

Do Autocracy and Fragility Connect?



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The concept of state fragility

On a daily basis, development practitioners navigate their way through the volatile and frequently violent contexts of the fragile states where they work. Often, they contend with obstructive and unaccountable authoritarian regimes. **There is a good prima facie case that autocracy leads to fragility, and that fragility in turn loops back to autocracy. But the more one probes, the more tenuous and multi-stranded the relationships between them appear.**

Recent events have upended established conceptions of state fragility. The fragility of Western democracies, including the weaknesses of their democratic institutions and of their public health systems, have been brutally exposed. In contrast, other countries with less accountable governance structures have proved surprisingly resilient. This provides an opportunity to reconsider not only state fragility but also the nature, functions, and ownership of states themselves.

Fragility, like other development buzzwords, comes with a certain amount of baggage. To start with, the focus was on fixing and rebuilding fragile states in post-conflict settings. Not only were states considered fragile in themselves, but their relationships with the donor community were also fragile. Then as it became ever clearer that state-building was a quixotic and politically contentious enterprise, the focus turned from fragile states to 'fragile contexts'. **The concept of fragility was broadened to comprise multiple economic, social, environmental as well as security and political fragilities** (OECD 2020).

Yet what has been gained in breadth, has been lost in rigour. In particular, there is not enough precision about causal relationships over time, including those with authoritarian governance. The unit of analysis for most efforts to quantify fragility has remained the nation state. The roots of national fragilities in global and regional insecurities and shocks have mostly escaped scrutiny. Not enough attention has been given to major inequalities in the burdens of risk – between regions, countries, social groups, local communities, and individual citizens. Table 1 is an attempt to spell out

Key points

- Autocracy is complexly linked to fragility; and fragility loops back to autocracy.
- Yet not all autocracies are the same; and democracies too can be fragile.
- States are not born authoritarian, nor are they born fragile. They become so through historical processes.
- One should disaggregate from the fragilities of states, to fragilities within and across states.
- It is not states per se, but the social contracts between states and citizens that are fragile.
- Donors working in, around, and on authoritarian and fragile situations must face up to uncomfortable political choices.

some of these dimensions of fragility, below and above as well as within the nation state.¹

We live in a fragile and divided world. As development analysts and practitioners, our core concern is the impacts on and resilience of vulnerable people and groups imperilled by powerful interests, which are protected and empowered by states, and privileged in a crisis-prone global system. It is for this reason that local people and groups are positioned at the top of Table 1 and state-level and global fragilities are displayed below this grouping. Admittedly powerful causal relationships run from the global to the national to the local. However, the tsunamis of human suffering and insecurity that they set in motion break back in the other direction, as both climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic remind us.

Fragility and the shape of power

The particular concern of this paper is how autocratic, non-accountable governance (highlighted in bold in Table 1) connects to other dimensions of fragility.

¹ Table 1 is an amended version of a table in Luckham (2018: 9).

Table 1. The contested landscapes of risk and fragility

	State (political + security) fragilities	Economic fragilities	Existential (social + environment) fragilities	
Multiple layers of fragility	Local, community and individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Political exclusion of poor and minorities ■ Gender, identity-based, criminal, vigilante violences ■ Decentralised conflicts; proliferating non-state armed groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poverty, inequality, insecure livelihoods ■ Uneven development in marginal localities ■ Marginalisation of poorest people and groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mass vulnerability to famine, pandemics, displacement ■ Weak coping capacities of the most vulnerable ■ Unequal burdens of risk
	National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Authoritarian, exclusionary governance ■ Insecurity; challenges to monopoly of violence ■ Crises of legitimacy; unravelling authority ■ Unequal citizenship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ States as capitalist enforcers or as criminal enterprises ■ Failure to deliver public goods ■ Widening vertical and horizontal inequalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ineffectual responses to emergencies ■ Neglect of environment and climate risks ■ Weakened safety nets for health, wellbeing, and safety
	Regional and North–South	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Rising powers and new forms of hegemony ■ Regionally interconnected conflicts ■ Insecurity ‘blowback’ towards the North 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Varying regional capacities to weather economic shocks ■ Brunt of adjustments on poorest countries and people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Regional competition for water, land, resources ■ Mass population displacements (regional and South–North)
	Global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Muscular geopolitics and military interventionism ■ Securitisation of development assistance ■ Networked violence: terrorism, drugs, crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Footloose, non-accountable big capital ■ Global financial and economic shocks ■ Widening global wealth and income inequalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Unchecked climate change ■ Health pandemics (Covid-19, HIV, Ebola, etc.) ■ Unequal global distribution of risks (e.g. climate impacts) and of resources (e.g. vaccines)

Authoritarianism is by no means the only source of fragility, but it is certainly a major factor in it.

