes](#)

Additionally, Laos lacks skilled personnel from both fields, especially in rural areas. The continuing urban–rural divide in the delivery of services further hampers legitimacy. Authority challenges to the government have limited its capacity to provide basic services outside the capital, forcing it to rely on NGOs and IGOs and aid donors. This creates a feedback loop in which authority challenges limit capacity improvements, which further increase vulnerability to authority challenges.

The demography cluster trend is, like the human development cluster, quite stagnant, generally hovering between



6.0 and 6.5 for the period. The fact that it is consistently higher than the overall fragility trend is a testament to the continuing structural demographic issues Laos has faced since 1980. Incremental increases in health care effectiveness have helped improve life expectancies, although Laos still lags behind the regional and world average.<sup>51</sup>

51. World Bank, “Life Expectancy at Birth.”[View all notes](#)

The low capacity in the delivery of services and programmes related to demography and population is a product of the wider ineffectiveness of the government to project its authority.<sup>52</sup>

52. Bertelsmann, BTI 2012: Laos Country Report, 6–7.[View all notes](#)

Like human development, authority challenges to the government have limited its ability to provide demography-related services outside the capital, forcing it to rely on NGOs and IGOs.

The environment cluster data are consistently below the overall fragility line. This is because of poor economic development. Policy and policy implementation in the environmental sector remain weak and symptomatic of authority issues. The government has taken great strides to reduce slash and burn agriculture, which increases soil degradation and erosion, as well as vulnerability to natural disasters; however, farmers continue to resist such efforts. It has also tried to limit poaching and logging by establishing protected zones, but these efforts have been undermined by the active collusion of officials in such activities.<sup>53</sup>

53. Roder, “Slash-and-burn Rice Systems.”[View all notes](#)

The benefits of the resource extraction industry go to the few well-connected officials, while the general population bears the environmental costs.<sup>54</sup>

54. Stuart-Fox, “The Political Culture of Corruption.”[View all notes](#)

In the environment cluster capacity and authority operate in a self-reinforcing loop of instability; weakness in each one prevents meaningful improvement in the other. Legitimacy suffers as a result.

The cluster analysis above identifies authority as a proximate cause of fragility, with capacity as a structural cause, in a sort of self-reinforcing feedback loop. Three of the six clusters showed a clear authority–capacity feedback loop, two gave primacy to authority and one was driven by capacity. In all six clusters legitimacy came last, and sometimes acted independently of authority and capacity. The sequence for Laos, then, is: A/C, followed by L. This suggests that the entry point for engagement should be dually focused on improving authority *and* capacity, with a secondary focus on legitimacy improvement.

## Conclusion

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In this article we have tried to answer the question of why certain countries are perpetually stuck in a fragility trap, while others are able to exit to a reasonable degree. To further nuance our analysis, we also considered a third category of countries which have moved ‘in and out’ of extreme fragility. By disaggregating fragility into the discrete categories of authority, legitimacy and capacity we have been able to examine the sequencing of each type of transition across the three categories. The cases examined in this article provide a starting point for theory

development in regard to which clusters tend to lead to overall improvement, a ‘trap’; or ‘in and out’ behaviour. Some important patterns have been identified.

For those mired at the bottom, like Yemen, we showed that challenges to authority have been the primary factor keeping it trapped in extreme fragility. This result suggests that focusing first on interventions that bolster authority structures are the best strategy for moving these states along the path to stability. We know that, at least intuitively, authority challenges do not simply arise out of thin air. They are based on perceived injustices and legitimate grievances and arise in many cases as a result of a misdistribution of resources.

For countries that exit fragility, like Bangladesh, lifting their population out of poverty is a way to improve the legitimacy of the state. International development agencies could help these ‘exited’ countries’ economic capabilities and competitiveness as a way to strengthen legitimacy and authority. At the same time, while Khan notes that ‘developmental rent allocations succeeded in creating new sectors such as garment and textiles in Bangladesh’, it is also important to recognise that attempts to improve governance through aid have been less successful.<sup>55</sup>

55. Khan, “Aid and Governance in Vulnerable States.” [View all notes](#)

This juxtaposition illustrates the complexity that arises when examining the effects of foreign aid on fragility.

Clearly it may have a positive effect, yet at the same time it is not a ‘magic bullet’ to be relied on – many other factors account for improvements in governance and institutions as well.

For countries in and out of fragility, such as Laos, we have shown that both authority and capacity were critical in helping propel the country out of the bottom 40, while legitimacy was not as important. In this case a two-pronged donor policy focusing on both may be the most appropriate strategy for long-term engagement. Overall we have illustrated how, for different fragility transitions, different strategies must be employed in terms of both the nature and timing of interventions. Certainly more research is needed before we can state that our findings here are conclusive. Local context will always matter immensely and each country situation is unique.

