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Do Autocracy and Fragility Connect?

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Cover photo: Yangon, Myanmar. Protestors and local residents defend their makeshift barrier as military and police joint security forces attempt to clear the road blocks in Bayintnaung junction across the river from Hlaingtharyar. On 2 February 2021 the Myanmar military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized power from the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi. © Panos Pictures.

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Executive summary¹

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.

Fragility, like other development buzzwords, comes with some baggage. To start with, the principal concern was how to fix fragile states in conflict and post-conflict settings. States were not only considered fragile in themselves; their relationships with the donor community were also fragile. But as it became ever clearer that state-building was a quixotic and politically fraught enterprise, the focus has turned from fragile states to 'fragile contexts'. The concept of fragility has been broadened to cover multiple economic, social, environmental as well as security and political fragilities. But what has been gained in breadth, has been lost in rigour. There has not been enough precision about causal relationships over time, including those with authoritarian governance.

A simple mapping exercise shows that the OECD's most fragile states are for the most part autocracies; or if not autocracies, then they are liberalised autocracies or highly limited democracies. Yet the relationships are as much definitional as causal. Not all autocracies are the same. In the most extreme cases, there are multiple violently competing centres of power, rather than a functioning authoritarian government. Moreover, the form of regime matters less than the social interests and inequalities, which it protects.

A framework for thinking about states at risk is advanced, based upon the proposition that it is the interaction between despotic power (power over) and infrastructural power (power to), which shapes political outcomes. The framework distinguishes between more and less fragile autocracies. It highlights the possibility that democracies too can be fragile and plagued by bad governance. It envisions more than one pathway out of, as well as into, fragility, including developmental forms of autocracy, as well as of democracy.

Thus, historical inquiry is needed to understand how states are made and unmade; how they are challenged; and how they are made fragile or broken. A number of historical trajectories into fragility are distinguished: states challenged from below; states fractured by intra-elite competition; states torn by horizontal inequalities; states destabilised by regional and global insecurities; and states trapped in more or less durable disorder.

The nation state tends to be taken for granted. Yet immense spatial and social inequalities divide states from citizens, and citizens from each other, affecting both peripheral regions and marginalised groups. One must disaggregate from fragilities of states, to fragilities within and across national boundaries. A broad distinction is made between three kinds of political space at the state's margins: (a) contested spaces where there are multiple armed contenders for political authority, including the state itself; (b) securitised spaces, where national and international security concerns predominate; and (c) inclusive spaces, where diversity is managed through political accommodation and compromise.

Indeed, it may be argued that it is not states as such, but their social contract with citizens that is fragile. A number of alternative paradigms for rethinking fragility are discussed, which share in common an emphasis on the contingent nature of state authority; their decentring of analysis and policy; recognition of multiple layers of governance below the state; recognition of the agency and collective action of citizens, including marginalised and vulnerable groups; and an emphasis upon what works, rather than what is broken.

What can be concluded for development practitioners? In 'development-land' as well as 'peace-land' there is little room for political innocence. Sound analysis can identify better ways of working in, around and on fragile and authoritarian states, with less emphasis on good practice norms and policy templates and more on well-informed realism about how fragile and authoritarian states work; for whom they work; and whom they fail. Most forms of governance either reinforce existing power balances or change them and are welcomed or opposed accordingly. Practitioners should not only be politically informed; they should also be capable of critical self-reflection.

¹ My deep thanks to Aidan Mascarenhas-Keyes and to Eugenia Lafforgue for their assistance in researching this paper and for their perceptive comments on drafts. Thank you as well to Miguel Loureiro and Wei Shen for their useful feedback and comments.

1 Why state fragility? The concept's place in development thinking

Recent events have upended established conceptions of state fragility. The fragility of many 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 or less well-endowed health infrastructures, have proved surprisingly resilient. The time may have come to reconsider not only fragility but also the nature, functions and ownership of the state itself.

It is usually assumed that we know what we are referring to when we talk about states. They possess a material reality in the modern world of nation states in their boundaries, bureaucracies, national identities and political institutions. Yet as argued later, the story of statehood can be told through the frame of different yet interwoven narratives. Each provides distinct accounts of public authority; each has distinct implications for state fragility. Yet very few published analyses of fragility refer to theories of the state, or to the controversies over them (Ferreira 2016: 13).

Development analysts and practitioners began using the concept of fragility during the turbulent times that followed the end of the Cold War and especially after 9/11. At first, fragility was one amongst several possible framings. Others included 'failed', 'weak', 'collapsed', 'problem', 'fractured', 'stressed', 'LICUS' (lower-income countries under stress), 'troubled', 'shadow', 'phantom', 'negotiated' and 'hybrid' states. The profusion of concepts can be seen as symptomatic both of analytical confusion and of real-world complexity.

Before the 1990s, authoritarianism as well as violent conflict were mostly regarded as exogenous to development. After the end of the Cold War, development issues intertwined ever more directly with governance priorities and with security concerns. This change was as much a question of altered perceptions as of changing realities on the ground. Authoritarian misrule and civil wars in the developing South had been causing poverty, mass population displacement and human suffering long before the Cold War came to an end, even if their impacts were not as well understood as they are now. What has altered is that violent conflicts and state fragility have been mainstreamed into

both development and security policy as never before. Major landmarks have included the UN's 1992 *Agenda for Peace*; the UN's adoption of the *Responsibility to Protect*; the World Bank's *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*; and Sustainable Development Goal 16 to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development'.

It is worth looking briefly at the reasons for this transformation. Partly it has reflected a shift from state security to human security and human rights. With humanitarian concerns have come more interventionist donor policies and practices. The international community, so it has been suggested, has a responsibility to protect vulnerable people when their states trash their livelihoods, drive them from their homes and make them unsafe. Fragile, conflict-affected states have made the least progress on development and poverty reduction. And they have been most at risk from continuing cycles of conflict and insecurity; what an influential World Bank study called 'the conflict trap'.²

There was a natural fit between the prioritisation of security and donor governance and public policy concerns, which were gaining prominence in development policy and programming. Good governance linked as well to transitions from authoritarian rule and to democracy promotion. 'Democratic strategies toward military and security establishments' were seen as a vital part of this agenda (Stepan 1988: x):³ in order to protect against authoritarian reversals; to consolidate civilian control; and to ensure that resources were not diverted from development into military spending and violence. Development agencies turned their attention to state-building and to the stabilisation of fragile states and regions. Conflict prevention, peace-building, post-conflict reconstruction, state-building, disarmament, demobilisation and development (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) all emerged as important new tools of development policy and programming.

At the same time, critical analysts highlighted the dangers of the 'securitisation' of development.⁴ The destructive political forces unleashed by 9/11, the escalation of armed conflicts and of military interventions by Western and other powers, added a whole new dimension. The global

2 See Collier (2007).

3 For further analysis of democratic strategies, see Cawthra and Luckham (2003). DCAF – the Geneva Centre for Security Governance – was established in 2000 to deal with precisely these issues.

4 One of the earliest and certainly the most influential formulation of this critique is Duffield (2001).

interconnectedness of state fragility, terrorism, global crime, refugee movements and immigration were increasingly emphasised as a major threat to Western and international security. Added to this was the spread of cross-border insecurity in a number of regions in the developing South itself: in the Great Lakes of Africa, in the Sahel, in the Horn, in the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in and around Syria, Libya and Yemen.

It is in this context that the interest in fragility should be understood. The impacts upon the safety and welfare of vulnerable people have indeed been tangible and devastating. Yet the priority given to security has been problematic. The linking of aid to security priorities within geopolitical battlefields creates moral and political hazards. Humanitarian and development actors tend to lose their political innocence, and in the worst cases become targets for armed attack. At the same time, support for fixing fragile states, even more than other types of

governance programming, impacts on national and regional power balances. Inevitably, it is politically controversial.

Linked to this are deeper epistemological issues around the proper balance between political order and political change. Focusing on fragility per se can discount the transformative potential of dissent and of contentious forms of politics. It can all too easily end up preserving dysfunctional state institutions and political elites, rather than transforming them, so as to better resolve conflicts, manage development and protect citizens.

None of the above, however, means that fragility is not a legitimate donor concern. Nor does it invalidate its use as a tool of analysis. But it calls for greater self-reflection by those who use the concept; greater analytical rigour in how it is used; and more attention to the national and international power relations in which it is embedded.

2 Defining and measuring fragility

Fragility has been defined in different ways by different policy stakeholders. Each definition assembles a loose list of defining features, as can be seen in Box 1. Failure to mitigate risks and to carry out basic state functions, including security and poverty reduction, seems to be common to all the definitions. But there has been a discernible shift from the earlier formulations, which focus fair and square upon bad governance, including government failure to deliver basic functions to

citizens, especially the poor, to the OECD's wider conceptualisation in its recent *States of Fragility* reports.⁵ The OECD now prefers to talk of 'fragile contexts' rather than 'fragile states'. State-building, a central concern of the earlier policy literature,⁶ has almost disappeared from sight.

Implied in some of the definitions is that fragility is as much about the fragility of relationships between donors and their state partners, as it is about the

Box 1: Some definitions of 'fragile states'

- 'States are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and human rights of their populations' (OECD 2007).
- 'Fragile states are countries where the government cannot or will not deliver its basic functions to the majority of its people, including the poor' (DFID 2010).
- 'Periods when states or institutions lack the capacity, accountability or legitimacy to mediate relations between citizen groups and between citizens and the state, making them vulnerable to violence' (World Bank 2011: xvi).
- 'Fragility is the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, poverty, inequality, displacement, and environmental and political degradation' (OECD 2020).