First, as a major source of political violence and social exclusion in its own right. Second, through its impacts on the capacity of states to deliver public goods, respond effectively to emergencies, and manage conflicts. Many of the wider fragilities identified in Table 1, from gender and social inequality, to unchecked corporate power, to climate change, to the management of pandemics, are at the same time governance issues.

A simple mapping upon OECD’s fragility rankings of the V-Dem indicators used by SDC (2020) to categorise authoritarian systems (Figure 1) shows that the most fragile states are typically autocracies. However, the relationship between them is as much definitional as it is causal, since OECD’s fragility indicators overlap considerably with V-Dem’s markers of authoritarianism. Moreover, **not all autocracies are the same**. Some are partially liberalised. Many of them operate under the cover of formally democratic institutions. In others (those identified in Table 2 as ‘fractured’) there are multiple violently competing centres of power, rather

than anything that resembles functioning authoritarian governance.

The facts of fragility oblige us to reconsider both the state and questions of power.

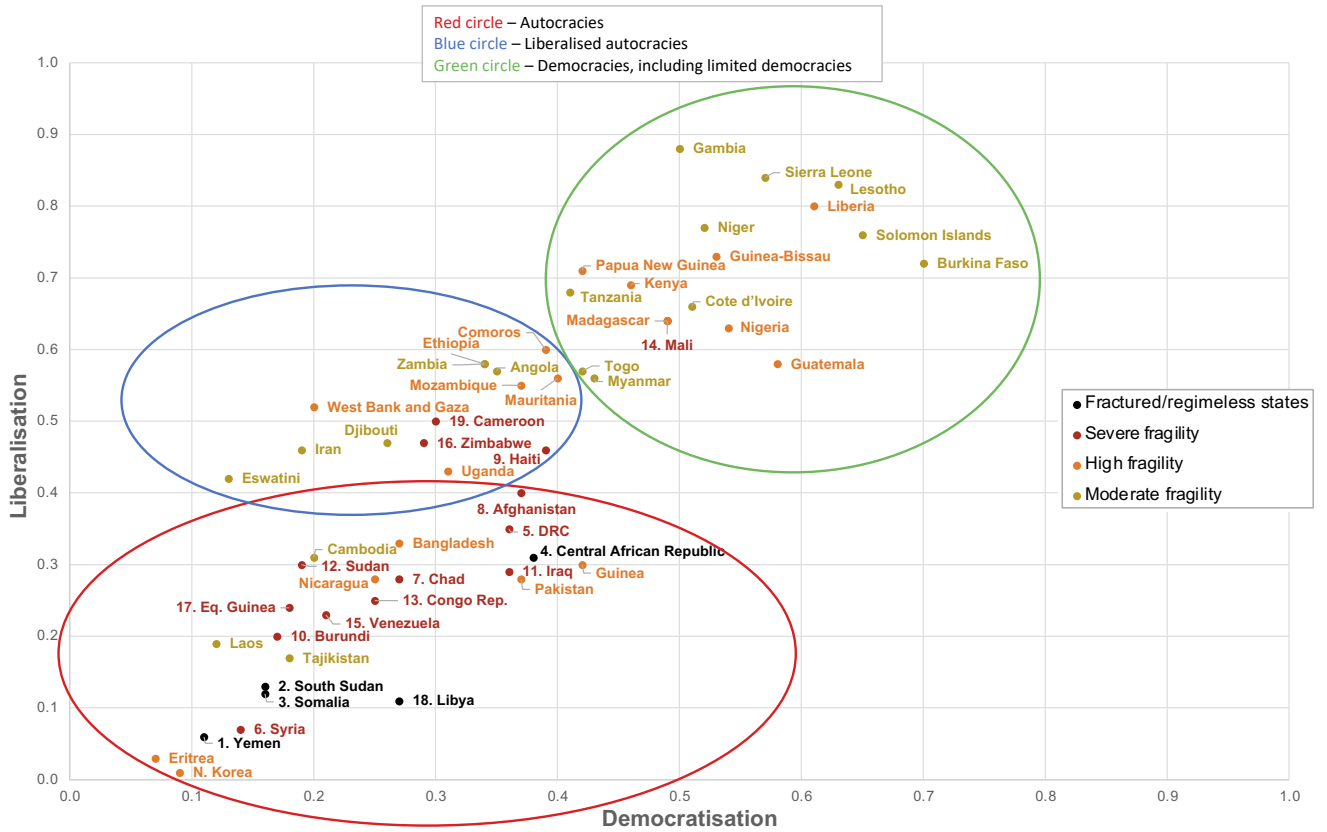
States have seeming material reality in their flags, armies, boundaries, bureaucracies, legislatures, and so forth. Nevertheless, they are extraordinarily elusive and difficult to pin down for analysis. It is often hard to answer the most basic questions about who governs, how state power is organised, who – if anyone – is accountable, and who benefits. It is especially so in authoritarian and fragile states.

