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Kai Thaler



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Avoiding the Abyss: Finding a Way Forward in Guinea-Bissau

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Since the collapse into warfare of Somalia and Bosnia in the 1990's, there has been an increasing focus among international scholars and policy makers on the problem termed state failure or state fragility and the potential for countries in the developing world to descend into economic, governmental, and security chaos. While the cases of Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which remain essentially states only in name, have dominated the headlines for the past decade, the tiny West African nation of Guinea-Bissau jumped into the public consciousness in early March 2009 with the assassinations of President João Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira and his rival General Batista Tagmé Na Waié, the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, within hours of each other. After a period of uncertainty and instability, further marred by the assassination in June 2009 of Baciro Dabó, an ally of Vieira running to replace the slain President, former interim President Malam Bacai Sanhá was elected as Guinea-Bissau's new leader in late July 2009. While Sanhá has the potential to provide some balance to Guinea-Bissau, he faces the challenges of a history of tumultuous politics, dire poverty, international drug trafficking, and a lack of military accountability to the civilian government. This article traces the roots of these problems facing Guinea-Bissau today, critically engages with the literature on weak or failed states as it pertains to Guinea-Bissau, and finally examines the potential pitfalls as well as opportunities available for Guinea-Bissau as the country tries to find a way forward.

A History of Conflict and Corruption

Guinea-Bissau has been characterized by internal conflict since even before its independence from Portugal in 1974. While the rebel *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC) was the most successful militarily of all the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies, Guinea-Bissau's political elite fractured and largely lost its ideological motivations after the assassination of PAIGC founder and unifying leader Amílcar Cabral in January 1973. While Cabral had advanced a Marxist theory of class

conflict and sought to raise up the peasantry through revolutionary struggle, his vision of national unity and development was replaced after his death by “personal antagonisms” and conflicts based “on the more politically salient factors of institutional, ethnic, and leadership competition”.¹ Corruption reigned supreme throughout the late 1970’s, with the government riddled with nepotism and clientelism as officials sought to use the PAIGC-controlled state for personal enrichment and security rather than state development.

The dominance of the government and its patrimonial networks by PAIGC officials of Cape Verdean origin led to increased ethnic tension. Guinea-Bissau is highly ethnically fractionalized, with more than 20 ethnic groups, none of which has an absolute majority.² The Balanta people are the largest group, making up approximately 28% of the population, and having been very active in the liberation movement, they were especially antagonized by the government’s failure to dispense more significant patronage to them. The sentiments of inequality were particularly acute in the military, where 70%-80% of the troops were of Balanta ethnicity, but they found themselves passed over for promotion in favor of associates of President Luís Cabral,³ the brother of Amílcar and a Cape Verdean who took control of PAIGC after his brother’s death.

In response to these grievances and peasant discontent at the predominantly urban character of the PAIGC leadership and its economic patronage, Vieira, who was Army Commander at the time, organized a military *coup*, aided by his record as a freedom fighter and his Papel ethnic identity.⁴ After Cabral sensed the political tide turning against him and attempted to protect his power by removing Vieira from the government, Vieira and his supporters in the military responded in November 1980 by staging a largely nonviolent *coup* which led to Vieira’s installation as President. With the backing of the military, Vieira transformed PAIGC into a more Leninist vanguard party, forming a Revolutionary Council and purging those of Cape Verdean ethnicity from the government. However, this ethnic politicking deprived Guinea-Bissau of much of its technical capacity, as Cape Verdeans were among the most educated people in the country. While the *coup* could have had the effect of opening the country to more transparent government and development, “[Vieira and his associates] did not have the training needed to complete construction of the state; their only experience was of the political patronage established by Luís Cabral”,⁵ and thus Guinea-Bissau continued to be hampered by clientelism.