⁵ See, for example, OECD (2020).

⁶ See especially OECD (2008).

states themselves. Fragile states and their elites are at best viewed as problematic partners in development cooperation; and at worst as obstacles to it. The language is revealing state structures and governments that 'cannot or will not' deliver basic functions (DFID); that 'lack political will and/or capacity' to deliver these functions (OECD/DAC). Indeed, it is a short step from invoking the concept of political will, to conflating fragility (or certain forms of it) with authoritarianism. States that will not or cannot work with the international community are *ipso facto* fragile, are more likely to be authoritarian and are more likely to be targets of international intervention.

A substantial academic literature has grown up around fragility. The view it takes of the state can be characterised as Max Weber plus.⁷ One influential early formulation holds that fragile states suffer from a security gap, a capacity gap and a legitimacy gap.⁸ The language of other studies differs, but they amount to much the same thing. The focus is as much normative as it is empirical, i.e. upon the things that fragile states should be doing, but are not doing. Not enough attention has been given to the real politics of how states are governed in practice; nor to the inequalities, which they embed; nor to the political geographies, which determine the uneven territorial penetration of the state within and across national boundaries.

Indices which attempt to quantify fragility include, amongst others, the OECD's *States of Fragility* and the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index.⁹ The indices are dogged by definitional and methodological issues, which affect both how fragility is analysed and measured, and how it is operationalised for policy and programming. Their aim in principle is to identify which states are fragile; to predict how and when they become fragile; to measure the impacts on development and poverty; and to define entry points for policy and programming. In practice, all of the indices and the analyses built upon them fall well short of this aim.

The OECD's *States of Fragility*, however, marks a significant break from previous more state-centred

approaches as it refers to fragile systems rather than states. It distinguishes between five principal forms of fragility: economic, environmental, political, security and societal, each with several subcomponents. The most immediately relevant for our purposes are political and security fragilities, each broken down into a dozen or so indicators, all of them complexly interrelated.¹⁰ And it makes a largely convincing case that these different dimensions of risk are systemically interconnected, having massive impacts on underdevelopment and poverty.

The most fragile countries have made least progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (OECD 2020: 31–2). They feature prominently in the World Bank's list of countries torn apart by high- or medium-intensity conflict (see the tabulations of Appendix 3) and tend to rank very low in the UN's Human Development Indicators (HDI). Conversely, states further down the fragility rankings tend also to be ranked higher on human development, are less often torn by violent conflicts, and tend to be more politically diverse.

Yet what *States of Fragility* has gained in depth, it has lost in rigour. It does not bring us much closer to a causal understanding of how the economic, social, environmental, political and security dimensions of fragility interconnect; or of how they determine violence, maldevelopment and poverty. The indices map multiple sources of risk but leave us hardly any wiser about which are the most urgent, or about how to prevent their escalation into violent crises. They have little to contribute on the best policy entry points to mitigate the impacts on poor and vulnerable people.

It is worth reflecting further on the reasons for these limitations. To start with, there is conceptual overstretch. Too many variables, too much history and too many countries and regions are crammed together within overarching frames of analysis. The use of multiple indicators tends to result in over-specification. Some of the indicators are based upon empirically shaky foundations, relying on questionable proxies, or on debateable expert judgements. National aggregates conceal major

7 In terms of the theoretical takes on the state spelled out in Appendix 1, the Weberian state plus (a) the developmental or governance state; and (b) the (legitimate) state as a contract with citizens.

8 Ferreira (2016: 13) provides a useful summary and critique of the literature. Other attempts to rethink the conceptualisation and measurement of fragility include Buterbaugh, Calin and Marchant-Shapiro (2017); Carment *et al.* (2015); Grävingsholt, Ziaya and Kreibaum (2015). Call (2010) first formulated the distinction between the three gaps. Interestingly, he has more recently argued that the concept of fragility is too ambiguous and too politically loaded to be useful.

9 See [Fragile States Index](#).

10 For security, the subcomponents all connected in one way or another to state and non-state violence: battle-related deaths; homicides; violent crime; non-state violence; terrorism; conflict risk; control over territory; armed security officers; police officers; rule of law; control over territory; and gender discrimination. The political dimension 'measures vulnerability to risks inherent in political processes as well as coping capacities to strengthen state accountability and transparency', i.e. most of the core features of the good governance agenda. It includes amongst others clientelism and corruption; government effectiveness; political stability; division of power; constraints against the executive; voice and accountability; physical integrity; and women's participation in parliament.

intra-national variations, and leave out excluded and violent peripheries, an issue returned to below.¹¹

The OECD rightly argues that ‘fragility emerges from a complex interaction of risks and coping capacities’ which are multidimensional, being neither straightforward nor linear (Desai and Fosberg 2020: 9–10). However, it is precisely this complexity which raises problems for analysis and policy. The variables clustered within each of the five dimensions are heterogenous; and how they interconnect is not sufficiently clarified. Their relationships to the variables bundled together within the other fragilities are no clearer. The political and security dimensions are respectively the fourth and fifth largest contributors to overall fragility. This seems counterintuitive and might appear to undermine the argument that political and security factors are the main drivers of fragility. But it is not obvious what this means in practice, since the causal direction of the relationships among the different fragilities is unclear.

Not all autocracies are fragile, but many fragile states are autocratic, or have previous histories of authoritarianism. States said to be fragile are in reality a mixture of countries where state authority has already fractured and those where it is brittle and at risk of fracturing. Properly speaking, only the latter should be categorised as fragile. States like Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan or Libya, all with histories of failed authoritarian governance, are already broken. They are distinct from countries like Syria, where repressive autocracies survive and are precisely the problem. Yet *States of Fragility*, like other indices, does not provide us any clear way of making these crucial distinctions.

Whilst *States of Fragility* puts the spotlight on transitions from fragility to resilience, it does not provide a clear evaluation of resilience per se.¹² There is little exploration of how states and their fragilities change over time, apart from brief summaries of short-term changes in selected countries. The Fund for Peace’s Fragile States Index compares the past and present fragility scores of all states (not just those considered fragile) over the previous ten years. Appendix 2 lists the countries where fragility scores changed the most between 2010 and 2020. Whilst crude, the comparisons are revealing. The

top five include four autocracies (Libya, Syria, Yemen and Venezuela), where brittle authoritarian regimes finally reached breaking point, plus Mali, once regarded as a post-conflict democratisation success story. Note also the appearance in the list of seemingly liberal democracies, including Greece, Chile, the United Kingdom, the United States, Brazil and South Africa.¹³

Neither *States of Fragility* nor any of the other fragility indices on offer have serious predictive power. The Polish political scientist Adam Przeworski once confessed that the failure to predict the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was one of the greatest failures of social science (Przeworski 1991: Introduction). The same can be said about the failure of most researchers and analysts to predict the Arab Spring and later on to foresee the Arab Winter.¹⁴

The core challenge is that we do not have enough evidence on how unhappy people are until they come out into the streets. Nor do we find out how robust or fragile states are until they are defied by their citizens or face serious armed insurrections at their peripheries. It is possible to document how and when countries tip over into violence and insecurity, but only after the events, not before them. Policymakers and social scientists discuss the potential of fragility indices as early warning systems. Yet predicting crises requires more robust empirical analysis of the conditions and processes of fragility than any of the current indices are able to provide.

This brings us to the wider question of who calls states or systems fragile and on what basis. Framing states as ‘fragile’ can legitimise all manner of policy interventions, especially when all states are treated the same. What works in Afghanistan or Syria may not work in Yemen or South Sudan. Conceptual confusion and weak empirical evidence all too easily end up in policy failures – for instance, international interventions that fail to stabilise conflict-torn states or indeed worsen their insecurity; or unrealistic policy prescriptions, like electoral or security sector reform packages, that come to nothing or reinforce the position of unaccountable political elites because they do not get to grips with the complex power relations of fragile states.

11 In fairness it should be said that the OECD’s *States of Fragility* (2020: 30) recognises a number of these methodological limitations, which it shares in common with other indices of fragility.

12 The definition of resilience is almost circular, amounting in practice to the capacity to transition out of fragility.

13 Although in all of these countries fragility increased from low base levels, and in none were the increases dramatic.

14 Buterbaugh *et al.* (2017) undertake a statistical analysis of Arab League states to ascertain if the outbreak and scale of the 2011 upheavals could have been predicted by using fragility and other indicators from the years preceding them. However, they find no clear-cut relationships whatever.

3 The contested landscapes of risk and fragility

Despite the change from state to wider conceptions of fragility, the OECD's *States of Fragility*, like other indices, still uses the nation state as its unit of analysis and measurement. The global dimensions of risk are for the most part left implicit and escape direct scrutiny. Climate change is a significant exception, but the focus has tended to be more on its impacts than on the global interests that drive it. Major inequalities in the burdens of risk – between regions, countries, social groups, local communities and citizens – are referred to but are not given as much attention as they deserve. The agency and resilience of the vulnerable people and communities most exposed to violence, hunger, disease and environmental degradation are flagged, but they are not fully integrated into the analysis.

five components. It groups political and security fragilities together, since they closely interconnect. It combines environmental together with societal fragilities in a single broad category of existential risks. At the same time, it spells out the global, regional and local as well national dimensions of each of the forms of fragility.

