

Crisis, Fragile and Failed States Definitions used by the CSRC

Fragile State: A “fragile state” is a state significantly susceptible to crisis in one or more of its sub-systems. (It is a state that is particularly vulnerable to internal and external shocks and domestic and international conflicts). In a fragile state, institutional arrangements embody and perhaps preserve the conditions of crisis: in economic terms, this could be institutions (importantly, property rights) that reinforce stagnation or low growth rates, or embody extreme inequality (in wealth, in access to land, in access to the means to make a living); in social terms institutions may embody extreme inequality or lack of access altogether to health or education; in political terms, institutions may entrench exclusionary coalitions in power (in ethnic, religious, or perhaps regional terms), or extreme factionalism or significantly fragmented security organisations. Drawing on insights related to “institutional multiplicity” – ubiquitous in our research so far: In fragile states, statutory institutional arrangements are vulnerable to challenges by rival institutional systems be they derived from traditional authorities, devised by communities under conditions of stress that see little of the state (in terms of security, development or welfare), or be they derived from warlords, or other non-state power brokers. The opposite of a “fragile state” is a “stable state” – one where dominant or statutory institutional arrangements appear able to withstand internal and external shocks and contestation remains within the boundaries of reigning institutional arrangements.

Crisis State: A crisis state is a state under acute stress, where reigning institutions face serious contestation and are potentially unable to manage conflict and shocks. (There is a danger of state collapse). This is not an absolute condition, but a condition at a given point of time, so a state can reach a “crisis condition” and recover from it, or can remain in crisis over relatively long periods of time, or a crisis state can unravel and collapse. Such a process could lead, as we have always argued, to the formation of new states, to war and chaos, or to the consolidation of the “ancien régime”. Specific “crises” within the subsystems of the state can also exist - an economic crisis, a public health crisis like HIV/AIDS, a public order crisis, a constitutional crisis, for instance - with each on its own not amounting to a generalised condition of a crisis state although a subsystem crisis can be sufficiently severe and/or protracted that it gives rise to the generalised condition of a crisis state. The opposite of a crisis state is a “resilient state”, where institutions are generally able to cope with conflict, to manage sub-state crises, to respond to contestation, wherever the state sits between fragility and stability.

Failed State – We define a “failed state” as a condition of “state collapse” – eg, a state that can no longer perform its basic security, and development functions and that has no effective control over its territory and borders. A failed state is one that can no longer reproduce the conditions for its own existence. This term is used in very contradictory ways in the policy community (for instance, there is a tendency to label a “poorly performing” state as “failed” – a tendency we reject). The opposite of a “failed state” is an “enduring state” and the absolute dividing line between these two conditions is difficult to ascertain at the margins. Even in a failed state, some elements of the state, such as local state organisations, might continue to exist.

Crisis States Workshop – London, March 2006