Vieira maintained control by way of a mix of appeasement and repression within the military and was able to thwart various challenges to his rule throughout the 1980’s, including a coup attempt in 1985. While in 1991 Guinea-Bissau was part of the wave of democratization sweeping sub-Saharan Africa, and was one of the few countries in which such reform was initiated from the top down, the transition was incomplete as Vieira maintained authoritarian structures under the guise of a democratic system.⁶

Vieira and PAIGC remained secure in their position of power until 1998 when a combination of meddling in foreign affairs and domestic corruption managed to finally bring

down the regime. Vieira had sought closer relations with neighboring Senegal, even going so far as to join the *Communauté Financière d'Afrique* (CFA) and adopting the CFA franc as Guinea-Bissau's currency. However, in exchange for its support of Vieira, Senegal demanded an end to weapons trafficking from Guinea-Bissau to rebels in the Cassamance region. Vieira's response was to sack his chief of staff, General Ansumane Mané, accusing him of masterminding the weapons smuggling scheme, when in fact the whole upper echelon of Vieira's government was involved.

The ensuing civil war dragged on for over a year and became internationalized as troops from Senegal and Guinea-Conakry fought on behalf of Vieira. However, after a failed attempt to broker a peace agreement and form a national unity government in late 1998, Vieira doggedly remained in the presidential palace despite facing increasingly strong opposition and waning international support. After further delays by Vieira in leaving office in early 1999, opposition members of the Bissau-Guinean military finally succeeded in ousting him in May 1999.

Unusually for sub-Saharan Africa, the military, seeking to counterbalance the "illegal or nondemocratic"⁷ actions of Vieira, quickly returned control to civilian leaders and long-time opposition leader Kumba Yala of the *Partido para a Renovação Social* (PRS) took the reins of the government. However, like Vieira before him, Yala failed to seize the opportunity for meaningful reform and instead continued the pattern of autocratic misrule, adding to it erratic behavior such as threatening to invade Gambia in 2002.⁸ This led to another coup in 2003, after which PRS General Secretary Artur Sanhá became the interim Prime Minister and Henrique Rosa the interim President.

Yala's maneuverings and subsequent removal had an unintended consequence: Vieira returned to Guinea-Bissau after time spent in exile and, despite having been expelled from PAIGC, was reelected as President in 2005, presiding over a parliament headed by his former party. However, Vieira's victory came in large part thanks to backroom deals struck with the leadership of the military and he found himself beholden to the Armed Forces and specifically Armed Forces Chief of Staff Tagmé Na Waié who helped to prevent any protests from disrupting the election.⁹ The rivalry between these two men continued until their assassinations in March 2009, but in the background of their feuding, Guinea-Bissau remained mired in poverty and found its governmental structures further rotted by corruption that entered the country accompanying a lucrative cargo: cocaine.

Underdevelopment and Drug Trafficking

Why has the government of Guinea-Bissau proven so consistently corruptible and become treated as a cash cow for those with access to its coffers? Quite simply, abuse of power and misuse of funds is one of the few and easiest of ways to make a living in Guin-

ea-Bissau. In the 2008 UN Human Development Index, Guinea-Bissau ranked 171st out of 179 countries, with a GDP per capita of US\$467 and a life expectancy of only 46 years in 2006.¹⁰ The economy is based on agriculture and heavily dependent on the production of cashews, which provide almost 90% of Guinea-Bissau's export income; these agricultural revenues alone would make it very difficult for the country to sustain itself, and thus it also relies greatly on foreign aid.¹¹ Years of political infighting have ensured that this foreign aid has generally failed to achieve the development for which it was intended, and thus most rural Bissau-Guineans continue to fish and farm as they always have, while their urban counterparts are reliant on a burgeoning informal economy.¹²

Guinea-Bissau employs a disproportionate number of people in its security forces, among the highest percentage *per capita* in Western Africa, but the government only set aside US\$7.5 million for military spending in 2003, with most soldiers receiving only US\$400 in pay.¹³ Guinea-Bissau also has a high level of small arms proliferation, thanks in large part to the distribution of weapons to civilians during the 1998-1999 civil war.¹⁴ Finding themselves with weapons and low-paying (if any) jobs, Bissau-Guineans have turned their capacity for violence and protection into a source of income, finding clients in what initially seems an unlikely place: South America.