Table 1 highlights the precarity of our existence in a fragile and divided world. The core concern of development analysts and practitioners is the risks facing poor and vulnerable people and groups, together with their resilience and agency when confronting these risks. It is for this reason that local people and groups are positioned at the top of this table. Yet their lives, their livelihoods and indeed their survival are hostage to formidable economic and social forces over which they have no control. They are hostage as well to powerful

Table 1 reframes fragility to help us to think beyond these limitations whilst building upon the OECD's

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 and 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 and 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)

Source: Adapted from Luckham (2018: 9).

interests, which are protected and empowered by states as well as by a crisis-prone global system. Strong causal relationships run all the way from the global to the national to the local. But the tsunamis of human suffering and insecurity, which global and regional crises set in motion, break back in the other direction, as both climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic now remind us.

Table 1 also bids us to look for the causal relationships between the different components of fragility in their global as well as national and local dimensions. It is a conceptual map rather than a causal analysis. The causal connections it brings attention to must be argued and empirically demonstrated, including how autocratic, non-accountable governance

(highlighted in the table) connects to other dimensions of fragility.

Authoritarianism is by no means the only possible source of fragility, but a good case can be made that it is a major factor. First, as a major contributor to 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. Moreover, many of the wide array of 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 major governance issues.

4 Enter authoritarianism: How does it map upon fragility?

This section considers authoritarianism and how it maps upon fragility. Before doing so, it is necessary to acknowledge some of authoritarianism's terminological ambiguities. Authoritarianism refers primarily to regimes, yet it is just as commonly used to refer to states. Regimes are neither the same as states, nor are they the same as governments or ruling elites. They include the latter, but also comprise the rules and practices of rule through which they govern, and by which they are constrained. At the same time, there is almost as much conceptual confusion about the categorisation of regimes as authoritarian or democratic,¹⁵ as there is about the categorisation of states as fragile or resilient. The precise form of regime may matter less than the social interests and inequalities it protects.

Figure 1 presents a simple mapping of the regimes of the 57 fragile states listed in the OECD's *States of Fragility 2020* report, drawing upon SDC's methodology for the classification of regimes.¹⁶

What does this mapping tell us? One should first admit that the conclusions that can be drawn are limited because the relationships between autocracy and fragility are definitional as much as they are causal. The OECD's political and security fragility indicators (which feed into its overall fragility scores) overlap with the V-Dem indicators used to categorise regimes. That is to say, autocracies are

prominent in listings of extremely fragile states, in part because authoritarianism is built into the definition and measurement of fragility itself.

What cannot be denied, however, is that the majority of fragile states are governed under one form or another of fully fledged or partly liberalised autocracy. Even those categorised as democracies in Figure 1 are with only a few exceptions limited or illiberal democracies.

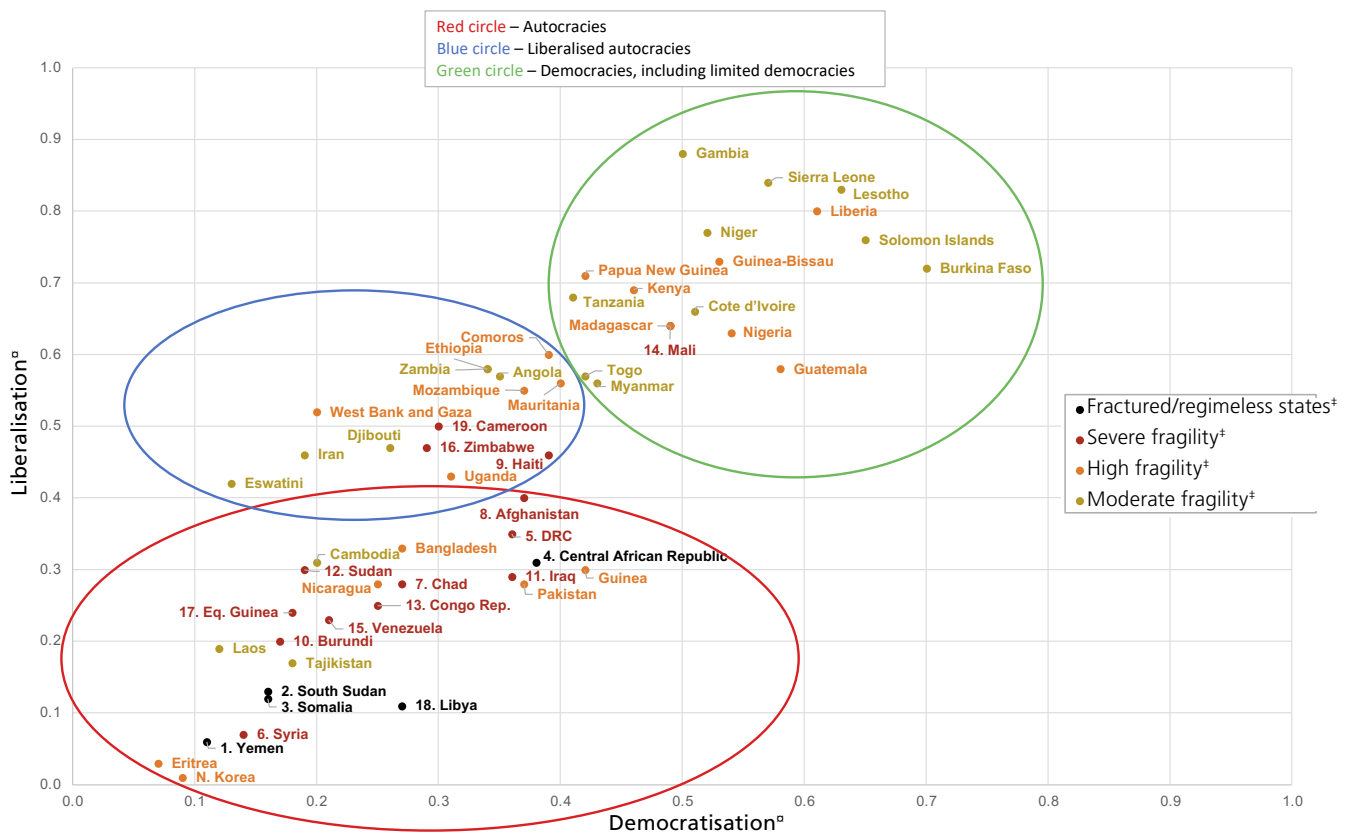
Yet authoritarianism, like democracy, comes in many shapes and sizes. Some autocracies are weak, and others are inordinately powerful. Some, like Iran, have survived enormous internal and external pressures more or less intact. Others like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) or Venezuela only just hold together in conditions of long-term political and economic crisis. There are few, if any, clear unilinear relationships: not between authoritarianism and fragility; nor between democracy and good governance.

In some fragile states commonly classified as autocracies, including Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, the Central African Republic and Libya, there is scarcely any centralised political authority of any kind, let alone half-functioning autocracy. At best, there are competing centres of power or wartime social orders and at worst, highly volatile

¹⁵ Nevertheless, there is more conceptual depth to the debates about regimes than in the debates about fragility. A classic analysis of the complexities of categorising democracies is Collier and Levitsky (1997), who invented the term 'democracy with adjectives'.

¹⁶ The three categories of severe, high and moderate fragility are derived somewhat arbitrarily by dividing the 57 countries into three equal numbered groups. (OECD only singles out 13 severely fragile groups from the remainder, but this seems equally arbitrary, leaving out extremely fragile countries like Libya and Mali). Within the states categorised by SDC as autocracies, a small number of fractured or 'regimeless' states are singled out in black, for reasons explained further below. Only four countries (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands and Lesotho) meet SDC's criteria for political democracy, as opposed to just limited democracy. The first three have previous histories of violent conflict. In none of them can democracy be said to be fully consolidated.

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



Source: Author's own. Created using data from Coppedge *et al.* (2020)^a and OECD (2020)^b.

violent conflicts between multiple armed bodies. For this reason, they are best categorised as 'fractured' or 'regimeless' states, rather than autocracies. This should not be taken to imply that there is a political or governance vacuum – just that there is no single central political authority with anything resembling a monopoly of legitimate violence.

Conceptually and practically distinct from regimeless states are closed but fragile autocracies, such as Syria, Eritrea and (once more) Myanmar. In these states the thread of centralised political authority, though at times tenuous, has not yet snapped. Power is not only highly centralised, but also kept in place by regimes' repressive apparatuses. Yet as will be argued below, despotic power on its own is inherently problematic and should not be confused with state strength. Fragile autocracies tend to find themselves under threat from two directions: first, from the factional disputes, which play out within the state's political and security elites; and second, from challenges to the regime from below, including civilian demonstrations, as in Sudan, or armed insurrections, as in Myanmar or both at once, as in Syria.

The distinction between liberalised and non-liberalised autocracies is, in practice, far from clear. Some long-standing repressive regimes like those

of Iran, Cameroon or Togo, categorised here as liberalised autocracies, have little respect for the rule of law and the other niceties of liberal statehood. At the same time, certain countries categorised in Figure 1 as autocracies, like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mozambique and even Afghanistan before its flawed democratic institutions were broken by the Taliban, have democratically elected governments (in Pakistan's case, a fully functioning democracy despite the persisting political influence of the military establishments). How these countries are categorised may reflect the vagaries of political indicators: having more to do with their histories of protracted political violence than with how they are governed.

