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The Formation of a Government of National Unity in South Africa: Issues, Trends, and Prospects

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Abstract

The political landscape in South Africa changed significantly following adopting the democratic system in 1994. After the African National Congress (ANC) lost its parliamentary majority in the 2024 national elections, a Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed, formalised through a Statement of Intent signed by ten political parties also represented in the National Assembly. This study examines the formation and functioning of the GNU, focusing on its impact on governance and service delivery in South Africa. It also investigates the role of each participating political party within the GNU framework. Using a qualitative research approach, including document analysis, this study offers insights into the potential effectiveness of the GNU and proposes a conceptual framework for policymakers and practitioners in South Africa. This framework can be successful if implemented correctly. The study finds that the GNU is still in its infancy and unstable, with each political party trying to assert its influence in their appointed ministries.

Keywords: *Government of National Unity: Governance; Service Delivery; Political Parties*

1. Introduction and Background

The 2024 national elections in South Africa marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape, with the African National Congress (ANC) losing its parliamentary majority for the first time since 1994. This shift necessitated the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU), formalised through a Statement of Intent signed by ten political parties. This study aims to examine the formation and functioning of the GNU, focusing on its impact on governance and service delivery in South Africa. The study investigates the role of each participating political party within the GNU framework and explores the underlying reasons for conflicting interpretations of the GNU cooperation agreement among these parties.

On 29 May 2024, South Africa held competitive national and provincial elections, with 1,743 political parties contesting for positions (Independent Electoral Commission, 2024). The election results revealed a significant shift in the country's political landscape. The ANC secured 40.18% of the votes, the Democratic Alliance (DA) garnered 21.81% support, and the Mkhonto WeSizwe Party (MK) received 14.58% of the votes (IEC, 2024).

According to the Independent Electoral Commission's report dated 10 April 2024, 52 political parties registered for the 2024 general

elections. This number excludes 42 unrepresented parties at the regional and provincial levels, as well as apolitical citizens (IEC, 2024). The South African News Agency (2024) reported that the ten political parties forming the GNU are:

- African National Congress (ANC)
- Democratic Alliance (DA)
- Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)
- Patriotic Alliance (PA)
- Good
- Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC)
- Freedom Front Plus (FF+)
- United Democratic Movement (UDM)
- Rise Mzansi
- Al Jamaah

A Government of National Unity (GNU) is a coalition that comprises the majority of political parties and interests represented in the legislature (Emerson, 2016). GNUs are generally formed to bring together the broadest possible spectrum of political interests in response to a crisis. GNUs are formed to achieve national interests such as nation-building, social order, and peace and stability. Agreements within GNUs are negotiated by the national executive structures of the political parties and often have implications for governance in provincial and local spheres. Thus, the concept of a GNU is not new to South Africa's political system. In 1994, the ANC won the elections with 70% of the votes. However, the late President Nelson Mandela formed a GNU with the National Party, led by the late Mr FW De Klerk. This GNU lasted only three years, from 1994

to 1996, as the National Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party, led by the late Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, abandoned the GNU agreements before the agreed period due to their exclusion from joint decision-making in the finalisation of the Constitution of the Republic in June 1996 (Wissink & Reddy, 2022; Weisiger, 2016).

In 2024, South Africa's democratic journey was significantly advanced by the establishment of its second GNU (South African Government Website, 2024). However, the ten participating political parties have diverse ideological and policy differences, which may complicate their ability to reach consensus on governance issues and advance the country's economic and service delivery agendas. The DA, for instance, appears to view the GNU primarily as a coalition between itself and the ANC, as evidenced by its initial demands for 12 ministries and significant influence over the appointment of director generals. For the GNU to function effectively, political parties must demonstrate tolerance and ensure that all members are accommodated in the cabinet appointed by the President. Historically, political parties and politicians have often prioritised their political survival and positions over the populace needs. Additionally, external influences, including from Western countries, may impact the GNU's dynamics.
Given this context, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework and assess the potential effectiveness of the GNU in achieving effective governance in South Africa. This research raises several critical questions:

- Is the GNU's Statement of Intent legally binding?