With traffic growing steadily since 2005, Guinea-Bissau has become a transshipment hub in the international cocaine trade, with cartels using the country as a way station between production facilities in South America and the lucrative markets of Western Europe. While shipment via Guinea-Bissau is not as convenient as a direct route to Europe, the country has an ideal sociopolitical climate for organized crime, as "expertise in smuggling, the weakness of law-enforcement agencies, and the official tolerance of, or even participation in, certain types of crime, constitute a form of social and political capital that accumulates over time".¹⁵ That this negative social and political capital has accumulated rapidly in Guinea-Bissau is understandable given its culture of corruption and the fact that "just 6 grams of cocaine has a value equal to the average annual salary".¹⁶ Taking advantage of Guinea-Bissau's economic disadvantage, traffickers from Colombia, as well as Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico,¹⁷ have been bringing in their product by sea and air, making use of Guinea-Bissau's uncontrolled coastline, which features a number of small islands. It would be extremely difficult for the Bissau-Guinean government to combat the traffickers, given that in 2006 the entire GDP of Guinea-Bissau was US\$304 million, or the equivalent of only 6 tons of cocaine at European wholesale prices, while 13 tons of cocaine were seized in West Africa in 2006.¹⁸ However, the government does not even attempt any serious efforts at enforcement. The *Polícia Judiciária* (PJ), who are supposed to be responsible for enforcing the law against drug traffickers, are forced to conduct their duties with "No handcuffs, just one vehicle, two filthy cells and about 60 investigators for a country of 1.6 million inhabitants and 36,000 square kilometers".¹⁹ Woefully inadequate prison facilities and a fear of violent retaliation for prison sentences

lead many judges to set convicted drug smugglers free, leading Guinea-Bissau to have the lowest incarceration rate by far in West Africa.²⁰

While the officers of the PJ and the judiciary are ostensibly attempting to do their jobs in the face of insurmountable odds, the actions of their fellow state employees in the military have consistently contributed to the drug smuggling problem. Soldiers assist in the unloading and transport of cocaine at unused airstrips around the country, while sailors help move traffickers and goods among the coastal islands, earning handsome profits for their aid and protection.²¹ The corruption reaches up to the highest levels, as evidenced by the case of two army officers who were arrested in April 2007 with 635kg of cocaine, only to be set free by the extrajudicial order of Tagmé Na Waié.²² Members of the political establishment are also involved, with the director of Interpol for Guinea-Bissau publicly acknowledging that “on an individual basis, certain senior Guinea-Bissau officials strike deals with drug traffickers”.²³

It is this cocaine-fuelled intrigue which is believed to have led to the assassinations of Tagmé Na Waié and Vieira in March 2009. Tagmé Na Waié was spearheading new efforts to check the influence of drug traffickers over the country, which made him an enemy of both the traffickers and those Bissau-Guineans who collaborate with them.²⁴ There are also reports that claim that three days before Tagmé Na Waié’s assassination, a private plane landed at the airport in Bissau and was loaded by soldiers loyal to Vieira with 200kg of confiscated cocaine, then took off without any official record of its arrival or departure.²⁵ The fact that the bomb used to kill Tagmé Na Waié was of foreign origin is also seen as evidence of the involvement of international traffickers, and it was initially believed that the assassination of Vieira, carried out by men in military uniforms, was a revenge attack by soldiers loyal to Tagmé Na Waié.

However, subsequent analysis by the International Crisis Group (ICG) sheds doubt on these theories of foreign involvement and a revenge killing. Tagmé Na Waié’s efforts at combating trafficking were not of any great significance, and he and Vieira had been at the center of a domestic dispute with former Navy Chief Bubo Na Tchuto, which has also led to speculation of Na Tchuto’s involvement; the ICG raises the possibility that “If [Vieira’s murder] is seen as a revenge killing, it may be that those who killed Tagmé also wished to eliminate Vieira and anticipated the domino effect”.²⁶ Further discrediting the theory of traffickers being directly responsible for the assassinations is the testimony of Anthony L. Mazzitelli of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, who said that “Already in September [2008] the drug traffickers had started moving out of Guinea-Bissau” and no large drug seizures had occurred since October 2008.²⁷ Whatever the truth behind the killings, it is unlikely to be uncovered anytime soon, as the commission charged with investigating the murders is severely underfunded and commission members have received death threats that are likely to deter them from probing too deeply into the corruption in the military and government.²⁸ Highlighting the fear and uncertainty that plagues the commission,

its leader, Attorney General Luís Manuel Cabral, when describing death threats he has received, was careful to note, "I am not saying members of the armed forces are threatening me, as they are also interested in keeping the situation calm".²⁹