Yet this does not leave us much wiser about how authoritarian forms of governance impact upon fragility; or about how fragility impacts in turn on authoritarianism. Practitioners as well as analysts need forms of inquiry which trace the impacts of authoritarian governance, not just in generic terms, but in the historical and political contexts of individual fragile states. Cross-national statistical studies take us part of the way; for instance, by identifying how individual countries match with or deviate from the expected patterns generated by statistical inquiry. However, small-n qualitative and quantitative comparisons can be much more specific, both about national histories of fragility

and authoritarian governance and in identifying policy entry points.¹⁷

To summarise the argument so far, more convincing analysis is needed of the conditions, both of fragility and of authoritarianism, and of the complex interactions between the two. This should be based, firstly, on sound analysis of how authoritarian structures work, of for whom they work, and of the

power relations, which underpin them. Second, it should be attentive to patterns of change, including the historical trajectories, which states follow, as they become more or less fragile over long periods of time. And third, it requires disaggregated analysis of the levels of political authority above and below the state, which support and constrain state power, even in the most seemingly centralised and repressive autocracies.

5 A framework for thinking about power, states and fragility

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 (see the multiple theoretical takes on the state spelled out in Appendix 1). As Abrams put it, the state is ‘the mask, which prevents our seeing political practice [and power] as it is’ (1988: 58). Yet it is often hard to answer the most basic questions about who governs; how power is organised, deployed and controlled; who if anyone is accountable; and who benefits. This is especially so in authoritarian and fragile states.

This section proposes a new framework for the classification of states at risk, based upon the power relations that underpin them. The starting point is the SDC’s previous work on authoritarian and democratic regimes.¹⁸ To this is added the distinction between despotic power and socially embedded power (respectively power over and power to), drawing upon Mann’s (1988) distinction between despotic power and infrastructural power. Foucault (1980) makes a similar contrast between ‘sovereign’ forms of power and ‘capillary’ forms; with the latter embedding power and ‘governmentality’ deep into all levels of social interaction.¹⁹ Related, but not quite the same, is the distinction made by North, Wallis and Weingast (2009), between closed access and open access societies. What matters here is that despotic power and socially embedded power point to two distinct ways of thinking about state power and thus of state fragility.

On the face of it, despotic power is relatively straightforward. It is founded upon centralised hierarchies. It is exercised from the top down. It is

kept in place through state coercion (Max Weber’s ‘monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force’ (1948: 78)) supplemented by surveillance and control over information. Regime security is the overarching state priority, and military, police and security apparatuses are central to the regime’s survival and capacity to govern, especially so in authoritarian regimes.

Behind this characterisation, however, lie more difficult issues about how despotic power is exercised and reproduced. Formal hierarchies invariably intersect with informal ones. Patronage systems keep the wheels of government turning. Autocrats are perennially suspicious of alternative centres of power, including those located within the security establishments on which their survival depends. Their relationship to wealth creation is contradictory. They depend on it for taxes and rents, but they choke it off by allocating resources to their securocrats and cronies. Inequality, too, is an inherent feature of power relations, and tends to be politically and socially corrosive.

Socially embedded power is exercised differently, not from the top, but in and through the institutions and procedures of the state. Moreover, the sinews of power extend far outside the state, both reshaping political and civil society and extracting support from the latter. Socially embedded power takes longer than despotic power to establish, and (arguably) more time to destroy. Those who exercise authority gather strength from, yet are constrained by, law and due process. Legal, institutional and frameworks protect and facilitate wealth creation. The state also relies on these frameworks to deliver security along with health, education and other public goods. Through them it builds up political capital and wins public support.

¹⁷ Two examples are Carment *et al.* (2015), who compare transitions to and from fragility in Yemen, Bangladesh and Laos; and Glawion, de Vries and Mehler (2019), who highlight the differences as well as similarities between the Central African Republic, Somalia and South Sudan, the three most fragile states according to the Fragile States Index.

¹⁸ SDC (2020).

¹⁹ See also Appendix 1.

Table 2: A typology of power and regimes

		Socially embedded power (Power to: institutions, laws, social capital, governmentality)		
		Low	Medium	High
Despotic power (Power over: hierarchy, coercion, surveillance)	Low	Fractured or 'regimeless' e.g. Yemen, Somalia, Libya, South Sudan	Fragile democracy e.g. Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nepal, Lebanon	Plural democracy e.g. India, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia
	Medium	Fragile or brittle autocracy e.g. Syria, Venezuela, DRC, Burundi	Limited democracy e.g. Turkey, Philippines, Uganda, Tanzania	Developmental democracy e.g. South Korea, Taiwan, Botswana
	High	Repressive autocracy e.g. North Korea, Eritrea, Myanmar	Liberalised autocracy e.g. Egypt, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Morocco, Nigaraqua	Developmental autocracy e.g. China, Vietnam, Singapore

Source: Author's own.

Mann (1988) formulated his distinction between despotic power and infrastructural power to explain how premodern political and military formations were reshaped to consolidate territorial control and build more effective and militarily powerful states. Infrastructural (i.e. socially embedded) power was, in his view, a prerequisite of modernity. Despotic power is closely associated with autocracy and socially embedded power with democracy, although they are not precisely the same. Institutional analysts, like North, have argued that open access societies, along with the institutions that create and sustain them, are prerequisites for capitalist development – even if this is somewhat difficult to reconcile with the rise of China and other developmental autocracies, which have successfully combined closed political systems with fast-growing mercantilist capitalist economies.

Governance outcomes, including fragility, tend to be shaped in all political systems by the interactions between despotic power and socially embedded power. There is no simple continuum from closed access to open access societies, from autocracy to democracy, or from fragility to resilience. Autocracies that rely principally on force, like Syria or Eritrea, tend to be more fragile than those that hardwire their despotic power into institutions and social networks, like China or Vietnam. Democracies as well as autocracies can become fragile, can suffer from poor governance and can find their monopoly of violence evaporating, as in Mali. Transitions to democracy have come and gone. The success of political struggles for democracy is never assured. Their outcome instead has sometimes been further cycles of repression and conflict, not democracy.

The typology of Table 2 delineates varying ways in which despotic power and socially embedded power interact to shape the characteristics of authoritarian and of democratic governance. Instead of positing that all autocracies are fragile, it envisions those autocracies, which institutionalise their power, clothe it in seemingly democratic forms, extend it deep into society and deliver economic growth and public goods, having considerable staying power, perhaps as much as consolidated democracies. Conversely, it does not exclude that in some plural democracies, institutions may obstruct effective governance; populist politicians and corporate interests may bend the state out of shape; and inequality may eat away at popular legitimacy.

What follows for the analysis of authoritarianism and fragility? Autocracies which have despotic power but enjoy little infrastructural power can be separated into two broad groups. On the one hand, there are fragile or brittle autocracies, like Venezuela or DRC, where some form of despotic rule continues at the centre, but power is contested, especially at the political margins, and the survival of the regime and even of the state remains in question. On the other hand, there are seemingly more durable autocracies, like North Korea, Eritrea or Myanmar (before and after its democratic interlude), where the core repressive state apparatuses crush dissent, and the regime survives no matter how badly it governs, and no matter how weak its legitimacy among its citizens.

Both durable and brittle autocracies are distinct again from fractured or 'regimeless' states.²⁰ However, the differences among the categories is by no means absolute. One should remember that

²⁰ The term 'regimeless' is used by Luhmann, McCann and van Ham (2018) to refer to fragile situations that do not fit easily into V-Dem's categorisation of regimes.

Table 3: 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

Source: Author's own.

the centralised autocracies of countries like Libya or even Somalia (before it imploded) were once seen as almost unassailable. Fractured or 'regimeless' states lack both despotic and infrastructural power. In them, the central state scarcely functions, if at all. Instead, there are multiple competing centres of power and violence. For this reason, it makes little sense to characterise their regimes as either authoritarian or democratic. Durable disorder, as argued in Section 6, seems to be their principal defining characteristic.

It can of course be argued that all forms of despotic governance are inherently problematic. In the final analysis, only states that work through institutions and enjoy a basic measure of legitimacy are capable of effective collective action to deliver public goods, including security. But there are a number of developmental autocracies, like China, Vietnam, Singapore or (more arguably) Rwanda, whose power is socially embedded, as well as imposed from above, as the categories in the right-hand column of Table 2 remind us. They rely on tightly controlled institutions and social networks: they deliver public goods as well as, if not better than, many democracies and their citizens for the most part see them as legitimate and authoritative. It follows too that democratisation is not necessarily the only the exit path from fragility.

Finally, Table 2 brings into the frame of analysis countries that do not fit within the recognised categorisations of autocracy and fragility yet may be beset by their own pathologies of divisive politics, poor governance, criminality and violence, such as Colombia, Mexico or the Philippines. It also includes countries like India or even the UK (during the Troubles in Northern Ireland), where democratic governance is fully consolidated, yet state authority is fragile in marginalised regions.

Nevertheless, the categorisations of Table 2 can only take us so far. Whether Sri Lanka, for instance, is best considered a plural, a limited, or a fragile democracy, or all at the same time, is debateable, and has varied from one period of its history to another. Egypt has shifted back and forth between repressive and liberalising forms of autocracy.²¹ Lebanon is a plural democracy in a state of political paralysis, since powerful armed movements enjoy *de facto* veto power over all government decisions. Rwanda is an illiberal democracy, which verges on outright autocracy; Burundi and Nicaragua have ceased being paradigm cases of national reconciliation and have shifted towards exclusionary forms of despotism; and South Sudan is in theory a fledgling democracy, but in practice is a deeply divided regimeless state. No categorisation or coding scheme can resolve these ambiguities.

²¹ It was listed as fragile in the 2018 *States of Fragility*, but it was removed in the 2020 version.

In sum, the typology is best seen as a way of asking questions about states, regimes and their systems of governance, rather than as a device for placing them into neat boxes. From this point of view, the states which fall between classifications, or are in transition between them, are of especial interest. The typology calls attention to certain generic problems around the relationships between states' power, violence and fragility. How these relationships play out tends to vary from one national and historical context to another. Disputed categorisations are best seen as diagnostic tools, which bring attention to areas of contestation where more than one analytical approach may be relevant.

