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Middle East and North Africa Programme: Yemen Forum Workshop Summary

The Role of Youth Activists in Yemen's Transition Process

May 2012

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a summary of a workshop held in Jordan in May 2012, which brought Yemeni youth activists together with international policy-makers to explore the extent of youth participation in Yemen's transition process and identify mechanisms for increasing future involvement.

Changing perceptions of international actors

Yemeni perceptions of the international community have improved over the last six months, largely driven by the positive role of UN special envoy Jamal Benomar. Other external actors' efforts to support Yemen through aid, capacity-building and the Friends of Yemen process are reflected in relatively positive perceptions of European countries.

However, a poor perception of several countries remains: US policy in Yemen is still seen as focused only on counter-terrorism, while Iran and Saudi Arabia are also seen as interfering in Yemen in pursuit of national self-interest.

Military reform: an urgent priority

Military reform is an urgent priority and comprehensive restructuring – which goes beyond reshuffling a handful of senior commanders – is likely to take at least two years. There are ongoing discussions between US military planners and President Abdo Rabbo Mansur Hadi, but no clear plan has been agreed. Increased consultation and transparency in the process are priorities for Yemeni youth.

The demands of youth activists will help to maintain pressure on Hadi to expedite reforms of the military and security services, and activists can increase their leverage by lobbying the international community to keep the question of military reform high on the diplomatic agenda.

National dialogue – a question of representation

There was widespread agreement that youth inclusion offered a unique opportunity to promote the establishment of a modern, democratic state in Yemen, and that the participation of young people was vital to the success of the national dialogue. However, there was no consensus over how to ensure that youth activists are able to influence the preparatory stages, or how best to achieve youth representation in the dialogue itself.

This is aggravated by the lack of transparency on the part of the Yemeni government and the international community regarding plans for the national

dialogue. With no clear terms of engagement for the process, youth groups cannot adequately prepare.

The southern question

The possibility that representatives of the southern movement will not be willing to take part in the national dialogue puts in doubt the ability of the dialogue to fully engage all sections of Yemeni society, and ultimately the success of the dialogue itself.

However, many young Yemenis are keen for dialogue to take place at the grassroots level between northerners and southerners, and between southerners, to increase mutual understanding of grievances, clarify the aims of dialogue at the national level and identify solutions to the southern question.

Increasing youth participation in politics

Yemeni activists are keen to increase youth participation in politics and to work on ways to improve youth awareness and skill levels in the political arena. Support from both Yemeni and international policy-makers was seen as essential to these aspirations, especially through directing international funding to a wider number of local NGOs and CSOs and more training programmes to give young people the tools to engage in politics effectively.

Youth activists have a vital role to play in engaging wider Yemeni society in the national dialogue and taking forward civil society.

Action points

Key actions to take in the short term to support aspirations for a successful national dialogue are:

- Increasing transparency and providing more information about the national dialogue process;
- Supporting youth groups to address the question of representation and participate effectively in the national dialogue;
- Youth groups pushing for greater interaction with the transition government; and
- Increasing the access of youth groups and NGOs outside Sana'a to resources and training.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2012, the Chatham House Yemen Forum convened a week of workshops in Jordan for Yemeni civil society activists, in association with [Resonate! Yemen](#). Participants were active in a variety of fields in the civil society sphere – including human rights, development, journalism and political activism – and came from different regions of Yemen, including Sana'a, Taizz, Hadramawt, Abyan and Aden.

The week of activities focused on bringing together Yemeni civil society activists in dialogue with international policy-makers, but workshops were also held on negotiation strategies, conflict analysis, scenarios for territorial restructuring and debating the role of Islam in politics.

This paper primarily summarizes the sessions held on the second day, when policy-makers from a number of Western and regional governments and international organizations participated in discussions with Yemeni activists, with the aim of increasing mutual understanding of each group's role in the transition process in Yemen, focusing on key mechanisms for civil society involvement. There were no designated panellists and participants were free to speak in English or Arabic, so as to enable a genuine exchange of perspectives and the full equality of all participants.

