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THE JASMINE REVOLUTION

APPLIED LESSONS FOR U.S. GRAND STRATEGY

by

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Biography

Col Brandon Beightol is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He graduated from the University of Tennessee in the spring of 1994 with a degree in Political Science and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Air Force. Shortly after graduation, he attended intelligence training at Goodfellow AFB, TX and graduated in 1995. Following intelligence training, Col Beightol has served in a variety of positions to include intelligence analyst, instructor, staff officer, squadron commander, executive officer and most recently served as the senior intelligence officer for the Air National Guard.

Abstract

From 1987 until 2011, the people of Tunisia suffered under autocratic rule, but in 2011, a popular revolution overthrew the ruler, resulting in its current representative democracy. This paper will examine the recent history of Tunisia leading up to the revolution. It will then examine realist, liberal and constructivist theory, as applied to the Tunisian revolution, and determine which theory best explains the events. Lastly, it will inform the kinds of policies we should adopt for similar revolutions in the future.

Thesis

The Tunisian Revolution had three phases: the decade leading up to the revolution, the twenty-five-day revolution that lead to the ousting of the president and the three-year period that followed, which resulted in a successful representative democracy that exists today. Competing theories seek to explain the causes and outcomes of the revolution; however, constructivist theory best describes the factors that lead up to and followed the revolution. The events of this revolution illustrate that economic and political factors that established the conditions in which technological advances empowered people to mobilize effectively, and ultimately led to a dramatic change in the government.

Introduction

In January 2011, an unexpected revolution erupted in Tunisia and similar revolutions quickly spread to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria; a period that has come to be known as the *Arab Spring*. It all began with the *Jasmine revolution*, named for the Tunisian official flower, in which angry protestors convinced the military to withdraw support for the President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. After Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, competing political coalitions negotiated the terms in which they formed an increasingly representative government. By

October 2011, Tunisia had successfully elected a new president and in 2014, completed its second peaceful political transfer of power since the revolution. The grand strategist seeks to understand forces and factors that drive revolutions and influence their outcomes. A close examination of this period reveals the strategic factors that influenced the revolution and the political reforms that followed it. Realist, liberal and constructivist lenses all offer explanations for the Tunisian revolution. A comparison of these perspectives offers a tool to help us understand the relationship between polices and outcomes, which can be used to understand and possibly foresee future occurrences.

Factors leading up to the Jasmine Revolution

In 1956, Habib Bourguiba took over as president after leading Tunisia into independence from France. Tunisia's economy did well during the 1960's, primarily due to "oil revenues" and growth in exports "such as phosphates, phosphate products, food products and manufactured goods."[1] During this time, President Bourguiba's political and economic policies led to the formation of a *social contract* between the government and the Tunisian people. In this implicit exchange, the central government exercises power by taking resources, but also redistributes them to the people. For the elite, the government offered economic benefits, including investment opportunities. Organized labor sought improvements in living standards, and for those in the middle class the government offered public education and opportunities to work in the public and private sector. For the poor, the government offered public education and subsidized bread, oil, sugar and other necessities. In sum, the social contract meant that the government provided benefits in exchange for fealty and political quiescence.

The system worked throughout much of the 1960's and 1970's, but by the early 1980's, the inefficiencies of these socialist economic policies began to show. Tunisia began to

experience a severe foreign exchange crisis "due to falling oil revenues and remittances" and subsequently turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank "for a structural adjustment program (SAP) in exchange for debt relief."[2] The IMF restructuring called for austerity measures that included eliminating food subsidies. In December 1983, as food prices doubled, riots broke out in the southern, interior region of Tunisia and quickly spread to coastal areas, including the capital, Tunis. Bourguiba declared a state of emergency and cracked down on the rioters, killing over 150 Tunisians in multiple cities. Bourguiba also reduced the severity of planned austerity measures, reinstated food subsidies and postponed IMF structural adjustment. From 1984 through 2010, Tunisia suffered three major uprisings, all related to interventionist austerity measures. In each case the government dealt harshly with the protestors. The memory of the 1984 bread riots would resurface in 2011, not as part of another uprising, but as a regime changing revolution.