To illustrate the categorisations in more depth and to show how they can make a real difference to how we think about fragile states, Table 3 uses de Waal's (2009, 2015) analysis of political marketplaces to make a stylised comparison between the monopolistic political marketplaces of fragile autocracies, and the competitive marketplaces of fractured or 'regimeless' states. In both cases, how they work and for whom are the key questions.²²

In the monopolistic political marketplaces of fragile autocracies, regimes survive and enjoy a monopoly of force at the centre, even when that monopoly is contested in insurgent margins beyond their control. In the political marketplaces of fractured or 'regimeless' states, rival political authorities compete nationally and locally for power in situations of extreme violence and territorial fragmentation. In both marketplaces similar mechanisms may be at work; for instance, the tight nexus between security, rent-seeking and corruption or the reliance on informal networks to organise power and to buy loyalty. But how these mechanisms play out, how they contain political violence or spread it, and how they impact on those most at risk differs significantly between the two business models.

The business models, along with the typology of regimes, are of course ideal types. In practice, countries can combine elements of both. Although Syria's regime, for example, is centralised and highly repressive, it has also struggled to assert its monopoly of violence in its insurgent peripheries. In that sense, it is both a repressive autocracy and fragile one. The regime has maintained its grip on power and terrorised its civilian population into submission, in conditions which elsewhere might have broken apart the state itself. Yet there still remain areas in which armed factions, including some supporting the state as well as those opposing it, compete for power, territory and resources, in a similar way to in regimeless states.

Furthermore, the business models are open to challenge and change. Mali, for instance, was for a long time a fragile democracy, but ongoing political violence has rendered it both more authoritarian and more unable to assert its political authority in large parts of national territory. Whether it is best categorised authoritarian, in transition back to democracy, or 'regimeless', is a matter for debate. Certainly, the efforts of the national government and its international backers to restore some semblance of a monopoly of violence have become increasingly desperate. Many local communities have to cope with armed militants at the same time as competing with their neighbours for land, resources and protection.

That is to say, political marketplaces tend to be both multi-layered and multi-form. Even countries categorised as fully fledged autocracies, like Myanmar, with strong monopolies of violence at the centre, struggle to exert their authority within the more competitive political marketplaces of their peripheries. The same is true also of some consolidated democracies, like India, Colombia or Mexico, where the political marketplaces of their insurgent or criminalised margins bear more than a passing resemblance to those of regimeless states.

²² See Chabal and Deloz (1999) for both on how African states work and for whom, and on disorder as a political instrument.

6 Fragility in historical context: State-making and state-breaking

Historical understanding is essential to comprehend how states are made, how they are challenged and how they are made fragile or broken. Recent analysis has turned away from transitions paradigms, whose predominant concern was transitions from authoritarian to democratic forms of governance. Instead, the focus has often been on transitions in the reverse direction, back to authoritarian rule, either directly, or in varying forms of democratic drag, including the liberalised autocracies and the limited democracies of the analysis above.²³

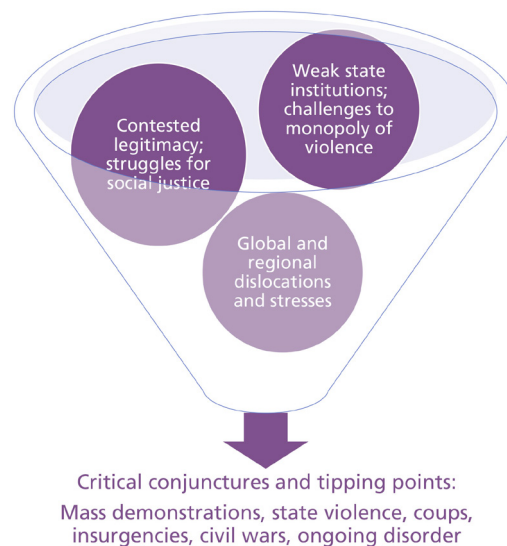
Transitions to as well as from fragility need to be placed in historical context (see Figure 2). How exactly do states and societies become fragile? Where are the historical inflection points that convert political and economic inequalities and frictions into full blown crises?

Deep historical analysis of how states arise and how they are stitched onto social and political formations and become dislocated from them is beyond the scope of this paper. Such an analysis would have to take account of the enduring imprint of colonial and other empires. For now, however, some broad contextual distinctions can be made, as spelled out in Box 2.

States contested from below: Popular defiance of autocratic and exclusionary regimes calls into question the presumption that stability and security are desirable in their own right. Struggles to right injustices sometimes succeed, as in post-apartheid South Africa, but they may also be derailed by ongoing cycles of repression and violence, as in Palestine. Even if they open seeming pathways to democratic change, as in the initial phases of the Arab Spring, in Myanmar or in Zimbabwe, all too often these pathways are blocked by varying combinations of counter-revolution, regime violence and armed insurrection.

Democratisation itself, like development, can be destabilising, not least when promoted by donors. That does not mean that popular support for democratic change is not real and legitimate. But transforming democratic politics into consolidated democratic institutions is arduous and complicated.²⁴ All too many democratic transitions have ended up as transitions into armed conflict, as in ex-Yugoslavia, Côte d'Ivoire and in South Sudan. The problems tend to be especially acute

Figure 2: Challenging or breaking the state?



Source: Author's own.

in post-civil war transitions, where democratic and war-to-peace transitions intersect. Moreover, once the initial democratic openings run their course, they may simply confirm previous insurgents in power, who over time become as non-accountable and corrupt as their predecessors, as in Uganda, Nicaragua or, more arguably, Ethiopia.

Hence it is vital to understand why some transitions 'succeed', as in Liberia and in Sierra Leone, and why others revert to extreme fragility, as in South Sudan, or awaken new forms of criminal and social violence, as in Nicaragua and El Salvador. What, in particular, were the crucial turning points, when better political decisions or improved policy interventions might have produced different outcomes?

States fractured by violent intra-elite competition: During much of the Cold War period, authoritarian regimes, most of them military, were the norm throughout the developing South, reflecting the institutional frailty and weak legitimacy of post-colonial states. Ruling elites kept themselves in power through varying combinations of state coercion, surveillance and patronage. Yet the smooth working of authoritarian structures was often disrupted by intra-elite conflicts, endemic militarism, coups and counter-coups. Regimes lasted only as long as they had rents to distribute

²³ See Carothers (2002) and Levitsky and Way (2002).

²⁴ Explored in detail in Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor (2003).

Box 2: Varying historical trajectories of fragility

States contested from below:

- Challenged by struggles against fundamental injustices (e.g. Apartheid South Africa, Palestine)
- Challenged by subaltern uprisings (e.g. Arab Springs, Nicaragua, Nepal, Zimbabwe)
- Thrown off course during democratisation (e.g. ex-Yugoslavia, Côte d'Ivoire)

States fractured by violent intra-elite competition:

- Endemic militarism and *coups* (e.g. West Africa, Central America, Myanmar)
- Unravelling authoritarian governance (e.g. Syria, Libya, Yemen)

States torn by political mobilisation of horizontal (ethnic/religious/sectarian) inequalities:

- Imposed by exclusionary majorities (e.g. Myanmar, Sudan, Zimbabwe)
- Challenged by insurgent and/or secessionist minorities (e.g. Bosnia, Sri Lanka)
- Stemming from multiple rival nationalities and groups (e.g. DRC, Nigeria, Lebanon, Philippines)

States destabilised by transnational insecurities:

- By cross-border conflicts and interventions (e.g. Afghanistan–Pakistan, Sahel, Horn of Africa)
- By terrorism, global crime, wars on terror/drugs (e.g. Central America, Afghanistan)
- By foreign interventions (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Ukraine)

States unable to break free from durable disorder:

- For example, Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen, Libya

Source: Author's own.

and external patrons to prop them up. When these vanished, they became more vulnerable to factional disputes, as well as to subaltern challenges to their authority, including those driving democratisation.

Most military regimes have since been replaced, in some cases by liberal democracies, more often by liberalised autocracies or illiberal democracies. Yet the legacies of political militarism live on and from time to time resurface in the form of *coup d'états* and reimposed authoritarianism. Especially important is the centrality of the state's military, police and security apparatuses, both in upholding regimes, and in bringing them down, when intra-elite conflicts break out into the open. The tendency is to assume that state security apparatuses are homogeneous and all powerful. But cracks and fissures often open up in the edifices of power – both inside security apparatuses themselves and between security establishments and regimes. These divisions sometimes open spaces for challenges to state authority, as during the Arab Spring. But military and state elites also regroup to remove elected governments, as in Egypt, Thailand and Myanmar. When factional disputes break into the open, they sometimes ignite widespread state and societal upheavals, as in Syria, Ethiopia or (in the context of electoral violence) Kenya.

Donors and international agencies are rightly wary of getting involved when factional disputes expose

the underlying fragility of regimes. But sometimes they may have little choice; for instance, when these disputes derail aid programmes, make them hostage to regime manipulation or incite wider violence. For this reason, nuanced political understanding is needed of how the structures of authoritarian governance come under stress, how factional disputes play out and when they generate violent upheavals. Good analysis of the changing power dynamics can also help to identify political spaces in which more constructive forms of international engagement are possible, as during the Central American, the Colombian and the Nepalese peace processes.