This was the second in a series of Yemen Forum workshops for civil society activists. The first event was held in Cairo in October 2011, and the summary is available to download from the Chatham House website: [Yemen: Strategies for Change – Playing the Policy Game](#).

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

The Chatham House Rule

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

SESSION 1: PERCEPTIONS

During the first session, participants discussed their perceptions of various groups involved in Yemen's transition, including domestic actors (such as the established political parties and the youth movement) and international actors (such as the Gulf states and individual Western countries).

Participants were divided into small groups consisting of both policy-makers and activists and asked to choose two words to describe the role of one of 22 key individuals or groups currently involved in the transition in Yemen. Each description represents the consensus reached within the groups, although not necessarily the view of each workshop participant.

This session was organized along the same lines as a previous exercise in Cairo in October 2011. By comparing the results of the Jordan exercise with the results from Cairo, it was possible to roughly illustrate shifting perceptions over time. (With the caveat that only around 50% of the participants in Jordan had taken part in the previous workshop). Participants were encouraged to think critically about achievements during the six months that has passed since the Cairo workshop – in terms both of events on the ground and of uptake of recommendations.

Perceptions of international actors

Western governments were described in relatively positive terms, although criticism and ambivalence persisted. Germany was described as 'committed' and 'helpful'; the EU was perceived as wanting real change, despite making 'insufficient' effort; and the United Kingdom was seen as pursuing stability, security and democracy, primarily through the Friends of Yemen process. The United States was consistently depicted as preoccupied with security and counter-terrorism, to the detriment of wider concerns.

In stark contrast to the findings of the Cairo workshop, where the UN was described as 'unhelpful', 'internally divided' and 'self-serving', participants in Jordan saw the UN as playing a constructive and conciliatory role. UN special envoy Jamal Benomar was seen as a good negotiator with the potential to contribute to the successful implementation of the transition plan.

Iran and Saudi Arabia were described in negative terms. Iran was considered provocative and seeking to gain influence in Yemen, while Saudi Arabia was seen as manipulative and untrustworthy. Participants considered that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries had acted out of concern for regional stability in sponsoring Yemen's transition plan.

Perceptions of Yemeni actors

Traditional political parties still carried negative connotations, but their diminishing influence meant that they were seen as less of a hindrance to change. For example, the General Congress Party (GPC) was seen as a movement that was 'trying to survive'; while six months earlier, participants in Cairo had described it as an 'obstacle to change'. Elite players – such as General Ali Mohsen, the Saleh family and the Al-Ahmar family – were still seen as corrupt and opportunistic. Yemen's new president, Abdo Rabbo Mansur Hadi, was described as 'the best of the worst'.

Emerging political forces – such as the new political parties, youth activists and prominent individual women leaders, including Tawakkul Karman and Houria Mashhour – were seen as integral to the success of Yemen's transition.

Participants saw both southerners and the Houthis as striving for greater influence and autonomy during the transition period.

SESSION 2: THE TRANSITION PROCESS

The political situation is still extremely fragile, with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his relatives continuing to exercise direct control over well-resourced military and security divisions. One Yemeni participant described the transition as a 'peaceful change of dictatorship', while others argued that none of the youth movement's revolutionary objectives had yet been met. Negotiations over the GCC agreement were perceived as an elite affair in which youth activists were not able to express their ideas and concerns, and participants called for the next steps in the transition process to be less 'top-down'. There were also strong expectations for the international community to exert more effective pressure on Yemeni political actors to bring about real and deep-rooted change, particularly in the military and security sector.

Restructuring of the military

A sense of urgency pervaded discussions over military restructuring. Several Yemeni participants viewed the lack of a unified command structure in the Yemeni military as obstructing efforts to defeat Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), especially in the south. Ongoing divisions within the military and security services were also perceived as contributing to political instability, as well as preventing President Hadi from prioritizing the national dialogue.

Hadi's creation of a new military and security committee under the terms of the GCC transition deal, as well as his recent purge of several senior military commanders (most of whom are Saleh allies), were hailed as positive steps in the right direction. However, it was noted that there is a great difference between reshuffling a handful of senior commanders and establishing an effective, unified national institution under one central line of command.