- Is this arrangement a true GNU or merely a grand coalition?

- Will it effectively serve the interests of South Africans, particularly in terms of service delivery?

To address these questions, this paper will review the literature on coalitions and GNU issues within international, African, and specifically South African contexts. The following sections will explore coalitions globally and in South Africa, respectively.

2. Coalitions in the International Context

Political coalitions have their origins in European countries, particularly notable in the spring of 1990 in countries such as former East Germany, former Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, two of Yugoslavia's six republics, and Romania (Mokgosi *et al.*, 2017). This trend has since spread globally, with countries like the Nordic nations, the Benelux countries, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Cyprus, East Timor, France, Germany, Greece, Guinea-Bissau, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Kosovo, Latvia, Lebanon, Lesotho, Lithuania, Malaysia, and Nepal adopting coalition government structures due to global voting system reforms (Mokgosi *et al.*, 2017). Monteleone (2015) highlights that the development and evolution of coalitions are influenced by changes in bargaining strength and environment due to the global leadership cycle and long-term organisational changes in the international political system.

In Lesotho, a coalition agreement involving five political parties was formed in 2012, resulting in a single-party state that lasted for 14 years. This coalition government was led by the Democratic Congress and included smaller parties (Nhengu & Murairwa, 2020). However, the coalition collapsed in 2014 when the smaller parties withdrew due to changes made by the Democratic Congress, particularly regarding the governance of key government institutions.

In Zimbabwe, the late President Robert Mugabe appointed a GNU that included opposition figures. This coalition focused on three principal concerns: attaining debt rescheduling, promoting domestic and foreign reinvestment, and re-establishing electoral legitimacy (Nhengu & Murairwa, 2020).

Kenya stands out in Africa for its regulation of coalition building. The Kenyan Political Parties Act 11 of 2011 outlines registration requirements and timelines for submitting necessary documentation to relevant authorities. It also stipulates sixteen issues that coalition agreements must address (Dladla, 2019). The Kenyan model serves as a benchmark for South Africa to consider in initiating legislative reforms aimed at regulating and managing coalition arrangements in national and provincial governments.

3. Coalitions in South Africa

The adoption of coalition governments has become increasingly common worldwide due to shifts in electoral systems, and South Africa is no exception. The preference for coalition governments over single-party rule can significantly influence the evaluation of new electoral systems. Originating in European countries, coalitions have spread globally, with South Africa experiencing a surge in coalition formation after the 2016 local government elections when the ANC lost control of some metropolitan municipalities in Gauteng (Mokgosi *et al.*, 2017). Mokgosi *et al.* (2017) stress that coalition-forming political parties need a concrete plan for effective responsibility fulfillment. From the 2021 local government elections, parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Action SA emerged as kingmakers in local and metropolitan municipalities, particularly in Gauteng. These parties were expected to play a crucial role in advancing the interests of the poor through these coalitions. However, South Africa has faced challenges with unstable coalitions, primarily due to the absence of legislative frameworks and policies to govern these arrangements. This instability is particularly evident in metropolitan municipalities where the ANC did not secure an outright majority, such as in the City of Tshwane and Johannesburg. Smaller parties have exacerbated this issue by frequently switching allegiances, as seen in Nelson Mandela Bay with the unpredictable stance of the United Democratic Movement (UDM) from 2016 to 2024.

Despite some stable coalitions, such as the City of Tshwane, that have successfully insulated administrations from political infighting and built well-performing local governments, coalitions in South Africa often amplify problems at the political-administrative interface (Ndou, 2022). The 2021/2022 Local Government Audit Outcomes Report, presented by the Auditor-General of South Africa (2022), highlighted instability at the council and mayor levels, leading to delayed council sittings and the late tabling of investigative reports. This instability further hampers council approval and decision-making on significant strategic and operational matters (Nzewi, 2024).

