



**Land a blow** South Africa, a country that once fared well on the fragility index, has slipped down the scale. It is currently in the grips of a debate on land acquisition without compensation  
AFP/GULSHAN KHAN

**STATES OF MATTER**

# Between failed and fragile

An index that claims to measure the frailty of States stands on shaky, questionable grounds



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Every failed British Prime Minister has an afterlife, when he is allowed to strut his stuff on the global stage as a statesman. In March 2017, David Cameron, the Prime Minister who left office after handing his successor the Brexit hot potato, took up a position as chair of an advisory commission on “State fragility”. After brief deliberations, the commission published its report in April this year.

All States were fragile at one time, the commission concludes, though some found ways of building cohesion through specific institutions of governance. The integrity of institutions depended upon citizen loyalty to the principles embodied in them. Writing a formal Constitution was only the first step; it was far more important to nurture the civic culture that would prevent the atrophy of governance institutions.

Aside from these generalisations, the commission offers a qualified mea culpa for the failure of Western efforts at institution building. Often the priority has been to implement the processes of democratic governance, it concedes, rather than foster the basic ethos.

The new approach the commission favours would emphasise pragmatism rather than idealism. Elections would not be forced without building up a culture of civility and securing widely shared tolerance for difference. Drawing lessons from botched efforts at forced democratisation in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, the commission expresses a strong preference for a transition authored by the people and their leaders, rather than “pop-up democracy”.

South Africa in 1994 is one transition that gains the approval of the commission. Though the preceding white supremacist power structure was brutal, it did build up the institutions that could handle a multi-party democracy based on universal franchise. The

African National Congress (ANC), moreover, was an inclusive liberation movement, that could, with relative ease, win the consent of most if not all through the transition and beyond.

Reality can on occasion creep up on such confident assertions and embarrass them. South Africa is currently going through a review of internal policy, after growing restiveness at the long denial of the rewards of liberation. In December, the ANC determined at its annual conference on a review of the constitutional provision that forbids land acquisition without compensation. The intent was to correct persistent iniquities in land ownership, with over 72 per cent of farmland owned by the white minority population of less than nine per cent.

South Africa’s modest reform proposal occasioned a furious Twitter blast by US President Donald Trump, condemning the supposed expropriation of land and the killing of white farmers.

Though emanating from the extremist fringe, Trump’s ludicrous tweet was a pointer towards a recurrent practice of the liberal mainstream that it shows no self-awareness of. Time after time, liberalism has cheered as its standard bearers, notably the US and Britain, have walked into situations where it has no business to be, fomenting chaos and destruction. It has then walked away while blaming the victims and the imperfections of their societies.

State fragility is a successor to “State failure”, a term of art that entered the vocabulary in the mid-’90s, gaining currency first in a tiny trickle, before becoming a virtual torrent. Its origins can be found in a 1995 report of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which iden-

tified State failure as “a type of serious political crisis exemplified by... events in Somalia, Bosnia, Liberia, and Afghanistan”.

A common factor in all these instances was US intervention, giving legitimate grounds to pose a question. Was State failure the cause or the consequence of US intervention?

A tracking of the use of the term in the prestigious establishment journal *Foreign Policy* reveals that it gained currency all through the ’90s, before peaking after the terrorist attacks on US territory on September 11, 2001. In 2005, the “Fund for Peace”, a research and advocacy body based in Washington DC, in association with *Foreign Policy*, began putting out an annual listing of the world’s “failed States”: A negative beauty pageant that was awaited with dread by most countries.

Critiques soon emerged of the very concept.

State failure, it was pointed out, was a way of wishing away the principle of national sovereignty in the feverish drive by Western liberalism to impose its will. The critique did not gain much traction, but forced a switch from the harsh, judgemental tone of “failure” to “fragility”.

Imperial overreach by the US and its vassals though seems now to have contributed to the rupture of internal concord and a growing mood of incivility in the very bastions of liberalism. To paraphrase the metaphysical poet John Donne and one of his great poems of valediction: No State is an island, detached from the rest. There is no cause for any among them to ask: for which failed State does the bell toll today? Every State’s failure is a failure of the whole.

**All States were fragile at one time, the commission concludes**