Fighting Against Failure

Even if drug traffickers were not the culprits in the murders of Tagmé Na Waié and Vieira, their reported exit from Guinea-Bissau is surely welcome. However, Mazzitelli, the anti-drug official, described their reasons for leaving as such: the traffickers "need a certain stability. They don't need a failed state. They need a weak state".³⁰ His comment highlights what has long been the central fear of international policy makers with regard to Guinea-Bissau: that the diminished capacity of the central government due to poverty, crime, and corruption would lead to the collapse of the state into total anarchy.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a growing subfield of political science and development studies devoted to the analysis of weak, fragile, or failed states. However, there are subtle differences amongst these terms and their applicability to Guinea-Bissau is debatable. In 2008, the Brookings Institution compiled an "Index of State Weakness in the Developing World", which defines weak states as "countries that lack the essential capacity and/or will to fulfill four sets of critical government responsibilities: fostering an environment conducive to sustainable and equitable economic growth; establishing and maintaining legitimate, transparent, and accountable political institutions; securing their populations from violent conflict and controlling their territory; and meeting the basic human needs of their population".³¹ Assessing states across 20 indicators of (in)capacity in the categories of economic, political, security, and social welfare, the Index ranked Guinea-Bissau as the world's 18th weakest state, falling into the class of "Critically Weak States", with particularly poor scores in the categories of security and social welfare, noting the high incidence of coups and an extremely low level of primary school completion.³²

"Fragile states" is a term used most frequently among the development community. The World Bank classifies as fragile states those which fall under its designation of Low-Income Countries Under Stress (LICUS), "characterized by weak policies, institutions, and governance". "Severe" and "core" LICUS are determined on the basis of low *per capita* income and poor performance on an assessment of governance and institutional strength.³³ Guinea-Bissau is considered a core LICUS, and it is noted that among LICUS, it has an especially low Human Development Index. From 1995-2004 it had the second-worst economic trajectory, in fact experiencing negative growth of GDP *per capita* of approximately 4%; and Guinea-Bissau had the third-highest proportion of debt as a percentage of Gross National Income.³⁴

The term “failed states” gained traction in the academic community and in the public consciousness thanks in large part to the State Failure Task Force³⁵ (now the Political Instability Task Force), a Central Intelligence Agency-funded group charged with determining the factors behind events of state failure, now termed “major political instability events”, in order to predict their future occurrence. A major political instability event is defined as the occurrence of one or more of the following events within a state’s boundaries: revolutionary war, civil war, genocide or politicide, and adverse regime change (“abrupt turns from a more democratic system to one that is more authoritarian..., revolutionary changes in political elites, or total or near-total collapse of central state authority”).³⁶ The term “state failure” has been adopted by the Fund for Peace, which annually publishes a Failed States Index, published in *Foreign Policy*, based on ratings of 12 social, economic, and political indicators;³⁷ state failure is characterized most commonly by “the loss of physical control of its territory or a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Other attributes of state failure include the erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions, an incapacity to provide reasonable public services, and the inability to interact with other states as a full member of the international community”.³⁸ In the 2009 Index, based on data from 2008 and thus unable to take into account the destabilizing events of early 2009, Guinea-Bissau was classified as an “Alert” country, in danger of failing, and ranked the 27th most likely to fail, scoring especially poorly on the indicators of “Criminalization and/or Delegitimization of the State” and “Progressive Deterioration of Public Services”.³⁹

Yet in spite of all the above ratings which indicated Guinea-Bissau’s severe instability and risk for the collapse of the central state, in whatever terms might be chosen, there has been a remarkable lack of international attention to the country, calling into question the utility of such indices. While the indices might suggest that the countries deemed the worst are those in need of the greatest international assistance, in fact foreign aid donors have been abandoning Guinea-Bissau in recent years. In seeking greater accountability in the use of aid money, donor countries have shied away from so-called “Difficult Partnership Countries” (DPCs) with poor governance, and concentrated their resources in “aid darlings” (which receive more funds than their relative level of poverty and governance would predict), leading to the exit *en masse* of donors from Guinea-Bissau in the mid-2000’s.⁴⁰