A notable issue in South Africa is the lack of separation of powers between political parties and councillors, resulting in widespread friction between political officebearers and municipal administrations. Political turbulence in metropolitan municipalities significantly impacts service delivery. For instance, in 2020, the Gauteng Provincial Government dissolved the Municipal Council of Tshwane under Section 139(1)(c) of

the South African Constitution due to a deadlock in the municipal council, which lacked a mayor, mayoral committee, or municipal manager. Similar situations occurred in September 2024 when the ANC tabled a motion of no confidence to remove Councillor Brink as mayor of Tshwane and in August 2024 when Councillor Gwamanda was ousted as mayor of Johannesburg.

Removing mayors does not address service delivery backlogs and challenges, such as the water crises in these municipalities; instead, it exacerbates the situation. The DA has threatened to withdraw from coalitions with the ANC if Councillor Brink is not reinstated as mayor of Tshwane. This highlights a broader issue: coalition agreements in areas like the Gauteng metropolitan municipalities are not made public, depriving local communities and civil society of the opportunity to hold municipal coalition governments accountable for their actions or inactions, as mandated by the South African Constitution (Ndevu *et al.*, 2024).

4. Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology. According to Hiebl (2021), systematic reviews have become a standard approach in management studies, although guidance on setting up the sampling procedure remains limited. Despite its growing prevalence in public research, the use of SLR is still not as widespread as in other fields (Snyder, 2019). A systematic review must be structured, meaning it should be conducted in an ordered and methodical manner rather than haphazardly (Jesson *et al.*, 2011). Tranfield *et al.* (2003) emphasise that a structured search should be based on clearly defined research questions, followed by identifying relevant keywords and search terms derived from scoping studies, existing literature, and discussions within the review team.

This study used data from journal articles and media reports from South Africa as its unit for analysing issues, trends, and prospects of GNU in South Africa. The study initially targeted 100 articles using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to identify relevant articles. After careful analysis using the keyword "GNU" as the primary search term, 50 articles focusing on GNU cooperation, political ideologies, resource allocation, communication, and coalitions were selected for in-depth analysis. The selection criteria included:

- **Year of Publication**: Publications from 2016 to 2024.
- **Type of Publication**: Journal articles, conference proceedings, books and book chapters, and published dissertations and research projects.
- **Language**: Publications in English.

The exclusion criteria were:

- **Year of Publication**: Publications from 2015 and earlier.
- **Type of Publication**: Unpublished articles, books, book chapters, dissertations, and conference proceedings.
- **Language**: Publications not written in English.

The included studies' results were integrated using meta-analysis, a statistical technique combining findings to evaluate, compare, and identify trends, conflicts, or connections across multiple studies (Davis *et al.*, 2014). The proposed conceptual framework will be discussed in the next section, focusing on different variables relevant to the study.

5. Proposed Conceptual Framework for GNU

According to Veselý (2015), a conceptual framework can be defined as a set of key terms and relations between them that is organised to reflect different aspects of a process or system and guides the choice of methods and research design. Conceptual frameworks direct research by organising our thinking about how to approach social phenomena. A conceptual framework provides the most general components that can be used in any theory. Jowah (2016) adds that a conceptual framework illustrates the relationships between study variables and can also reflect the researcher's personal experiences.

Soames (2003) argues that logical positivism holds that there are no absolute philosophical truths, but the object of a conceptual framework is to clarify thoughts; this has aided researchers in simplifying their thoughts in this probe for truth. In this article, the researchers use a proposed conceptual framework, arriving at their proposition on the GNU. The proposed conceptual framework for the Government of National Unity (GNU) in South Africa aims to provide a model for

effective governance. This framework was developed by synthesising literature from various scholars to highlight the significance of different variables within the model (see Figure 1).

Independent Variables

- Political Ideologies: The differing political ideologies of the GNU parties, particularly on issues such as land expropriation and economic policies, can create challenges in policymaking and implementation. The ANC's stance on land expropriation contrasts with the DA's position, potentially leading to policy stagnation (Zweni, 2022).

- Resource Allocation: Effective resource allocation is crucial for the GNU's success. Proper allocation of financial, staffing, and capital resources can enhance service delivery and improve governance outcomes (Gomes *et al.*, 2021).