Several Yemeni participants highlighted the lack of information regarding the likely timeframe for military restructuring, as well as the lack of consensus over its eventual scale or scope. Participants heard that Hadi was already working with US military planners to draw up a framework for root-and-branch reform, although these discussions had not yet resulted in a clear plan, and that planners were hoping to assist Hadi with the future implementation of this restructuring plan – most likely over a period of more than two years.

Yemeni participants welcomed this information but called for greater transparency and increased youth consultation during the process of designing and implementing the military restructuring plan. It was also

emphasized that military restructuring should be based on a 'national vision', rather than the interests of competing regional and international powers. Several participants emphasized that the vocal demands of Yemeni youth activists would play a useful role in maintaining pressure on Hadi to remove the remaining military commanders associated with the former regime and expedite his planned reforms of the military and security services. It was suggested that youth activists could increase their leverage by lobbying the international community to keep the question of military reform high on the diplomatic agenda. Lobbying the US government to think beyond security and counter-terrorism was also seen as important.

There was disagreement over the sequencing of military restructuring in relation to the national dialogue, with some Yemeni participants insisting it should be completed before the national dialogue began, so that it did not distort the dialogue process and weaken the likely outcome. Policy-makers warned that military restructuring was likely to run in parallel with the national dialogue, as extensive reform was not feasible before the autumn, when the national dialogue was expected to start.

The national dialogue and the role of youth

Participants viewed the engagement of youth activists as vital to the success of the national dialogue, through their individual efforts as well as through their wider links to civil society and the general public. Several participants highlighted the role that youth activists could play in raising awareness and in public education in order to reach the 'silent majority'.

It was suggested that in order to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the national dialogue, youth groups and coalitions had to learn how to articulate their collective demands more coherently. To that end, they needed to push for greater interaction with the transition government, while the government needed to respond and assist them to better understand the challenges that ministers were currently facing.

Once again, lack of transparency over plans for the national dialogue was perceived as a barrier to youth participation, with criticism on this point directed at the government, as well as the international community. Improved transparency was seen as crucial for a sufficient level of trust to develop between youth activists and the government, especially if the former were expected to act as intermediaries between the government and young people. Some Yemeni activists saw themselves as potential 'watchdogs': pushing for transparency, articulating demands for democracy and human rights, making

sure that the government upheld its promises of reform and trying to hold the international community to account.

One participant described Yemeni youth activists as the 'throbbing heart' of the revolution, who had brought the country to its current state of transition; and yet they feel they are consistently overlooked by politicians, as well as international diplomats. Youth activists and international policy-makers both acknowledged the need for improved communication, in order to better understand each other's aims and priorities.

SESSION 3: THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

Participants heard that the national dialogue was expected to start in the autumn of 2012, and to last for about six months. The GCC transition agreement and its implementing mechanism stipulate that the dialogue needs to be comprehensive and inclusive of all segments of society, including minority groups.¹ A preparatory committee is expected to establish the parameters of the process, and participants agreed that diversity in its composition (especially with regard to the number of women and youth representatives) was an essential step towards an inclusive dialogue.

The role of the UN

UN envoy Jamal Benomar is expected to play a key role in coordinating the national dialogue and monitoring follow-up. While most participants emphasized that the dialogue should be a Yemeni-led process, they expressed confidence that Mr Benomar's contribution would be instrumental in determining the dialogue's success. The UN envoy's team were currently focusing on five broad topics: drafting a new constitution, the south and Sa'dah, the structure of the state, transitional justice and reconciliation, and the protection of vulnerable groups. Once the national dialogue process is complete and the new constitution has been drafted, Yemenis will vote in a national referendum on it.

Youth representation

The question of youth representation dominated discussions about the national dialogue. There was widespread agreement that the prospect of youth inclusion offered a unique opportunity to promote the establishment of a modern, democratic state in Yemen. While youth activists generally accepted the principle of representation – i.e. having their grievances addressed by a representative body, rather than being physically present themselves – there was no consensus over how to manage this process.