In 1987, President Bourguiba was allegedly planning to execute some suspected terrorists, leading many in his cabinet to suspect that he was becoming senile. At the time, Tunisian society did not accept the execution of political opponents or suspected terrorists. In November 1987, Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali led a non-violent, successful transfer in power and became the second president of Tunisia. Shortly after taking control of the country, Ben Ali signaled his intention to continue aggressive measures to reform the Tunisian economy, but during the first decade of Ben Ali's presidency, the economy slowed and the government was unable to continue aggressive IMF restructuring efforts. Because of the struggling economy, the government had to sustain high public spending levels and maintain the *social contract* established in the 1960s. However, during the first half of the 1990's, Tunisia's economy began to strengthen, which signaled the opportunity to pursue a new round of IMF-sponsored economic

restructuring measures, ones designed to move from a protectionist economy to a more open-market economic structure.

Jean-Pierre Cassarino describes that since 1976, Tunisia had maintained protectionist economic policies, enjoying cheap access to European markets, but protected Tunisian resources and labor through tariffs. In 1998, Tunisia entered into an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, accepted loans and adopted policies to gain free access to European exporters. On the flip side, Tunisia had to reciprocate by granting import privileges to European markets. Realizing this would impose a considerable shock to the Tunisian economy, the EU agreed to allow Tunisia to gradually reduce tariffs, which it would eventually eliminate over a twelve-year period. At the time of the agreement, economists estimated that such "enforced economic openness" would threaten up to "eighty-five percent of domestic firms," potentially resulting in mass unemployment.[3] However, policy analysts projected that an increase in foreign investment would offset these losses, but foreign investment would require Tunisia to offer quality products at a competitive price. Prior to 1998, Tunisia offered a competitive advantage due to subsidized labor. From 1998 through 2010, Tunisia would attempt a difficult transition, eliminating government subsidies expecting that foreign investment would strengthen the Tunisian export-oriented economy and make up for public sector job losses. This helps explain why the Jasmine Revolution began in 2010, the year in which Tunisia was scheduled to complete its economic reforms.

Economic reforms did not the cause the revolution, but provided opportunities for those close to President Ben Ali to exploit the system, which ultimately caused the demise of the Ben Ali regime. For example, "in 1992, Ben Ali issued a presidential executive order mandating that all major government contract bids go through the President's office."[4] This policy resulted in

catastrophic bureaucratic policies and signaled the beginning of the end of Ben Ali's regime. The IMF program called for the privatization of state owned enterprises (SOE) to entice foreign investment. The government elected "to privatize the most profitable SOEs such as textile companies, hotels, and small banking subsidiaries."[5] By the mid 1990s, Kaboub reports that "privatization deals and government sub-contracting became increasingly lucrative for Ben Ali's inner circle, the in-laws and close business partners."[6] For example, according to Kaboub "by the end of 2010, 220 firms connected to 114 people close to Ben Ali, had captured twenty-one percent of all annual Tunisian private sector profits."[7]

Although the events in December 2010 and January 2011 took the international community by surprise, in retrospect the Jasmine Revolution represented a logical culmination of powerful, social and political changes. In the mid-1990s, the Gafsa phosphate mine, a publicly owned company, transitioned from underground to open pit mining. This change in mining process reduced the mining workforce from over 15,000 to around 5,000 workers. Because Ben Ali exerted strong control over the labor union that controlled hiring, workers seeking employment complained against political influence in hiring. Nearly ten years after the lay-offs, local unemployed workers "staged a sit-in in front of the labor union's office, to protest corrupt hiring practices. They were joined by their families, the poor, women widowed by mining accidents and the exploited working class."[8] Ben Ali cracked down on the protestors and the police arrested over 200 demonstrators and two young protestors died in the confrontation.