It is useful to distinguish between two forms of power, namely despotic power (power over) and socially embedded power (power to).²

The former relies upon coercion and surveillance, the latter is exercised through institutions, social networks, and citizen engagement. Despotic power is closely associated with autocracy and socially embedded

² Drawing upon Mann’s (1988) distinction between despotic and infrastructural power.

Figure 1. Categorisation of fragile states according to extent of authoritarianism



Source: Robin Luckham.

Table 2. Political marketplaces, authoritarianism, and fragility: two business models

Monopolistic: Fragile autocracies	Competitive: Fractured or 'regimeless' states
■ The state monopolises violence, power, and rents	■ Rival political authorities compete to control violence, power, and rents
■ Criminalisation of the state; security–corruption nexus	■ Disorder is instrumentalised to extract surpluses and extend political control
■ Patronage and identity linkages among political and security elites	■ Competition among proliferating armed bodies (militias, mafias, militants)
■ Intelligence networks penetrate deep in civil society	■ Cycles of rent-seeking violence, often mobilising ethnic and religious identities
■ Repression is subcontracted to paramilitaries in unruly peripheries	■ Extreme territorial fragmentation of authority
■ External assistance props up ruling elites and their security agencies	■ International actors struggle to stay neutral and are sucked into conflicts themselves
■ Hidden stress points make state structures potentially fragile	■ Violence and criminality span across as well as within national borders
■ Yet the deep state can be surprisingly resilient (e.g. Syria)	■ Local pockets of effective governance exist, some under rebel control

power with democracy, although they are not precisely the same. Yet in all political systems, **governance outcomes, including fragility, tend to be shaped by the interactions between both forms of power.** There is no simple continuum either from autocracy to democracy, or from fragility to resilience. Autocracies that rely principally on force tend to be more fragile than those that hardwire their despotic power into institutions and social networks, like China or Vietnam. Democracies also can become fragile, like Mali; can suffer from poor governance; and can find their monopoly of violence vanishing.

Crucial for our purposes is the **contrast between fragile autocracies and fractured or 'regimeless' states.** In the former, like Syria or Eritrea, there are monopolistic political marketplaces (De Waal 2015) in which regimes deploy violence to ensure their survival, even if their authority may be contested in peripheral regions beyond their control. In fully fractured states, such as Somalia, Yemen or Libya, governments have been stripped of their monopolies of violence. Instead, rival political authorities (sometimes including the rump of the former state) compete violently to control people, resources, and territory. Similar political mechanisms tend to be at work in both monopolistic and competitive political marketplaces: for instance, a nexus between violence, rent-seeking, and corruption; or a reliance on informal ethnic and other networks to organise power and buy

loyalty. But these mechanisms play out in very different ways when there is still a single recognised source of political authority, however fragile it may be, from when the state is torn apart by rival centres of power and violence. There are of course countries, like the DRC or Myanmar, which fit somewhere in between: with badly functioning, but still functioning, governments at the centre; and multiple contenders for power, including the state, in many other parts of national territory.

States are not born fragile; nor are they born authoritarian. They become so through historical processes of state-making and state-breaking. Their legitimacy is disputed; they face challenges to their monopolies of violence; they are destabilised by global dislocations and international interventions; or sometimes by all of these at once (see Figure 2).