Labeling a state as failing, weak, or a DPC stigmatizes it as incapable of effective self-government and thus legitimizes a halt to foreign aid, despite the existence of forms of technical assistance and debt relief that can be provided with greater accountability. Placing demands on an extremely impoverished country for improved governance is idealistic and in many ways untenable. When there is extremely low economic opportunity in a country, access to state power becomes an attractive, relatively easy option for making a living. As mentioned above, Guinea-Bissau has a single-commodity export economy, based on cashew production and export, with small production of other agricultural

products and fish; outside of this sector, foreign aid makes up the rest of the national income, comprising over 80% of the national budget in 2004.⁴¹ Without the development of adequate alternative sources of income, an end to the abuse of state power and raiding of public coffers is unlikely to take place, lowering governance ratings, which leads to reductions in foreign aid, and thus perpetuating the cycle. This conundrum is highlighted by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Index of African Governance, which in 2008 ranked Guinea-Bissau fourth from last in the category of "Legality, Transparency and Corruption", but dead last for "Sustainable Economic Opportunities".⁴²

The withdrawal of foreign aid leads those who have become dependent on the use of the state for accumulation of personal wealth to seek other sources of income. For government officials and security forces, drug smuggling provided fresh sources of capital, with a correlation between the decrease in aid around 2005 and the growth of drug trafficking through Guinea-Bissau since. This has increased the "Criminalization and/or Delegitimization of the State" and reduced the Bissau-Guinean government's monopoly on the legitimate violence within its territory,⁴³ forcing those non-corrupted troops to compete with drug traffickers for control over the power of coercion.

While donors understandably do not want their aid to be channeled into private accounts where it will never help the poor citizens for whom it is intended, as occurred in Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko, disengagement can lead to even greater suffering for the poor. After the assassinations of Tagmé Na Waié and Vieira, *The Economist* wrote that the ensuing instability "will almost certainly lead to the suspension of aid inflows while a political settlement is negotiated, and will once again put back the adoption of a poverty reduction and growth facility".⁴⁴ This deprives corrupt state officials of one source of foreign exchange, but drives them into the arms of drug traffickers. Beyond the negative consequences for lay citizens of cuts in whatever foreign aid might normally filter down to them, the increasing use of Guinea-Bissau as a drug transshipment point has also had the side effect of creating new problems with drug addiction among locals and consequently increasing criminality.⁴⁵

Some scholars and commentators view the labeling of states in the developing world as "failed" or the other related terms as improperly imposing Western standards of the form and function of the state, and providing justification for imperialist or neocolonialist intervention, both economic and military.⁴⁶ There is a danger of donors and especially international financial institutions like the World Bank attempting to impose socioeconomic transformations that are alien or unwanted in developing societies; however, there is also a danger of defending corrupt regimes that provide little or no benefit to the people they are supposed to serve, all in the name of challenging Western hegemony. As this debate demonstrates, the use of terms such as "fragile", "weak", and "failing" and the compilation of indices often serves only to obscure the more fundamental issues facing poor states. Bissau-Guineans do want peace, reforms, and economic progress for their

country. Speaking of the excessive role of the military in politics, rights activist João Vaz Mané said, “If the authorities do not manage to control the situation, Guinea-Bissau will never get out of the spiral of abuses”.⁴⁷ A man with relatives in the civil service stated, “Life is too difficult. You work for two months, the government pays you for one”.⁴⁸ To the likely chagrin of both anti-imperialists and donors who shy away from DPCs, international intervention in Guinea-Bissau’s affairs and engagement with its government appears to be Guinea-Bissau’s best path to peace and economic development.