Another example that fueled the hopelessness of the Tunisian people started "in Ben Guerdane on August 9, 2010, when angry protestors clashed with police to protest a new tax on cars crossing the Libyan border."[9] The government again responded with ruthless violence, multiple arrests, and a closed border. From 1995 to 2010, unemployment rose from thirteen

percent to well over thirty percent. Policies enacted to comply with the IMF restructuring and the European Agreement resulted in elites and their extended families getting rich. These policies disenfranchised the middle class, which caused them to find common ground with the millions of poor people, resulting in widespread popular anger.

In December 2010, police confiscated the cart and scales of Mohamed Bouazizi, a vegetable vendor in Sidi Bouzid, for not having proper paperwork. He went to the local government office to protest, but the officials denied him any mercy or justice. On Dec 17, 2010, in an act of protest, he purchased a can of kerosene and lit himself on fire. Over the past twenty-five years, hundreds of Tunisians had died from self-immolation, hunger strikes, and police brutality, none of which lead to an uprising like the world witnessed in January 2011. But because people in the street captured his act on camera, and spread the images widely through social media, this became a focus of anger that had been building through twenty-five years of poverty and oppression. In sum, conditions had become ripe for a revolution, which the Tunisian government did not expect and lacked the means to defeat.

Democratization of Technology and Competitive Control

In 2013, David Kilcullen published a book titled *Out of the Mountains* in which he heralded increased global connectedness and the rapid growth of cities, especially in littoral regions. Supporting his theory of connectedness, he notes that Tunisia's population grew from "4.2 million in 1960 to 10.7 million in 2010,"[10] with a high rate of migration from the rural interior to the urban coastal areas. Tunisians that migrated to the urban areas gained access to digital technologies, including internet access and cell phones, but maintained close ties with family members in rural areas. By 2008, Facebook had become so popular that the government elected to block access during the Gafsa mine riots. By 2011, "there were 1.97 million Facebook

users, almost a fifth of the Tunisian population."[11] This high level of Facebook penetration supported *connectedness* throughout the country, generating a human network between roughly two million Tunisians online, and their family members that remained in rural areas. This human network would be an important factor in the 2011 revolution.

Kilcullen combined his observation of powerful trends in demographics and technological access with what he called a theory of competitive control. In his theory, he argues that people need security and predictability, so that they can establish businesses and ways to meet their basic human needs for food, family and water. However, the people do not have to agree with the ideology of those who provide security or even agree with the predictable rules. Therefore, whenever security or predictability falters, political entrepreneurs will step in and compete to control an area. Democratization of technology created new conditions in which the Tunisian government could no longer control the flow of information within the country. Kilcullen argues that the democratization of technology tipped the scales of competitive control, evidenced in 2011, when thousands of protestors overcame their fears of police brutality and the threat of violence. According to competitive control theory, the people of Tunisia became conscious of their own collective power to compete with and prevail against the Ben Ali regime, to overthrow his kleptocratic rule. They believed this technology gave them awareness of their human network. But this doesn't explain the ideas and people that gave Tunisians the confidence to continue their rebellion. Although initial reporting of the Jasmine Revolution created a picture of a *leaderless* revolt, explaining how the revolution continued to move forward, requires more information.

Ben Ali followed Bourguiba's method of control by marginalizing the military and favoring the state police. For example, Kaboub notes that Ben Ali "strengthened the state police

and presidential security apparatus, which employed over 55,000."[12] This large security force enabled the government to quickly identify the cause of the three revolts between 2005 and 2010 and suppress them with violence. So why was the Ben Ali government unable to control the revolution sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's act of protest? Kilcullen reports that in the 1990s "an online activist group called Takrizards, or Taks for short"[13] became active against the Ben Ali regime. Given the high rate of urbanization, and widespread frustration with the government, the Taks maintained a considerable following. "Many had been driven into exile, but continued to collaborate with other Taks in country."[14] Another element to the revolution came from a group of passionate soccer fans, prone to violence, called *Ultras*. This "disaffected, tight knit group became central to the movement."[15] The two groups began working together in the early 2000s, when the Taks "hosted a web forum for Ultras from different teams to interact and discuss street battles with police."[16] Once the revolution began, these two groups went into action and gained the upper hand in the "contested information space," thus winning the struggle for competitive control.[17]