Participants explored the idea of establishing a unified coordination council, whose leader – a competent interlocutor – would participate in the national dialogue on council members' behalf. The council would also facilitate contact between youth groups that were part of it and other delegates to the national

¹ See part IV, section 20 of the UN translation of the GCC agreement implementation mechanism, International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition* (2012), p. 37, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/125-yemen-enduring-conflicts-threatened-transition.aspx>.

dialogue, as well as distributing information and working to maintain the overall momentum of the national dialogue. However, some participants said it would be difficult – if not impossible – to gather divergent youth groups under one single umbrella structure.

Other suggestions included holding a nationwide youth conference to help groups prepare for the national dialogue, agree on common objectives and establish mechanisms to monitor representation; the formation of local youth councils in every province to appoint representatives to a national preparatory committee; encouraging established political parties to increase the participation of youth delegates in their delegations to the national dialogue; and drafting a 'goals and vision' document that would serve as the basis for youth engagement in the national dialogue.

In addition, the discussion around representation mechanisms was hampered by the lack of clarity around the goals and format of the national dialogue. This demonstrated again the need for more transparency around the transition process on the part of the Yemeni government and the international community, including the UN.

Impediments to the national dialogue

While participants emphasized that the legitimacy of the national dialogue needed to be underpinned by adequate representation of all segments of society, some raised concerns that significant groups would refuse to take part, in particular the Southern Movement and youth activists who insist that military restructuring must occur prior to the national dialogue.

To ensure the engagement of southern representatives, participants suggested that youth groups in the south could promote a separate 'southern dialogue', running in parallel with and eventually complementing the wider national dialogue. However, the prospect that the dialogue might fail remains, despite the heavy reliance of international policy-makers on its success, and the absence of any alternatives was highlighted.

Despite high hopes for change among youth activists, policy-makers stressed the importance of securing elite buy-in for both the process and the outcome, as well as the need for youth groups to find a way to work within those constraints, and the need for compromise.

SESSION 4: MECHANISMS FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Participants were divided into five breakout groups to discuss the following mechanisms for youth political participation in Yemen: civil society and development organizations, pressure groups and the media, political parties, the south and alternative models of the state, and the national dialogue.

Each group was asked to consider the advantages and obstacles for youth groups of engaging with the political process through the different channels, and to make recommendations to both activists and policy-makers for greater youth inclusion through each of these channels, including specific action points for participants of the workshop.

(See Appendix A for the worksheet each breakout group was asked to complete during the session.)

Civil society and development organizations

Participants in this group recognized several advantages of working through civil society organizations (CSOs) and development organizations, including local NGOs. (CSOs are here considered to be a broad range of formal and informal non-political organisations, compared to officially registered local NGOs). CSOs enjoy high levels of independence and credibility, and development organizations attract higher levels of foreign aid money to Yemen. Both CSOs and development organizations are likely to respectively represent and target the most vulnerable segments of Yemeni society, which are usually ignored by bigger political parties.

However, participants also identified a lack of communication between NGOs and local communities, which could lead to a misallocation of resources or misjudged priorities. Conditions set by donors are also an obstacle to the work of CSOs and development organizations, and several participants called for international donors to widen the pool of local NGOs and CSOs they fund.

Recommendations

- Policy-makers should be encouraged to set more flexible conditions for engaging with local CSOs in order to broaden the range of organizations that have access to funding.
- Youth groups should develop a clear vision for engaging with donor organizations, and create a support structure to make sure

that the grievances of local communities are addressed at the international level.

- Participants also called for a conference of independent youth groups to be held in the near future.

Pressure groups and media

The group highlighted the usefulness of pressure groups in creating broad-based coalitions of individuals from different backgrounds that succeed in achieving a strong impact and realizing specific goals. This was seen as a significant advantage over political parties.

However, pressure groups in Yemen were seen as lacking in experience and unaware of the potential they have to effect change. The media, on the other hand, are highly politicized and, especially within state-controlled media outlets, there are significant limits on freedom of expression.

Proposed solutions to overcome these problems included undertaking awareness-raising campaigns and training programmes to inform citizens about these potentially powerful channels for exercising influence. Participants also suggested getting around restricted access to mainstream media by using alternative media such as the Internet and more unconventional methods such as graffiti.