States torn by political mobilisation of horizontal inequalities:²⁵ Colonial empires shaped the political geographies of post-colonial states. They imposed structures and boundaries, which seldom coincided with pre-colonial political formations. In so doing, they created the fault lines around which fragilities would cluster. Post-colonial states have further reconfigured national, ethnic, religious, sectarian, clan and regional identities. What counts is not so much these identities themselves, as how they have been mobilised politically to encourage political contestation and violence. Three broad situations may be distinguished:

- First, where political elites have defined state and nation around the symbols, identities and interests of politically dominant groups:

25 On horizontal inequalities see Brown and Langer (2010) and Stewart (2009).

Buddhist and Burmese in Myanmar; Hindu in India; Sinhala in Sri Lanka and so forth. In most cases the politically dominant groups are also numerical majorities. But in some, like Syria and Rwanda, they are numerical minorities. In the former group, majoritarian ethno-nationalism disempowers and marginalises minorities. In the latter, secular nationalism is deployed to disguise the real distribution of power and resources, and to delegitimise opposition. In both, it is the politically dominant groups who shape national politics and define security around national and other identities; and who drive the politics of exclusion and insecurity.

- Second, and often in reaction to the first, has been the political and armed mobilisation of excluded minorities²⁶ in marginalised localities and regions: Tamils in Sri Lanka, Sahrawi communities in Morocco; Tuaregs and Fulani across parts of the Sahel; Kashmiris in India and Pakistan; and multiple, long-standing minority rebellions in Myanmar. However, the source of division and fragility is not just minority demands for self-determination; it is just as much the exclusionary politics of majoritarian governments and political elites.
- Third, are truly multinational countries, where the politics of inclusion and exclusion are more fluid, reflecting many diverse claims on national power and resources. In some, like Ethiopia, cyclical shifts in the centres of power among different national groups have extended back over centuries. In others, like DRC, power has become so decentralised, that economic and political transactions across national boundaries may be as significant as those within. In others, like Nigeria, episodes of political violence punctuate complicated and occasionally fractious accommodations amongst different regional, ethnic and religious interests.

The multinational and decentred nature of power can in certain respects be a source of resilience as well as fragility. Nigeria, for example, is politically divided, plagued by endemic influence buying and corruption and unable to contain the conflicts breaking out in its violent peripheries. Yet it is held together somehow by surprisingly vibrant though poorly functioning democratic institutions, in which power has alternated between competing political parties at both federal and state levels.

Managing diversity in plural states is truly challenging under all forms of governance, in democracies just

as much as in autocracies. A substantial academic literature considers how democratic institutions can be designed to share power, promote political alliances, build confidence and prevent violent conflict in fragile or potentially fragile plural states.²⁷ If there is any general lesson, it is that institutional fixes, such as constitutions, electoral systems or power-sharing arrangements, do not work in the absence of more democratic and inclusive forms of politics. Recent cases in point include Lebanon, once considered an exemplar of consociationalist power-sharing, where power-sharing has merely consolidated powerful vested interests and armed groups in their resistance to political change. Another example is Ethiopia, whose experiment in ethnic federalism has recently been shattered by new cycles of regional and ethnic contestation, of precisely the kind which it was designed to prevent.

States destabilised by transnational insecurities: In many parts of the world, fragility is more than simply an attribute of states. It is inherent in relationships between states and their neighbours, and in the fractures which spread across the globally interconnected world that we inhabit. The OECD's *States of Fragility* singles out four subregions where political and security fragility is acute, all in sub-Saharan Africa: the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the African Great Lakes and the Lake Chad Basin.²⁸ To these, one can add (amongst others): Syria, Iraq and their immediate neighbours; Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir; Myanmar and its neighbours; Venezuela and Colombia; and large parts of Central America. International relations analysts like to talk of regional and subregional 'security complexes', although 'insecurity complexes' may be a more apt description.

Analysis of regional fragilities, together with policy responses to them, has tended to reflect the priorities of major global players: notably countering terrorism and Islamist violence; dealing with international criminality; and containing refugee flows. What is key is how the fragilities of each country interconnect across national boundaries: through the trades in small arms and drugs; through cross-border migrations of combatants and refugees; through social networks of traders and terrorists; through intelligence collaboration and subversion; and through cross-border interventions by neighbouring states and by non-state armed groups.

The priorities of the international community reflect genuine concerns. But they tend to get in the way of serious empirical understanding of how global and regional insecurities link to longer histories of

²⁶ Or in some cases politically excluded majorities, as in Syria or (previously) Iraq.

²⁷ See, for instance, Stewart and O'Sullivan (1999); Luckham *et al.* (2003); Reilly (2006); Paris and Sisk (2009); and Carothers and O'Donohue (2019).

²⁸ It seems that these are singled out on the basis of the aggregated fragility scores of the countries within each subregion, rather than on the basis of the interconnectedness of their fragilities.

trans-border trade and migration. Furthermore, they minimise the manifold ways in which international interventions themselves, as well as armed militancy, can undermine national and local governance, and bring harm to the vulnerable communities and local people they are supposed to help.

Take, for instance, Mali and other states of the Sahel²⁹ with long histories of trans-border migration, trade, smuggling and violence. Islamist militants have managed to insert themselves into long-standing conflicts between Tuaregs, pastoralists and farmers in countries where political processes have become increasingly sclerotic and detached from the concerns of citizens. International and regional interventions to support governments and drive out militants have drifted into counter-insurgency, pulling along with them aid programmes and humanitarian assistance. It is, of course, vital to coordinate international action across national boundaries, ensuring that this is based on sound analysis of how both national governments and local communities are affected by and respond to the frequent shifts of power, profits and people across and within national borders.

Indeed, none of the human catastrophes that have unfolded in fragile states and regions can be properly understood without considering the impacts of global and regional geopolitics. International interventions have directly broken states like Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Ukraine. Even where the initial challenges to state authority have been domestic, the subsequent course of

events has often been shaped decisively by external engagement – most notably when global and regional powers provide weapons and military assistance to competing claimants to power, as in Syria, Somalia and in Yemen. Even international peace-building in fragile states has sometimes come with a heavy political price; for instance, when it has ended up entrenching repressive or predatory regimes, as in DRC and in Burundi.

States unable to break free from durable disorder: The concern here is not the historical conditions leading countries into fragility, but the historical conditions which keep them fragile. According to statistical analyses, the most powerful explanation of violent conflict is previous violent conflict: the so-called ‘conflict trap’. Countries like Somalia, Yemen, Libya and South Sudan (i.e. the fractured or ‘regimeless’ states referred to earlier) seem unable to break the long-term cycles of conflict that keep them fragile. The same indeed is true of certain fragile autocracies, such as DRC, Afghanistan and Venezuela. This does not mean they are political black holes: they have their own distinctive patterns of governance in which rival power centres violently compete. Durable disorder prevails because it works for those who benefit from keeping it that way, be they warlords, armed militias, militant clerics, criminal gangs or the merchants who do business with them (Ahmad 2017), along with their competing external suppliers of weapons, military support and ideologies.

7 Fragility at the margins: Political authority below and beyond the state³⁰

Analyses of fragility and of authoritarianism usually take the nation state as their unit of analysis. However, immense spatial and social inequalities divide states from their citizens, and cut off citizens from each other, nowhere more so than at their marginalised peripheries. Often these inequalities traverse 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 political geographies of such marginalised groups do not fit neatly within the boundaries and governance arrangements of states. ‘Subnational pockets of fragility’, as the OECD calls them (OECD 2020: 9 and

Appendix A), tend to be governed differently from elsewhere, if indeed state institutions reach them at all. They 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 brings attention to excluded minorities, groups and regions in states, like India, Kenya or even the UK, which are not normally categorised as fragile or as authoritarian. Countries with open or porous boundaries, like the countries of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, are at risk not only from their own conflicts, but also from those

²⁹ See Dowd and Raleigh (2013).

³⁰ Analysis in this and the following section draws in part on Lind and Luckham (2017), and Luckham and Kirk (2013).

Table 4: Political authority at the margins of the state

	Fractured/ 'regimeless'	Autocracies	Liberalised autocracies	Limited democracies	Plural democracies
Contested spaces	CAR South Sudan	DRC Venezuela Myanmar	Uganda Mozambique Sudan	Mali Nigeria Côte d'Ivoire	Lebanon
Securitised spaces	Libya Yemen Somalia	Syria Afghanistan Iraq Nicaragua	Ethiopia Cameroon Rwanda Zimbabwe	Kenya Philippines Guatemala Pakistan	India (Kashmir) Sri Lanka Colombia Northern Ireland
Inclusive spaces	Somaliland				Switzerland Costa Rica Ghana South Africa

Source: Author's own.

of their neighbours. Localities which are isolated geographically, like the borderlands of Pakistan and Myanmar, tend to be politically and culturally isolated as well. Slums and favelas in urban areas can be just as excluded and at risk from violence as borderland communities. Disaggregating also makes it possible to identify subnational pockets of relative peace and prosperity in otherwise violent and unstable contexts, as argued in Section 8.

Table 4 distinguishes three main modalities in which political spaces at the margins of the state are disputed, controlled or kept open: contested spaces; securitised spaces; and inclusive spaces. It cross-tabulates these with regimes as categorised above. In reality, of course, contested spaces tend also to be securitised, as well as living alongside more open and inclusive spaces. Indeed, a number of the countries included as examples in the table could have been listed in more than one box.

In contested spaces, the state is only one among a number of armed contenders for power and resources, be they local, national, regional or global – most obviously so in 'regimeless' countries, such as South Sudan or Yemen, where contested spaces encompass all or most national territory, and may extend into neighbouring countries as well. In countries where the central state still operates, like Myanmar and Nigeria, there tend to be complex patchworks of government and non-government control in different localities. Parallel administrations with their own armed formations may thrive at the peripheries without necessarily threatening the regime or undermining the state. Lebanon is an especially striking example of coexistence and competition between state and non-state authorities, each with their own military structures, and all within the boundaries of a formally democratic state.