- Communication: Effective communication within the GNU is essential for coordinating policies and ensuring transparency. Regular briefings and meetings can facilitate better understanding and cooperation among the parties (Aakhus, 2007).

Dependent Variable

- Effective Governance: The ultimate goal of the GNU is to achieve effective governance, which includes providing essential services, economic growth, and overall improvement in the quality of life for South African citizens.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model (Figure 1) illustrates the relationship between the independent variables (political ideologies, resource allocation, and communication) and the dependent variable (effective governance). This model can serve as a foundation for future empirical studies to test the proposed framework using primary data collected from participants.

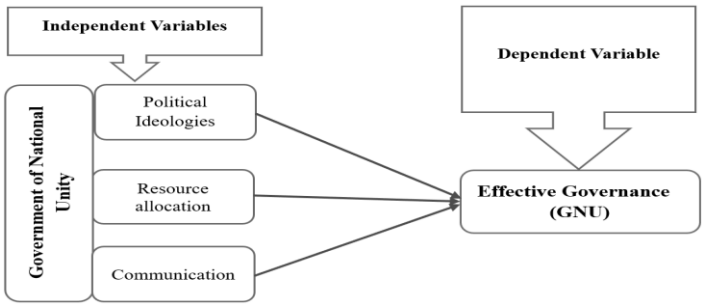


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework *(Source: Author)*

5.1 Political Ideologies (Policy Decisions)

The non-complementary political manifestos and policy positions of the coalescing parties stem from their varying ideologies on the fundamental tenets of Section 25 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (108 of 1996) that deals with land expropriation (RSA, 1996). The ANC, the majority party, has proposed amending the land expropriation clause to facilitate land reform more efficiently. In contrast, the DA maintains that Section 25 of the constitution should remain unchanged. This ideological clash between the majority party and the official opposition could impede the national redress project, which aims to benefit marginalised communities.

Each political party in the GNU has its constitution and manifesto, leading to overlapping and sometimes conflicting political ideologies. Some parties identify as communist, while others as capitalist. To understand the GNU members' positions, the study highlights key policy stances from three influential parties:

- **Democratic Alliance (DA)**: The DA opposes policies aimed at including previously disadvantaged Black South Africans in economic activities and rejects the national minimum wage implemented by the ANC-led government. The DA also advocates against Black Economic Empowerment, continuous bailouts for State-Owned Entities, and the National Health Insurance Scheme, arguing that these measures could bankrupt South Africa without improving healthcare. Additionally, the DA opposes clauses four and five of the BELA bill, which they believe would restrict mother-tongue education for certain groups. The DA has pledged to promote accountability, consequence management,

transparency, and good governance if elected to national and provincial governments.

- **Patriotic Alliance (PA)**: As a newly formed party led by Mr Gayton McKenzie, the PA lacks a clear policy direction. The party's leader has stated that their primary goal is to gain power, making it difficult to draw specific policy insights from their statements.

5.2 Resource allocation

In the public sector, resource allocation involves distributing scarce government resources among various departments to achieve governmental goals and enhance citizens' quality of life (Zweni, 2022). This process encompasses allocating staffing, financial, and capital resources to align with the government's strategic plans, programmes, and key performance areas (Gomes, Osborne, & Lisboa, 2021). Effective resource allocation is crucial for implementing strategies and plans, when resources are limited (Atambo & Chepkosgei, 2018).

Proper planning is essential for successful resource allocation. Without it, the government may face significant challenges in executing its strategies. Resource allocation is a top priority in the public sector because it directly impacts the government's ability to meet its objectives and improve service delivery (Gomes *et al.,* 2021). Prioritising resources based on the population's needs and aligning them with government priorities can prevent misuse and enhance performance (Inabo, 2020). Wise allocation ensures that funds are not wasted on unnecessary resources, thereby optimising the use of limited assets.

5.3 Communication

Effective communication is crucial for the success of the public sector, particularly in a coalition government like the GNU. Clear and effective communication of organisational plans, strategies, goals, and objectives can significantly enhance overall performance (Aakhus, 2007). Communication within the public sector can be both formal and informal, and coalition partners need to ensure that all members understand the information presented to them. Proper information

sharing allows leaders and staff to manage financial resources effectively, improving service delivery performance.