A debate also took place over whether mosques should be considered legitimate forums for campaigning. Most participants agreed that mosques have the potential to play a role in raising awareness and campaigning. Some also believed that it was the duty of mosques to disseminate information. Others disagreed, arguing that mosques cannot replace the media and should therefore not be considered an alternative method for sharing information.

Recommendations

- Policy-makers should encourage youth participation in pressure groups and campaigns.
- More pressure should be placed on the media to be transparent, and an effort should be made to combat corruption.

- More training should be available to Yemeni young people to give them the skills and experience to undertake advocacy campaigns.

Political parties

Participants in this group argued that, as a result of the revolution, positive changes have occurred within Yemen's political structures. A newly found right to protest and, more generally, greater freedom of expression have opened up the political stage to a number of new parties.

However, two main obstacles could undermine these positive developments: the use of force by some of the political parties and other powerful political actors (through sections of the military or militias), and what participants called 'negative foreign intervention', referring to the funding and arming of certain factions or the favouring of one party over another.

Participants identified three concrete solutions to these problems: the restructuring of military forces to create a unified national army, new laws to constrain the power of political parties and ensuring the enforcement of those laws, and the creation of a neutral national monitoring mechanism to oversee political parties and welfare organizations.

Recommendations

- Workshop participants should organize monthly meetings for political youth groups in different areas of Yemen.
- International community and policy-makers should support the proposed monthly meeting.

The south and alternative models of the state

The topic of 'the south and alternative models of the state' did not entirely fit with the assigned task of agreeing on advantages and obstacles to using certain mechanisms of political participation, but was included in the exercise in recognition that some Yemenis reject participating in the political process as defined by the central state, with its focus on Sana'a. Some activists say that their primary political goal is to entirely restructure the state – for example, through the re-establishment of an independent South Yemen.

Unsurprisingly, owing to the controversial nature of the topic and the diversity of views among group members, there was substantial disagreement among participants over the very notion of alternative models of the state. Some argued that it should not be discussed, pointing to the fact that there was no consensus over the problems that the issue of the south presents. This lack of agreement was cited as one of the main obstacles preventing youth groups from engaging with the issue. Another obstacle participants discussed was the endurance of the military and political elite tied to the old regime.

Solutions proposed included intensified communication and a deeper knowledge of the grievances of all parties to the conflict in order to ultimately encourage positive dialogue.

It was recommended that a north–south dialogue should be held, to be preceded by simultaneous north–north and south–south dialogues.

It was also suggested that holding a youth dialogue would raise awareness and improve understanding of the problem and the available solutions.

The national dialogue

The national dialogue has an international body – in the form of the UN – to support and supervise it. The UN's involvement was largely viewed as positive, particularly as it will provide observers and technical assistance, despite the risk that it might be misunderstood for an externally imposed process. The national dialogue will also provide a unique opportunity for Yemeni young people to voice their concerns and have a say in the country's future.

However, obstacles to the success of the dialogue include a lack of communication between various stakeholders, a lack of trust (particularly between government and military actors, and between youth groups and new political parties), the issue of transitional justice and the difficulties in setting up an independent investigation committee, a seeming disagreement over priorities, and the absence of a clear mechanism to determine the workings of the process.

Some participants raised transitional justice as a key issue for Yemenis during the transition process, arguing that the national dialogue should be a forum to discuss transitional justice, or that addressing transitional justice should be a precondition for the national dialogue. It was noted that a transitional justice law has already been drafted, which will lead to the creation of a commission for justice and reconciliation.

One participant was interested in understanding the difficulties faced by youth groups in finding their spokespersons to represent them in the national dialogue, highlighting the fact that the process will start soon and that there might therefore be considerable time pressure on youth groups trying to identify their key messages and a means to voice them.

Some pointed to the fact that party-affiliated youth groups would probably find it easier to select their representatives (and determine their line of argument) as they were already embedded in a well-defined structure. It is mostly independent groups that are faced with the challenge of representation. What emerged from the discussion, however, is that there is no commonly accepted idea on how to ensure the level of representation at the national dialogue that most Yemenis hope for.