By December 27th, the protests that started in the small town of Sidi Bouzid, had spread to multiple interior and coastal cities, including the capital Tunis. These protests included a broad collection of social groups acting with a level of intensity never seen before in Tunisia. These well-organized, violent protests included members from the middle and lower class. Many protests were led by Ultras, seasoned in intercity police battles, who encouraged others to stand up to police forces. The revolution was marked by state violence against people participating in public funerals, which sparked an escalating cycle of violence, fed by fury and desire for revenge, all of which the Taks captured by digital media and published. This virtual command and control, which helped mobilize and embolden millions of fearless protestors, allowed the

population to take control of the competitive information space, forcing the Ben Ali regime to flee the nation on January 14th, 2011.

Transition to representative democracy

In 1956, having gained independence from France, Tunisia elected a president, organized a national assembly and passed personal status codes. These codes guaranteed the separation of religion and state, banned polygamy and ensured the fair treatment of women and minorities. By 1970, President Habib Bourguiba had refined the political landscape, recognizing Tunisia as an economic and socially pluralistic state, but "rejected any form of political pluralism."[18] Despite the ban, opposition political parties did exist, but in 1981, the government forced Rachid Ghannouchi, leader of the Ennahda party into exile, where he lived until the revolution in 2011.

After the coup in 1987, the government recognized political parties, but continued to ban parties such as Ennahda that challenged the regime. During the Ben Ali era, political parties did not represent the public interests, but only acted as puppets of the government. Following the revolution, legitimate political parties quickly emerged, seeking to influence the future of the country. They bussed in citizens from across the country to participate in mass demonstrations. Their message was simple, they wanted "dignity, liberty, citizenship and bread."[19] They demanded that the government be replaced by leaders who would organize the "election of a parliament and constituent assembly and protection of free speech and press."[20]

Citizens of Tunisia organized within the capital and coordinated with government agencies to hold elections, which were eventually held in October 2011. As the various groups competed to shape the constitution and to gain public support in the first elections, they had strong arguments over the role of Islam. Most citizens focused primarily on the economy, but political debates focused on how the constitution would accommodate demands for secularism

versus state protection or even promotion of Islam. In October 2011, the Ennahda Party, led by Rachid Ghannouchi, was the best organized and funded, and earned forty-one percent of the vote. Since Ennahda did not get a majority, they had to partner with other political parties to form a majority, and they gained the opportunity to shape the constitution in its final stages.

With the results of the election, many feared that Tunisia had exchanged a totalitarian secular nation for an Islamic state. But in the two years following the election, the democratic process held up. In 2014, the Ennahda party gave up its majority to the secular leaning parties. Due to two political assassinations of high profile secular political leaders by a radical militant group, Ennahda leaders feared that the public would attribute these murders to Ennahda's competition for power. To discredit these accusations, Ennahda leaders withdrew from political competition to regain public trust. The Islamist Ennahda party won the first election, but when they failed to deliver growth in the economy, the people voted to return to secular rule, sending a clear signal that the Tunisian people considered employment opportunities and the economy more important than other factors. This election was significant for two main reasons: Tunisia's new political process had allowed multiple political parties to successfully emerge and in 2014 completed its second peaceful power transition.

A liberal perspective

Liberalism, which emphasizes the nature of people as rational rights-bearing actors, offers a distinctive approach to social mobilization. In this perspective, people have basic human needs for identity, security and recognition. When the state lacks institutions to provide for these needs and protect human rights, people become angry. This 'grievance' model of social action provides a powerful explanation for the Tunisian rebellion against their government, why they demanded representative government, and why they demanded a constitution that would protect

their rights. The revolution remains unfinished as long as competing elite networks continue to struggle to create a stable government, with institutions strong enough to provide basic human needs. This perspective has less to say about the *tipping point* in which protests culminated in revolution and regime changes. Social media did not merely allow the aggregation of grievances, it created a collective sense of shame at the humiliations endured publically, which helped create a sense of collective responsibility to correct these injustices. Tunisia's higher level of education and high ethnic homogeneity strengthened these effects.