In securitised political spaces, national or international security concerns dominate, including the policing of national boundaries, counter-terrorism and the control of dissent. How these securitised spaces are governed in democracies, such as India, Sri Lanka, Mexico or Colombia, may not be so very different from how they are governed under autocracies, like Syria, Burundi or Cameroon. Typically, securitised spaces are ruled under states of emergency; minorities face multiple discriminations; armed militants compete with state authorities for territory and control over civilians; human rights are routinely violated by soldiers, police and militants; and there is little or no democratic accountability. Even democratic countries, such as Colombia or the UK in Northern Ireland, where peace agreements have brought open violence to an end, find it difficult to overcome deep legacies of social division in their previously securitised margins.

In more inclusive political spaces, diversity is managed with varying degrees of success through political accommodation, compromise and inclusion. This is supposed to be how democracies work, even if the harsh reality in many democracies is that people and groups at the margins tend to be left out or even suppressed. Democracies vary considerably, both in their inclusiveness and in their ability to overcome democratic deficits, notably at their peripheries (Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor 2003).

Nevertheless, inclusive political spaces are not confined to those authorised by the state. They can be opened up without state involvement, or even in opposition to the state, as discussed in the next section. They can even thrive in conditions of extreme political fragmentation and violence, as in Somaliland or in Colombia's peace communities.

8 Whose fragility? Rethinking governance from below³¹

Much existing analysis of fragility departs from the assumption that it is states which are fragile. But in another way of thinking, it is not so much states as the social contract between states and citizens that is fragile or broken (Leonard and Samantar 2011). As the OECD's *States of Fragility 2020* suggests, 'putting people at the centre of the fight against fragility should be the starting point' for collective action (OECD 2020: 3).

This questioning of the nation state framework has called attention to alternative paradigms, which may provide a better grasp of realities on the ground. One of these is the idea of 'governance without government' (Menkhaus 2007) in areas beyond the reach of the state. Another formulation is 'negotiated states', in which state authority is constantly being negotiated, both with powerful stakeholders and with those who are excluded and marginalised (Hagmann and Peclard 2010). Another is 'hybrid political orders', in which state institutions interact with multiple other forms of political authority (Boege, Brown and Clements 2009; Meagher, Herdt and Titeca 2014; Bagayoko, Hutchful and Luckham 2016). Others again include 'wartime social orders', 'rebel governance' and 'criminal governance' in areas falling outside government control.³²

Despite variations in emphasis, these paradigms share a number of common concerns. First, an emphasis on the contingent and contested nature of state authority. Second, a decentering of analysis and policy from states to regions, localities and political spaces, both in and across state boundaries. Third, a focus on how authority is negotiated at multiple levels, extending down to local communities and social networks. Fourth, 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, criminal gangs, paramilitaries, militias, warlords and rebel groups. Fifth, an emphasis on the agency and capacity for collective action of citizens and marginalised groups, whether in resisting state authority or in cooperating with it.

More granular and decentred approaches to research and policy practice have reinforced these paradigm shifts. Researchers have used statistical techniques to disaggregate conflicts at the subnational level, to show how they cluster in some localities but not others.³³ There is a growing body of micro-level empirical studies:³⁴ of insurgent groups; of different participants in conflicts, including women; of rebel governance; of refugees and displaced people; of civilian people and groups caught up in or resisting violence; and of the different layers of local-level governance in conflict-affected localities. Many of these studies highlight local agency, along with the limitations of the state. Some offer complex accounts of how international agencies, state agencies, local administrations and non-state bodies interact, for instance to create new forms of indirect rule, in which powerful local actors extract resources and support from externals, and externals themselves become *de facto* participants in local struggles for power and patronage.

Development analysts and practitioners alike have argued that it is more productive to seek out what works, rather than what is broken (Allouche and Jackson 2019). To do this, they have often looked outside the formal boundaries of the state. There have been local turns, both in peace-building and in development practice.³⁵ These have attracted programme support for a range of grassroots initiatives, such as decentralisation programmes, local-level courts and policing, women's peace-building 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.

There has been keen interest in the potential of peace-building and of state-building from below. Somaliland, in particular, has attracted attention. A credible case can be made that a democratically accountable state was built in a situation of acute violent conflict, with very little support from the international community

31 See Luckham (2017) for a fuller discussion in the context of insecurity.

32 On rebel governance see Arjona *et al.* (2015) and on criminal governance Lessing (2020).

33 See, for instance, Raleigh *et al.* (2010).

34 These studies are too many to cite here, which is an encouraging sign of the interest in these questions. To give just one example, Murtazashvili (2018) provides a detailed account of the workings of different levels of political authority in Afghanistan, from the most local levels up to the state, both customary and formal.

35 MacGinty and Richmond (2013) on the local turn in peace-building; and Luckham (2017) on the wider issues of rethinking peace, security and development from below.

and neighbouring African states. This was achieved through lengthy consultations with clan elders, party activists, women's groups and other civic groups. Its significance is qualified, however, by Somaliland's difficulties in obtaining international recognition; the subsequent emergence of significant democratic deficits; and by the paucity of other real-life examples.

In the final analysis, these decentred and granular approaches cannot entirely replace the state as a focus for analysis and policy. State sovereignty still matters. Its presence or absence affects political outcomes, even in seemingly state-less contexts like Somalia, Yemen or Libya, where contested claims to state sovereignty have a direct bearing on external assistance and on access to natural resources. Even when states have lost their vital monopoly of legitimate violence at their fragile margins, they still remain important facts of political life, with varying

capacities to ensure security, extract resources and deliver public goods.

However, the social contract between states and citizens can provide an illuminating starting point for policy as well as analysis. It can bring a critical eye to how authoritarian and fragile states work and for whom they work; and especially whom they fail. It can expose the uneven local geographies of development, political power and state administration, including the major gaps and inequities at the state's margins. It can highlight the fragile and contingent nature of the state's relationships with citizens and local communities, especially those who are most excluded and vulnerable. And it can turn attention to the agency and capacities of citizens; including how they might be mobilised for collective action, so as to make the state more accountable and inclusive.

9 Conclusions: Uncomfortable dilemmas for development practitioners

Categorising states as fragile, or as authoritarian, is both an intellectual exercise and a political act. The categories are problematic and disputed – and they have real-world consequences. Development analysts and practitioners alike should reflect deeply upon how their categories shape their policies and programmes; how they influence their interventions in politically charged situations; and how they impact on poor and vulnerable people.

There seems to be a good *prima facie* case that authoritarian states are more fragile than democracies. But this is hard to demonstrate empirically, not least because the two concepts are imprecise and come loaded with all manner of baggage. This paper has argued that one should look behind both concepts to build a more convincing if more complex analysis. First, by unpicking the different dimensions of fragility, and asking if and how they are related. Second, by uncovering the political power relationships and social inequalities, which underpin authoritarianism and give rise to fragility. Third, by drawing on colonial and post-colonial history, to understand the conditions and crises that make states fragile. Fourth, by factoring in the major spatial and social inequalities which divide states internally and across national boundaries. And fifth, by decentring analysis and

policy, so as to better understand how fragility and authoritarianism impact on and are responded to by citizens, local communities and vulnerable groups.

This means facing up to some uncomfortable truths. Not all autocracies are fragile. Some indeed may be better at ensuring order and delivering public goods than many democracies. Democracies as well as autocracies 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 and how to reverse these cycles. Even well-consolidated democracies sometimes govern their marginalised peripheries in comparably violent and exclusionary ways to autocracies. On the other hand, pockets of peace and accountable, capable governance can thrive at the local level (Allouche and Jackson 2019; Leonard and Samantar 2011), even in the most fragile and violent contexts, although they do not necessarily scale up to wider levels of national authority.

In 'development-land' as well as in 'peace-land', there is little room for political innocence.³⁶ Practitioners should not only be politically informed and but also capable of critical self-reflection. Sound analysis of how fragile and authoritarian

³⁶ See Autesserre (2014) on the dangers of external actors isolating themselves in bubbles, with too little interaction with national stakeholders. 'Peaceland' is her term.

states work and for whom, is required to better comprehend the complex situations in which they deliver assistance and cooperate with local partners. It can also identify ways of working around the multiple obstacles they face. These are best seen as dilemmas to be navigated, rather than problems with ready solutions. For instance:

- Whether to 'work with the grain' of problematic national governments and local authorities to achieve development goals, or to insist on minimum governance and human rights standards?
- How to cope with intransigent or self-interested policymakers, when negotiating humanitarian 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 government institutions to NGOs and civic organisations, without undermining the former and endangering the latter?
- What to do when intelligence or national security agencies try to co-opt, infiltrate or subvert civic organisations, and how to protect the latter?
- What if cooperation is required with dissidents or even armed insurgents, as well as with the regime, and how to chart a course between them?
- When are Faustian bargains with repressive and corrupt elites or violent insurgents permissible, for instance to protect vulnerable people or to resolve conflicts?
- What to do when the security imperatives of governments and of powerful external actors pull in one direction and the need to build trust and work with civic activists and local communities pull in another?

The dilemmas are many, and there are few, if any, general answers.