According to Mehrabian (2017) interactive communication between GNU partners is critical for fostering open conversations through regular briefings, monthly meetings, and weekly meetings. Mafini (2014) emphasises the link between effective communication and good organisational performance in the public sector. Explicit norms and standards for communication are essential in any public institution, as they ensure that information is disseminated and understood correctly (Batliner *et al.*, 2003; Castells, 2013; Mehrabian, 2017).

Legislation and established norms and standards play a significant role in facilitating effective communication within the government. While some political organisations may view these norms and standards as unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, they are essential for maintaining responsible governance and accountability in the public sector, as mandated by the South African Constitution (Zweni *et al.*, 2022).

5.4 Effective Governance

Effective governance is fundamental to the success of any government, particularly in addressing the needs of its citizens. When governance fails, as described by Schwella (2016), a cascade of negative outcomes can occur, including lawlessness, abuse of political power, endemic corruption, dysfunctional public institutions, financial challenges, crumbling infrastructure, political strife, factionalism, and violent protests against poor service delivery. These issues have significantly impacted South Africa's public governance system over the past decade (Reddy, 2021).

Good public governance is essential for reconstructive progress and developing an efficient, effective, and capable state. South Africa must move quickly towards implementing good governance practices to fulfil its governmental roles and obligations (Reddy, 2021).

Service delivery, which involves providing citizens with essential resources such as water, electricity, sanitary facilities, and shelter, is a critical aspect of governance. The South African Constitution mandates that the government must structure and manage its administration, budgeting, and planning processes to prioritise the

fundamental needs of the country. This is aimed at promoting social and economic development within communities.

To ensure effective service delivery, the government must adhere to established policies, systems, and procedures designed to meet the needs of its citizens. The quality of life of South African citizens is directly and immediately affected by the availability and quality of these services. Effective governance, from the executive level down to government departments, is essential to ensure these services are delivered efficiently and equitably.

6. Policy Implications

South African politics are entering a new era with the formation of the GNU following the May 2024 general elections. The elections resulted in no single party securing a majority, necessitating the establishment of a coalition government. This shift marks a significant change in South Africa's political landscape, with implications for governance, service delivery, and economic development. In a GNU, the pursuit of consensus among diverse partners significantly impacts policy stability and continuity. This aspect of governance is crucial for ensuring that strategic plans are durable, consistent, and reliable over time. One of the key advantages of a GNU is the potential for enhanced policy stability. When multiple political parties come together to form a government, the policies they implement tend to reflect a broader consensus. This collective agreement can result in policies that are more stable and less prone to abrupt changes, even when there are shifts in the political landscape (Berliner, 2016). A GNU can mitigate the risks associated with drastic policy reversals that often accompany changes in single-party governments. This stability is particularly beneficial for long-term projects and reforms, such as infrastructure development, education reform, and healthcare initiatives, which require sustained effort and consistent policy support over several years (Naidoo, 2021). While the consensus-driven approach of a GNU has many benefits, it also carries the risk of policy paralysis. The need to achieve agreement among diverse coalition partners can slow the decision-making process and lead to compromises that dilute the effectiveness of economic policies (Gathii, 2019). For example, if coalition partners have conflicting views on key issues such as taxation or labour market reforms, reaching a consensus can be challenging. This can delay the

implementation of crucial economic policies and reforms, potentially hindering economic growth and development (Flees, 2017)

Governance and Political Stability

The GNU aims to address the country's pressing challenges through cooperation among political parties. However, the coalition's sustainability is uncertain due to ideological differences and power struggles. The GNU's voluntary nature, lacking legal backing, further complicates its stability. To ensure effective governance, the GNU must prioritise norms and standards for operation, moving beyond the non-binding Statement of Intent.

Service Delivery and Infrastructure

The GNU has identified key priorities, including driving inclusive growth, reducing poverty, and building a capable state. This includes investing in infrastructure through public-private partnerships (PPPs) to address South Africa's significant infrastructure challenges. However, implementing policies such as the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill and the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill poses financial and logistical challenges.