Recommendations

- Participants should seek to engage wider Yemeni society around the national dialogue through advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns.
- International policy-makers should that ensure clarity and transparency underlie all aspects of their work.

Such actions would facilitate the flow of information to build trust between Yemenis and international organizations as well as among Yemenis, and encourage dialogue in society at an early stage in order to consolidate key messages that will ultimately be presented at the national dialogue.

SESSION 5: MOVING FORWARD

The last session of the workshop focused on identifying actions that participants – and other Yemeni civil society activists and international policy-makers – could take to advance their goals.

Participants began by reviewing action points from the previous Yemen Forum workshop, held in October 2011, and voted by a show of hands on whether these recommendations had been implemented. The exercise was revealing in showing areas where progress had been made and in highlighting areas where action is still needed.

- **Action point from October 2011:** Increase frequency of meetings between Yemeni civil society activists and international representatives and ensure diversity of participation.

Progress: The majority of participants said there had been an increase in the frequency of meetings, but that there was still a lack of diversity among those in contact with international representatives.

- **Action point:** Design consultative processes during the transition period to prioritize inclusivity.

Progress: While participants said this has not yet happened, most argued that the national dialogue, which is slowly beginning to take shape, could be seen as part of that consultative process. The question remains to what extent it will be inclusive.

- **Action point:** Training and support for Yemeni NGOs and CSOs in documenting human rights abuses, developing advocacy strategies and speaking to the media.

Progress: With the exception of media engagement, participants agreed that some work had been done in most of these areas, although there was still high demand from many local NGOs and CSOs – especially outside Sana'a – for more capacity-building activities.

- **Action point:** Develop a central resource where people can access manifestos of the youth movement, and clear, accessible information explaining the role of international organizations in Yemen.

Progress: Donor organizations and governments have been working on making information more accessible and their activities more transparent, but participants felt there was still room for improvement, particularly with Arabic content. The UK Department for International

Development and Foreign Office were mentioned as good examples of transparency for putting details of their funded projects online, although many participants remained unaware of this resource.

Local NGOs have been working on mapping Yemeni youth organizations in order to better understand the aims and demands of the youth movement, but there is no easily accessible central resource bringing together information about these groups.

Aspirations for the next stage of the transition process

Agreeing that there was still progress to be made on the action points identified in Cairo in October 2011, participants discussed their hopes for the next stages of the transition process. It was agreed that ensuring representative youth participation in the national dialogue was a top priority for activists, as was an inclusive consultation process during the drafting of the new constitution.

Dialogue, preparatory meetings and training were seen as essential to empowering youth activists and facilitating their participation in the national dialogue. Several participants identified financial and logistical support as elements that donors could help with, such as covering venue hire costs for meetings and conferences. The difficulty of attaining funding from international donors and their strict conditions were noted: for instance, the requirement of certain donors that organizations had to have been operational for two years before being eligible for funding was highlighted as a significant obstacle, limiting the number of local NGOs able to attain funding.

Despite optimism and multiple plans in the works for preparatory meetings in different parts of Yemen before the national dialogue, it was also pointed out that fundamental challenges still need to be overcome: basic services are yet to be restored, which would be an important step towards restoring confidence in the government.

APPENDIX A

Template for each break-out group during Session 4 on 'mechanisms for political participation'. Participants split into groups to discuss the following mechanisms for political participation:

- Civil society and development organizations
- Pressure groups and the media
- Political parties
- The south and alternative models of the state
- The national dialogue

Two key advantages of working in this field: 1. 2.	
Two main obstacles: 1. 2.	Two solutions: 1. 2.

In the next 18 months:

One recommendation for policy-makers or youth:

1.

One activity for the participants in the room to work on:

1.

ABOUT THE YEMEN FORUM

The Yemen Forum is a specialist global network that pursues policy solutions for Yemen. The collective knowledge and influence of Yemen Forum members raise awareness, share expertise and support governments in forming policies that directly address the causes of conflict, poverty and poor governance in Yemen. The current phase of the project has two major strands: political economy analysis, and the politics of inclusion and legitimacy.

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