A realist perspective

A realist perspective emphasizes the cost-benefit-risk calculations in the minds of individuals deciding whether to take dangerous action against an apparently powerful and demonstrably vicious government. In this perspective, a protest movement represents a series of gambles in which opposition activists test the government's rules of engagement, political will, resources, creativity, and speed of reaction to challenges. The popular access to and mastery of technology gave opponents crucial information that allowed a rapid cumulative growth of support for the opposition. The opposition gained a superior understanding of its own strength and the weaknesses of the government. Access to information through social technology not only strengthened the perception of relative deprivation, compared to people in Europe, but it also gave activists access to a pool of *how-to* knowledge on strategies of rebellion, which raised the opposition's sense of strength. This perspective helps explain the speed of political changes when revolutions succeed. The actions of Ben Ali and his close advisors depended on perception of risks, cost and potential gains. Because the opposition had superior understanding of shifting conditions, they gained resolution in perseverance, while the Ben Ali inner circle suffered from perceptions of rapidly rising dangers. People value what they have and fear losing more than a

potential uncertain gain. The people had everything to gain, and Ben Ali's inner circle had everything to lose.[21]

A constructivist perspective

While liberal theory explains the revolution in terms of the government failing to uphold the social contract and realist theory explains how the cost-benefit calculus changed, giving the people the advantage and forcing Ben Ali to flee the country; constructivist theory offers a holistic view of the revolution. Constructivism builds on the concept that ideals and culture shape society, and efforts to suppress them can lead to conflict. For over fifty years, Tunisia's social contract produced a highly educated, liberal-minded society, and a large population of middle class cultural elites. The cultural elites held a worldview of the ideal society, which according to Sidney Tarrow's constructivist model can be called "the framing model."[22] As long as the state maintains the social contract and the cultural elites' continue promoting belief in a supportive "frame" of the world, the people did not rebel. But as the social contract crumbled, distance between the cultural elites' vision and reality grew wider.

The cultural elites, who had been aligned with the government for decades, suddenly found common ground with the lower class. In contrast to liberalism or realism, constructivism also explains the events following the revolution. In the months following Ben Ali's departure, the cultural elites worked together to shape the future of the country, based on a common ideological vision. There was competition regarding the role of religion, but the cultural elite were united in its efforts to focus the constitution on economic prosperity, with religion as a secondary factor. Using history and realism as a guide, one would expect Tunisia to quickly transition from autocracy to an Islamic totalitarian-like form of government. Following the revolution, the Ennahda party was the only political party that was ready and organized and

could have shaped the constitution to favor religious autocracy over secular economics. But the political elite remained focused on long term economic prosperity through the second election and reversed the predictable path toward an Islamic dominated form of government. According to Jonathan Zartman, "resources and social position of those who produce culture can create and sustain conflict, it can also serve as a means for stabilization."[23] This framing component of constructivist theory explains why the revolution occurred, and also explains how the country was able to evolve into a functional democracy that reflects the culture of the Tunisian people.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia in December 2010 and quickly spread across the Middle East. The Jasmine Revolution was the culmination of years of international economic intervention and autocratic greed that forced the middle class to shift away from alliance with the corrupt government toward support for the disenfranchised lower class. This shift explains the revolution and the successful formation of democratic governance following the revolution. A closer look at this shift in alliances reveals the connection between Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation and the capabilities of social media. Although the middle class cultural elite had suffered marginalization for decades, they needed a push to use their abilities and resources to mobilize a social movement. The poor had suffered painfully over the years due to austerity measures, but in each instance, the government first cracked down on the restlessness of the population, and followed up with renewed financial incentives. By 2010, the government had grown so corrupt that it could no longer buy off the middle and lower class. This paved the way for the two groups to form an alliance, enabled by social media and fueled by online leaders and violent street activists. Realist and liberal theory are popular in international relations studies because they suggest that forms of intervention can generate a desired effect. But the Jasmine

Revolution shows that ideals and culture can lead to internally-driven political change, as suggested by constructivist theory.