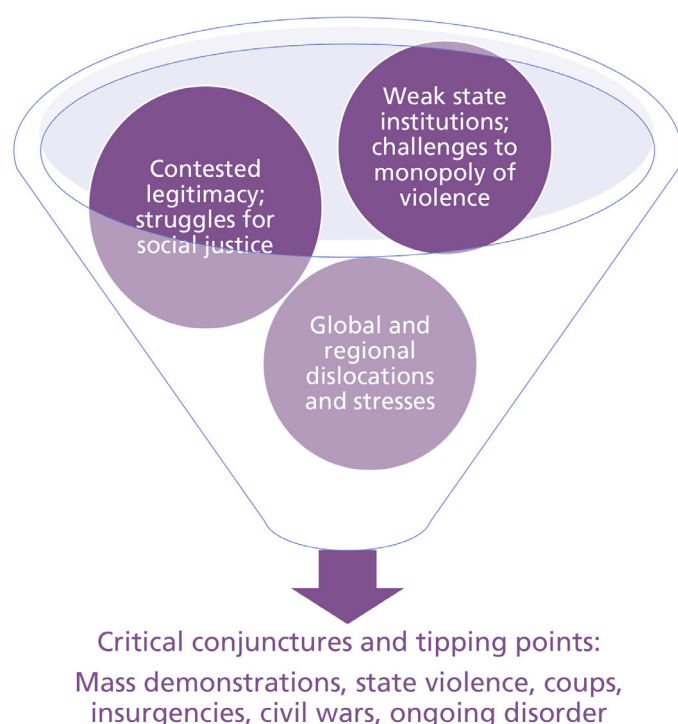
However, **the precise historical trajectories by which states become fragile differ significantly.** Broad distinctions can be made between states that are:

- Challenged from below by subaltern uprisings against fundamental injustices (e.g. apartheid South Africa, the Arab Spring);
- Thrown off course during democratisation (e.g. ex-Yugoslavia, Côte d'Ivoire);
- Threatened by endemic militarism and divisive authoritarianism (e.g. Myanmar);
- Torn by the political mobilisation of horizontal (ethnic/religious/sectarian) inequalities (e.g. Bosnia, Lebanon, Sri Lanka);
- Destabilised by transnational insecurities (e.g. in the Sahel, Central America); and
- Unable to break free from durable disorder (e.g. Somalia, Libya, Yemen).

Historical understanding of these varying contexts can facilitate better-informed and more precisely targeted policy, be this electoral assistance in new democracies; democratic control of security institutions in states transitioning from authoritarianism; confidence building between divided groups and communities in plural societies; or tackling the interconnected sources of insecurity in regions like the Sahel.

Analyses of fragility and of authoritarianism usually take the nation state as their starting point. Yet **immense spatial and social inequalities often divide states from citizens, and citizens from each other,** nowhere

Figure 2. Challenging or breaking the state?



Source: Robin Luckham.

more so than at their marginalised peripheries. **Often these inequalities cross international boundaries**, as with the Kurdish populations of the Middle East, Pashtuns and Kashmiris in South Asia, Tuaregs and Fulani in the Sahel, and Somalis in the Horn of Africa. The social geographies of marginalised groups and regions does not fit neatly within the boundaries and governance arrangements of states. ‘Subnational pockets of fragility’, as the OECD (2020: 9) calls them, tend to be governed differently, if indeed state institutions reach them at all. They also tend to be disproportionately at risk from political violence, mass population displacements, and other manifestations of fragility.

Disaggregating from the **fragilities of states**, to **fragilities within states** highlights the importance of the political geographies of states and their surrounding regions. It brings attention to excluded minorities, groups, and regions in states, like India, which are not normally categorised as fragile or as non-democratic. Furthermore, slums and favelas in urban areas can be as excluded and at risk from state and non-state violence as borderland communities. Disaggregating also makes it possible to identify subnational pockets of relative peace and prosperity in otherwise violent and unstable contexts.