Working on authoritarian structures and fragile situations in order to change them can be especially challenging. Governance initiatives supported by development agencies cannot but be politically loaded. This is evidently so with democracy promotion, even in its less obviously partisan forms, such as electoral monitoring and support. It is equally the case with most forms of peace support, including stabilisation and conflict-resolution; with disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration; with security sector reform; and with justice and human rights support. All of these run the risk of external actors taking on tasks that national governments and others should be performing. National elites may well be more interested in the resources that such programmes bring in, than in the reforms they are supposed to achieve. International engagement, especially in governance and security matters, tends to disturb 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.

In sum, there should 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 support broadly based local and national initiatives, rather than those of political elites, donors or seurocrats?
- Can alliances be built both inside the state and outside it, that have some 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 wealthy, the powerful and the well connected?

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Appendix 1 – What is this mysterious entity called the state? Different theoretical takes have real-world consequences

- **Sovereign or juridical:** International recognition plus the choreography of sovereignty.
- **Weberian:** Monopoly of legitimate violence; control of territory; rational (bureaucratic) administration.
- **Developmental or 'governance' state:** Capacity to deliver security and other public goods, to tax and to regulate the economy.
- **State as a social contract with citizens:** Legitimacy; accountable public authority; rule of law; and implicitly liberal democracy.
- **Nation state:** 'Imagined communities' embedded in history, culture and values. Tensions between national identity and accommodating diversity.
- **State as organised crime and/or as political marketplace:** Roots in both neoliberal economics and Marxist theory. 'Whose state?' is the big question.
- **Marxist:** Ruling committee of the bourgeoisie; enforcer for global capitalism.
- **Neo-patrimonial:** Personal power; patronage; corruption.
- **Rentier:** Resource or aid dependent.
- **Gendered:** Site of patriarchy.
- **Negotiated states or hybrid political orders:** Multiple sites of power and legitimacy within and outside the state; may also include rebel governance.
- **Networked or disciplining state (Foucault):** Power is not sovereign (from top) but networked or 'capillary' (permeating society); 'governmentality' extends beyond formal state; power is legitimised via 'regimes of truth' (like development and governance).

Appendix 2 – Long-term most worsened fragility 2010–20

Country	Increase in fragility [†]	Regime type [Ⓐ]	UNHDI rank [Ⓓ]	WB conflict tracker [Ⓐ]
Libya	25.8	Autocracy	105	High-intensity conflict
Syria	20.9	Autocracy	151	High-intensity conflict
Mali	17.3	Limited political democracy	184	Medium-intensity conflict
Yemen	14.3	Autocracy	179	Medium-intensity conflict
Venezuela	11.7	Autocracy	113	High institutional and social fragility
Greece	6.0	Democracy	32	No conflict
Eritrea	5.5	Autocracy	180	High institutional and social fragility
Chile	5.0	Democracy	43	No conflict
Bahrain	4.9	Liberalised autocracy	42	No conflict
United Kingdom	4.7	Democracy	13	No conflict
United States	4.3	Democracy	17	No conflict
Brazil	3.9	Democracy	84	No conflict
The Gambia	3.2	Limited political democracy	172	High institutional and social fragility
South Africa	2.7	Democracy	114	No conflict
Cameroon	2.6	Liberalised autocracy	153	Medium-intensity conflict
Angola	2.3	Liberalised autocracy	158	No conflict
Burundi	2.2	Autocracy	185	High institutional and social fragility
Djibouti	2.1	Liberalised autocracy	166	No conflict
Central African Republic	2.1	Autocracy	188	Medium-intensity conflict

Source: Author's own. Created using data from Coppedge *et al.* (2020)[Ⓐ]; Fund for Peace (2020)[†]; UNDP (2020)[Ⓓ]; and World Bank (2021)[Ⓐ].

Appendix 3 – Fragility and authoritarianism master table

Country	Fragility rank [†]	Economic fragility [†]	Political fragility [†]	Security fragility [†]	Environmental fragility [†]	Societal fragility [†]	Regime type ^a	Trending ^a	UNHDI rank/189 ^o	Conflict and type ^t
Yemen	1	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Down	179	Medium-intensity conflict
South Sudan	2	High	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Down	185	Medium-intensity conflict
Somalia	3	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	n/a	High-intensity conflict
Central African Republic	4	High	High	Severe	Severe	High	Autocracy	Stable	188	Medium-intensity conflict
Democratic Republic of the Congo	5	High	Severe	High	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	175	Medium-intensity conflict
Syrian Arab Republic	6	Severe	Severe	Severe	High	Severe	Autocracy	Down	151	High-intensity conflict
Chad	7	High	Severe	High	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	187	Medium-intensity conflict
Afghanistan	8	High	High	Severe	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	169	High-intensity conflict
Haiti	9	High	High	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	170	High institutional and social fragility
Burundi	10	High	Severe	High	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	185	High institutional and social fragility
Iraq	11	Severe	High	Severe	High	High	Autocracy	Stable	123	Medium-intensity conflict
Sudan	12	Severe	Severe	High	High	Severe	Autocracy	Down	170	High institutional and social fragility
Congo	13	High	High	Low	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	149	High institutional and social fragility
Mali	14	High	High	High	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	184	Medium-intensity conflict
Venezuela	15	High	Severe	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Autocracy	Stable	113	High institutional and social fragility

Country	Fragility rank [†]	Economic fragility [†]	Political fragility [†]	Security fragility [†]	Environmental fragility [†]	Societal fragility [†]	Regime type [°]	Trending [°]	UNHDI rank/189 [°]	Conflict and type [°]
Zimbabwe	16	High	Moderate	Low	Severe	High	Autocracy	Stable	150	High institutional and social fragility
Equatorial Guinea	17	High	Severe	Moderate	High	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	145	
Libya	18	High	High	Severe	Moderate	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	105	High-intensity conflict
Cameroon	19	Moderate	Moderate	High	Severe	Severe	Liberalised autocracy	Stable	153	Medium-intensity conflict
Uganda	20	High	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Liberalised autocracy	Stable	159	
North Korea	21	High	Severe	Low	High	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	n/a	
Pakistan	22	High	High	High	High	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	154	High institutional and social fragility
Eritrea	23	High	Severe	Minor	Severe	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	180	High institutional and social fragility
Nigeria	24	Moderate	Low	High	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	161	Medium-intensity conflict
Mozambique	25	High	Low	High	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	181	Medium-intensity conflict
Madagascar	26	High	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	164	
Kenya	27	Moderate	Low	High	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	143	
Ethiopia	28	High	Moderate	High	Severe	Severe	Liberalised autocracy	Stable	173	
Guinea-Bissau	29	High	High	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	175	High institutional and social fragility
Guinea	30	High	Moderate	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Up	178	
Bangladesh	31	Moderate	Moderate	High	High	Severe	Autocracy	Down	133	
Papua New Guinea	32	High	Low	Moderate	High	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	155	High institutional and social fragility
Mauritania	33	High	Moderate	Low	High	Severe	Liberalised autocracy	Stable	157	

Country	Fragility rank [†]	Economic fragility [†]	Political fragility [†]	Security fragility [†]	Environmental fragility [†]	Societal fragility [†]	Regime type [°]	Trending [°]	UNHDI rank/189 [°]	Conflict and type [‡]
Honduras	34	High	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	Liberalised autocracy	Stable	132	
Liberia	35	High	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Political democracy	Stable	175	High institutional and social fragility
West Bank and Gaza Strip (NB: OECD and UNHDI offer one score, SDC offers two)	36	Severe	Moderate	High	Moderate	Severe	WB: Liberalised autocracy GZ: Autocracy	Stable	115	High institutional and social fragility
Nicaragua	37	Moderate	Moderate	High	High	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	128	
Guatemala	38	High	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	127	
Zambia	39	High	Low	Low	Severe	High	Liberalised autocracy	Stable	146	
Comoros	40	High	High	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Down	156	
Niger	41	High	Low	High	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	189	Medium-intensity conflict
Tajikistan	42	High	Severe	High	High	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	125	
Sierra Leone	43	High	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Political democracy	Up	182	
Lao People's Democratic Republic	44	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	137	High institutional and social fragility
Angola	45	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Severe	High	Liberalised autocracy	Up	148	
Burkina Faso	46	High	Low	High	Severe	High	Autocracy	Down	182	Medium-intensity conflict
Eswatini	47	High	Low	Low	Severe	High	Autocracy	Stable	138	
Lesotho	48	High	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Stable	165	
Togo	49	High	Moderate	Moderate	Severe	Severe	Limited political democracy	Down	167	
Tanzania	50	High	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Down	163	

Country	Fragility rank [‡]	Economic fragility [‡]	Political fragility [‡]	Security fragility [‡]	Environmental fragility [‡]	Societal fragility [‡]	Regime type [‡]	Trending [‡]	UNHDI rank/189 [‡]	Conflict and type [‡]
Myanmar	51	Moderate	Low	High	High	Severe	Limited political democracy	Up	147	Medium-intensity conflict
Côte d'Ivoire	52	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Up	162	
Solomon Islands	53	High	Low	Moderate	Low	High	Political democracy	Stable	151	High institutional and social fragility
Iran	54	Low	High	High	Moderate	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	70	
Djibouti	55	High	Moderate	Low	Low	High	Liberalised autocracy	Stable	166	
Cambodia	56	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High	Severe	Autocracy	Stable	144	
The Gambia	57	High	Low	Moderate	Severe	High	Limited political democracy	Up	172	High institutional and social fragility

Note: 1–13 are the most fragile states highlighted by *States of Fragility 2020* (OECD 2020).

Source: Author's own. Created using data from Coppedge *et al.* (2020)[‡]; OECD (2020)[‡]; UNDP (2020)[‡]; and World Bank (2021)[‡].