This look at the Tunisian Revolution explains revolutionary tendencies from an internal perspective, but liberal, realism and constructivism also apply to the effects of external interference. For decades prior to the revolution, the IMF dangled financial incentives in front of the Tunisian government, with the utopian intent of transitioning Tunisia to a western-based, open economy. The IMF embraced a liberal view that financial assistance and structural reforms would drive a transition from a closed, protected system to an open, competitive market economy. The IMF failed to account for the reality of providing financial assistance to a kleptocratic government. They failed, or chose not to understand, that Ben Ali and his cronies would find a way to steal the money, instead of applying it to its intended purpose. The IMF is involved in structural reforms in other countries in Africa and other parts of the world, with similar utopian expectations. The realist understands that dishonest governments tend to remain dishonest and would only skeptically or cautiously use financial incentives to shape a country's economic system. As with the internal perspective, constructivism offers a useful explanation of external influences upon a struggling country.

There is no way to predict that destructive economic policies combined with social media would result in a semi-peaceful revolution and successful transition to secular democracy. But constructivism does offer a method of understanding the effects of external influences and how governments and populations may respond. The constructivist emphasize the role of history and culture, and understands that external levers, such as financial incentives, applied to one country will have a different effect on another country. The constructivist also understands the power of doing nothing, which although hidden, as partially evidenced in the Jasmine revolution, and

serves as the best example of why the strategist should embrace constructivist ideals. Following the revolution, the people of Tunisia came together to form their new government and they succeeded without significant international support. On their own, they bused in representatives from the rural communities and designed their constitution based on the way they wanted to be governed. The liberal would have been quick to interfere with international support and the realist would have predicted that Tunisia was destined for totalitarian rule, following the first election. But Tunisia surprised the world in 2014 when they choose economic prosperity and secular rule, which would have been overlooked by strategists confined to liberal or realist theories. The successful strategist understands the value and limitations of liberal and realist theories and embraces the value of understanding that no two countries are alike. Applying constructivist theory is not easy, it demands looking beyond the obvious by combining history and culture with environmental factors and developing an appreciation for a country, which can lead to policies designed for successful outcomes.

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Notes

[1] Karen Pfeifer, "Parameters of economic reform in North Africa," *Review of African Political Economy*, December 1999: 448.

[2] Ibid., p. 450.

[3] Jean-Pierre Cassarino, "The EU-Tunisian Association Agreement and Tunisia's Structural Reform Program," *The Middle East Journal*; Winter 1999, p. 60.

[4] Fadhel Kaboub, "The Making of the Tunisian Revolution," *Understanding the Political Economy of the Arab Uprisings.* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2014.) p. 65

[5] Ibid., p. 68.

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[7] *The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to all Tunisians*, World Bank Group. May 2014, Available at: www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/publication/Unfinished-Revolution, p. 16.

[8] Fadhel Kaboub, "The Making of the Tunisian Revolution," *Understanding the Political Economy of the Arab Uprisings.* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2014), p. 63.

[9] Ibid., p. 63.

[10] David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 180.

[11] Ibid., p. 185.

[12] Fadhel Kaboub, "The Making of the Tunisian Revolution," *Understanding the Political Economy of the Arab Uprisings* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2014), p61.

[13] David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 180.

[14] Ibid., 180.

[15] Ibid., 180.

[16] Ibid., 181.

[17] Ibid., 187.

[18] I. William Zartman, *Arab Spring: Negotiating in the Shadow of the Intifadat* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 53.

[19] Ibid., 56.

[20] Ibid., 56.

[21] David Houghton, *The Decision Point: Six Cases in U.S. Foreign Policy Decision-making* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 139-140.

[22] Sydney Tarrow, "States and opportunities: The Political Structuring of Social Movements." In D. McAdam, J.D. McCarthy, and M.N. Zald, (eds) *Opportunities, Mobilizing, Structures and Framing*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp 41-62.

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