Economic Growth and Public-Private Partnerships

To achieve sustainable economic growth, the GNU plans to leverage PPPs to strengthen sectors like energy, communication, water, and transport. While PPPs offer potential solutions, they must be carefully managed to avoid exacerbating existing economic and social inequalities. The GNU must also address investor confidence, which is crucial for economic stability and growth.

Policy Recommendations

- **Develop norms and standards**: Establish legally binding frameworks to govern the GNU's operations, ensuring accountability and stability.

- **Prio**ritise **Citizen Needs**: Focus on service delivery and infrastructure development to address the fundamental needs of South Africans.

- **Strengthen public-private partnerships**: Implement well-regulated PPPs to enhance infrastructure and economic growth.

- **Promote political consensus**: Encourage dialogue and cooperation among GNU parties to overcome ideological differences and ensure effective governance.

By addressing these policy implications, the GNU can work towards achieving its goals of inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and effective governance, ultimately improving the quality of life for South African citizens.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The formation of the GNU in South Africa represents a pivotal moment in the country's democratic evolution. The GNU aims to address deep-seated socioeconomic challenges and promote stability through political compromise and consensus-driven governance. However, the success of this coalition government hinges on its ability to navigate ideological differences, implement effective policies, and deliver on its commitments to the South African people.

Key Challenges and Opportunities

The GNU faces significant challenges in steering the nation towards sustainable development and peace. These challenges include ideological differences among coalition partners, the need for consensus in decision-making, and the pressure to address socio-economic inequalities. However, the GNU also presents opportunities for adaptive and responsive policymaking, drawing on diverse perspectives to enrich policy discussions and outcomes.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure the GNU's success and contribute to South Africa's stability and development, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. **Develop a Clear Legislative Framework for Coalitions**: Integrate a clear legislative framework for coalitions into the South African Constitution to provide a stable and predictable governance environment.

2. **Ensure Consensus-Based Decision-Making**: All GNU partners should adhere to consensus-based decision-making processes, as outlined in the Statement of Intent, to ensure that policies reflect the collective will of the coalition.

3. **Promote Political Tolerance and Dialogue**: Encourage a culture of political tolerance and open dialogue among GNU partners to facilitate cooperation and reduce conflict.

4. **Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)**: Leverage PPPs to address infrastructure challenges and stimulate economic growth. However, these partnerships must be carefully managed to ensure they contribute to inclusive development and do not exacerbate inequalities.

5. **Invest in Skills Development**: Given the anticipated employment opportunities in sectors such as construction and manufacturing, invest in skills development programs to equip the workforce with the necessary capabilities.

6. **Address Socio-Economic Inequalities**: Prioritise policies to reduce socio-economic inequalities, including poverty alleviation programmes, youth empowerment initiatives, and land redistribution.

7. **Promote Civic Engagement and Accountability**: Foster a culture of civic engagement and accountability through political education, youth involvement, and the strengthening of civil society organisations.

8. **Enhance Regional and Global Cooperation**: Strengthen regional and global cooperation to enhance South Africa's resilience and stability. This includes fostering diplomatic relations, establishing trade partnerships, and contributing to international peacekeeping efforts.

Conclusion

The GNU represents a significant opportunity for South Africa to address its socio-economic challenges and promote political stability. By implementing the proposed policy recommendations, the GNU can foster a more inclusive, stable, and effective governance system. The success of the GNU will not only impact South Africa's immediate future but will also set a precedent for future coalition governments in the country. Based on the following research questions;

- *Is the GNU's Statement of Intent legally binding?*
- *Is this arrangement a true GNU or merely a grand coalition?*
- *Will it effectively serve the interests of South Africans, particularly in terms of service delivery?*

The statement of intent is not legally binding because these partners (political parties) are enforcing their own political agenda and ideologies as opposed to following the goals of the agreement, this is evident because the members (parties) of the GNU failed to pass the National budget which was tabled by the Minister of Finance in March 2025. Secondly, the study found that this is just merely a coalition not a GNU. Lastly, service delivery has not improved since the general elections in May 2024.

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