These results tend to support the idea that, in the most extreme cases of fragility, operational responses that focus on reinforcing, stabilising and strengthening authority structures are well placed. Second, in situations where fragility is not extreme, strategic timing will be more crucial for particular performance clusters because of the positive feedbacks that they create for other weak areas. Alignment with local priorities, coordination among international actors, acting fast but staying engaged for a long period of time, and avoiding pockets of exclusion, as recommended by the OECD,<sup>56</sup>

56. OECD, Principles for Good International Engagement. [View all notes](#)

are all sensible in theory.

All of this speaks to two concluding observations. First, it is time to move beyond such exclusive definitions and understandings of fragility defined by the presence of large-scale violence. A second observation focuses on the need for closer and better monitoring of specific countries whose negative trends might be reversed through strategically timed and fairly narrow interventions. Knowing precisely the trajectory a state is on will help in determining the kinds of programmes that are likely to be effective under specific conditions. The exact timing process will depend on a variety of contextual factors, from the complexity of the fragile state in question and its trajectory, to the number of actors involved in the potential engagement, to the operational structure and culture of the lead departments and agencies.

## Notes on contributors

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## Notes

1. Rotberg, *When States Fail*; Starr, *Dealing with Failed States*; Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*; and Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu, “The OECD’s Discourse on Fragile States.”
2. Carment et al., “State Failure”; and Brinkerhoff, “State Failure and Fragility.”
3. Carment, “Assessing State Failure.”
4. The methodology, data and indicator descriptions and results from research can be found at [www.carleton.ca/cifp](http://www.carleton.ca/cifp). Data for the period 1980–2012 were used.
5. Goldstone, “Pathways to State Failure”; and Bates, “The Logic of State Failure.”
6. Marshall and Cole, *Global Report 2014*.
7. Naude et al., *Fragile States*.
8. Cordell and Wolff, *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*; and Newman and DeRouen, *Routledge Handbook of Civil Wars*.
9. For our purposes the term ‘sequencing’ means the order in which authority, legitimacy and capacity change over time. Timing, on the other hand, refers to the engagement by a third party (a donor or intervening force for example) to respond to these changes. Strategic timing is therefore a response to a sequence of changes within a fragile state, in which a decision is made to allocate resources with the full understanding of the consequences of that resource allocation.
10. Consider, for example, Brinkerhoff, “State Fragility and Failure”; Marshall and Cole, *Global Report 2014*;

and Van de Walle, “The Economic Correlates of State Failure” for approaches similar to ours, in that they focus on first causes. On the other hand, works such as Kasfir, “Domestic Anarchy”; and Klare, “The Deadly Connection,” with their focus on armed conflict, state predation and anarchy, are representative of studies in the literature that we think provide analyses of symptoms that are a function of a larger set of underlying structural problems.

11. For a description of the methodology, see Carment et al., *Security, Development, and the Fragile State*. Following consultations with a panel of experts, CIFP decided at the outset to classify each of its indicators into one of the A, L or C clusters
12. Naude et al., *Fragile States*, 5. See also Carment et al., “Fragile States and Aid Effectiveness.”
13. For details, see Carment et al., *Security, Development, and the Fragile State*.
14. Stewart and Brown, “State Fragility.” See also Balamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, “State Fragility.”
15. See, for example, Balamoune-Lutz and McGillivray’s critical exposé of the CPIA rankings used by the World Bank. Balamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, “State Fragility.”
16. Eisenhardt, “Building Theories from Case Study Research.”
17. Ibid.
18. See Tikuisis et al., “Typology of State Types,” for a similar treatment of the data.
19. Seawright and Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques.”
20. Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 91.
21. Seawright and Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques.”
22. In the case of Yemen the data for legitimacy are only available from 1990 onwards.
23. Katz, “Yemen,” 1–3. See also Boucek, *Terrorism out of Yemen*.
24. Bertelsmann, *BTI 2012: Yemen Country Report*, 6.
25. Ibid., 3–5.
26. Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, 62.
27. Mitchell, “What the Social Sciences can tell Policy-makers.”
28. “Analysis.”
29. Heffez, “How Yemen chewed itself Dry.”
30. Khan, “Aid and Governance in Vulnerable States.”
31. Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*.
32. Ibid.
33. World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
34. Zafarullah and Rahman, “The Impaired State.”
35. Ahmed, “Sustaining Ready-made Garment Exports.”
36. World Bank, *World Development Indicators*.
37. Ibid.
38. Khan, “Aid and Governance in Vulnerable States.”
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40. Streatfield and Karar, “Population Challenges for Bangladesh.”
41. Aminuzzaman, “Environment Policy of Bangladesh.”
42. Ibid.
43. Maimbo and Ratha, *Remittances*, 125.
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46. Rosser, "Lao People's Democratic Republic."
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