Finding a Way Forward

If Guinea-Bissau is to exit its current cycle of *coups* and criminality, the international community must become more involved and concerned with the country’s affairs, and concrete steps must be taken in a number of sectors. Reforming the security sector is of primary importance, as is ensuring that drug traffickers are no longer able to use Guinea-Bissau as a transport base and safe haven. So far, while President Sanhá has named a new military commander, José Zamora Induta, and charged him with “the onerous task of turning our military into a republican entity that is modern, disciplined, obedient and submissive to political power”,⁴⁹ security reforms have remained stalled in Parliament despite pressure from a European Union mission which helped draft them. While it will be difficult, efforts must be undertaken to reduce the size of the military, and also control small arms proliferation.

However, in order to ensure that former soldiers are not being turned out of uniform and into an economy that remains crippled, the initiation of development projects is necessary. Guinea-Bissau is still suffering the effects of the 1998-1999 civil war: estimates suggest that had it not been for the war, GDP *per capita* would have been 42% or 43% higher in 2004.⁵⁰ There has been substantial growth in the production of cashew nuts for export, with Guinea-Bissau becoming the world’s sixth-largest producer, and there is, according to a World Bank study, potential for further growth in cashew production that could directly benefit poor farmers, as well as opportunities to use Guinea-Bissau’s “fertile soils, abundant water, and a favorable climate” to produce cereals and fruits, although care must be taken to protect the rice crop upon which most Bissau-Guineans depend for subsistence.⁵¹ There is also the possibility of developing mineral and offshore oil deposits, which have been left unexploited due to the high capital costs of production;⁵² any revenues, though, would need to be prevented from falling into the hands of government officials, for instance using a protected and transparent Sovereign Wealth Fund.

The commitment of monetary and technical aid to Guinea-Bissau would not be altruistic. On the drug front, the European Union would benefit greatly from increased drug interdiction in Guinea-Bissau, helping to prevent cocaine from reaching European shores.

For Portugal, the former colonial power and also the destination of much of the drug cargo passing through Guinea-Bissau, increased involvement would also be an opportunity to reassert itself and draw Guinea-Bissau further into the *Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa* (CPLP), after Vieira's moves toward the Francophone bloc in West Africa. Keeping drug traffickers out of Guinea-Bissau would allow the country to channel its human resources toward more productive ends in industries that will keep more profits at home, and will cut off one of the main sources of governmental corruption.

From an international security viewpoint, a peaceful and stable Guinea-Bissau positively contributes to a more peaceful and stable West African region by reducing the likelihood of refugee movements out of Guinea-Bissau due to episodes of violence. This would increase possibilities for a resolution of the conflict in Cassamance, turning Guinea-Bissau from a "bad neighbor" into a potential economic and diplomatic partner,⁵³ an especially important step in light of ongoing instability in Guinea-Conakry. Curtailing the drug trade will also help to restrict the financing of terrorist groups. In 2007, two Colombians were arrested in Guinea-Bissau who had ties to the rebel *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC)⁵⁴ and there is concern that Hezbollah and Hamas are receiving profits from drugs transiting through Guinea-Bissau.⁵⁵ Guinea-Bissau was in fact the scene in 2008 of the arrest and extradition of five members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who were wanted for killings in Mauritania, and who threatened Guinea-Bissau with retaliation for its act of law enforcement.⁵⁶ As AQIM seeks to expand southward in Africa, it is important that Guinea-Bissau, which is 40% Muslim, does not become a base for the terrorist group due to a lack of governmental capacity, as has occurred in Algeria and Somalia.

Despite its small size, there is much at stake in assuring that Guinea-Bissau moves "beyond rule of the gun",⁵⁷ to a new system of stable, accountable government that can effectively secure its own territory, while also securing the livelihoods of its constituents. Since becoming independent, Guinea-Bissau has been characterized by "stable instability", prevented by domestically and internationally conditioned "political inertia" from achieving sustained peace and economic and political development.⁵⁸ Thus incentives and pressure of the international community will be necessary to advance many of the security sector and governance reforms, but development projects should be sure to make use of alternative social structures and networks, both to dilute the power of the central government and because political parties are some of the least trusted institutions among Bissau-Guineans.⁵⁹ By swiftly providing conditional aid to help Guinea-Bissau rebuild effective and transparent governmental institutions, restarting economic development programs, and by empowering citizens, the international community can ensure that Guinea-Bissau pulls away from the abyss and has a future as a functional state, not a failing one.

(Endnotes)

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