Another way of putting it is to say that **it is not so much the states, but the social contract between states and their citizens, that is fragile** (Leonard and Samantar 2011). Questioning the nation state framework has brought an interest in **alternative paradigms**, which may provide a better grasp of the realities on the ground. Ideas such as:

- ‘Governance without government’ (Menkhaus 2007) in areas beyond the reach of the state;
- ‘Negotiated states’ (Hagmann and Peclard 2010), in which state authority is constantly negotiated both with powerful stakeholders and with those who are excluded and marginalised;
- ‘Hybrid political orders’, in which state institutions interact with multiple other forms of political authority (Boege, Brown and Clements 2009; Bagayoko, Hutchful and Luckham 2016); and
- ‘Wartime social orders’ and ‘rebel governance’ in areas falling outside government control (Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015).

Despite variations in emphasis, these paradigms share a number of common concerns, namely:

- An emphasis on the contingent and **contested nature of state authority**;

- **A decentring of analysis and policy** from states to regions, localities, and other political spaces, both in and across state boundaries;
- A focus on how **authority is negotiated at multiple levels**, extending down to local communities and social networks;
- Bringing attention to a **multiplicity of governance actors within and beyond the state**, including local administrations, policing and court institutions, civic groups, traditional, clan and religious authorities, paramilitaries and militias, and warlords and rebel groups; and
- An emphasis on the **agency and capacity for collective action of citizens** and marginalised groups, whether in resisting state authority or in collaborating with it.

Uncomfortable truths for development practitioners

Development researchers and practitioners alike have argued that **it is more productive to seek out what works, rather than what is broken**. To do this, they have increasingly looked outside the formal boundaries of the state. There have been **local turns, both in peacebuilding and in development practice** (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Luckham 2017). These have attracted programme support for a range of grass-roots initiatives, such as decentralisation programmes, local level courts and policing, women’s peacebuilding activities, and many others. A key problem for all of these initiatives, however, is that they easily become hostage to wider national predicaments, such as escalating armed conflict; interacting state and non-state violence; the breakdown of social protections; inertia or corruption in government; and ill-thought-out interventions by regional and international actors.

Hence donor agencies must still find **better ways of working in, around, and on** fragile and authoritarian states. They cannot begin to do so unless they have a more realistic grasp of (a) how these states work; (b) for whom they work; and (c) whom they fail. This may mean facing up to some **uncomfortable truths**. Not all autocracies are fragile; and some may even be better at ensuring order and delivering public goods than defective democracies. Democracies as well as autocracies may protect vast inequalities in power and wealth, and can sometimes be venal, corrupt, and fragile. Democratisation itself may tip countries into cycles of violence and long-term disorder, and we do not know enough about why this happens or how to reverse these

cycles. Even well-consolidated democracies sometimes govern their marginalised peripheries in comparably violent and exclusionary ways to autocracies.

In development-land as well as in peace-land, there is little room for political innocence (Autesserre 2014). Practitioners should be politically informed and capable of critical self-reflection. They should consider and be prepared for:

- How to cope with intransigent or self-interested policymakers when negotiating access or supporting development programmes;
- How to identify reliable interlocutors within national governments, without rendering them vulnerable to intimidation and other forms of regime pressure;
- How to re-channel assistance and programming from problematic governments to NGOs and civic organisations;
- What to do when intelligence or national security agencies try to co-opt or subvert the latter; and
- If cooperation is required with dissidents or even armed insurgents, as well as with the regime, how to navigate a way between them. **The dilemmas are many, and there are few general answers.**

Working on authoritarian structures and fragile situations to change them is especially challenging.

Governance initiatives supported by development agencies cannot but be politically loaded. They all too easily result in external actors taking on tasks that national governments and others should be performing. National elites may be more interested in the resources that programmes bring in, than in the outcomes they are supposed to achieve. International engagement, especially in governance and security matters, disturbs existing power balances, and is supported or opposed accordingly. Added to this is donor hubris, including the tendency to overestimate what such forms of support can actually achieve in extremely volatile situations.

Conclusion

In sum, there needs to be less emphasis on good practice norms and policy templates, and more on well-informed realism about what can be achieved within the political constraints and dynamics of each local, national, and regional situation. Three acid tests can be proposed:

- Do programmes stem from local and national initiatives rather than just those of the donor?
- Can alliances be built both inside the state and outside it, that have a genuine prospect of mobilising support and changing things?
- Are there tangible benefits for the vulnerable people and groups most at risk; and how can they too be organised to ensure that these benefits reach them and are not appropriated by the powerful and well connected?

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