

Solution to the Political Problem of *Bangsamoro*: Maguindanaon Professionals and Employees Association Perspective

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to get the perspective of the Moro people in the Philippines islands, specifically members of MAPEA (Maguindanaon Professionals and Employees Association), on the belief that this sector could give an educated, intelligent, and strategic formula for the just, peaceful, and lasting solution to the political problem of the “Bangsamoro” people for self determination. In this study, an explanation based on the historical perspectives is necessary. It is to gather the answer of critical question, especially related to what are the root causes of the “Bangsamoro” political problem. Accordingly, the Philippine history is replete with many stories of rebellion and secession. In Mindanao alone, the government has been spending time, efforts, and resources to contend the armed movements. Besides, the “Bangsamoro” struggle for independence has started from 16th to 20th century. In 1968, after the Jabidah Massacre, MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) fought against the government forces and the violent armed confrontations ended up in the peace talk in Tripoli, Libya in 1975. When in 1996, the GRP (Government of the Republic of Philippine) – MNLF Final Peace Agreement was forged, the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) continued the struggle so that the All-Out War declared by the Estrada administration in year 2000. Finally, the perspective of the members of MAPEA does not differ from what have already been done to solve the “Bangsamoro” political problem. Just like other organizations, they are hopeful that the conflict would end. This is a new learning.

Key words: *Moro people, historical perspective, self-determination, political problem and solution, and the perspective of MAPEA members.*

INTRODUCTION

In many countries in the world, the armed struggle has been used as an instrument for gaining major demands, such as the right to self-determination or principle wherein a people or nations exercise the right to statehood or self-rule, and that such right has an equal right to sovereignty. A fundamental right guaranteed and recognized by the United Nations Charter, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, UN (United Nations) General Assembly Resolution No.41/128/1986; UN General Assembly Resolution No.61/295/2007; or more

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popularly known as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of People* (Musib M. Buat, 2007). However, experiences worldwide show that the objectives are not that easy to attain.

There are several relevant stories to tell. The purpose of writing this section is to gain insights from the experiences of East Timor and Aceh in Indonesia to study the solutions embodied in their peace agreements which might be of help in finding a new solution for the resolution of the *Bangsamoro* (Moro people) political problem.

The case of East Timor of Indonesia is an appropriate case to cite. For decades, the East Timorese alleged that they have been maltreated and marginalized. They launched a protest movement which resulted to several occasions of militia rampage killing many of them. Finally, in 1999, after a long process and after many of the civilians had been killed, a referendum was held and the people decided for independence (http://www.pbs.org/newsletter/bb/asia/east_timor/index.html, 11/3/2012).

Aceh province in Indonesia has also been home to one of Asia's longest-running conflicts. Its Sultanate was the center of Islam in Southeast Asia prior to and after the fall of Malacca to the Dutch colonizers in 1511. In the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the British ceded to the Dutch their colonial possessions in Sumatra and describes that Aceh was one their territorial possessions, although they did not control it. On March 26, 1873, the Dutch colonial government declared war against Aceh, which admitted as the Dutch's longest and bloodiest colonial campaign (Ricklefs, 2004). The Dutch embedded Aceh in 1874 but the people of Aceh, to include the religious leaders, fought hard during the entire Dutch colonial days and even up to the independence of Indonesia in 1945. One of the military leaders of the bloody Dutch invasion, Hendrikus Colijn, became Prime Minister of Netherlands (www.google.com, 15/2/2012).

Even for a country long hardened to election violence, the massacre of at least 57 defenseless civilians on the main southern island of Mindanao, the Philippine, many of them relatives and supporters of a local politician and a large group of journalists sets a new low. This troubled corner of the Philippines usually makes headlines for its long-running Muslim separatist rebellion. But the killings starkly exposed a nationwide malaise: the fierce competition for regional power among the country's small élite of a few hundred families and clans that control an inordinate amount of the national wealth — and the desperate lengths some will go to protect their hold on power (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1943191,00.html#ixzz1g1BAFSMI>, 11/3/2012).

Many more cases of rebellion or secession have been happening throughout the world. And while peace talks usually take place after wide and massive armed confrontations, the conditions recur. In addition, only the warring parties are considered as important actors. The stakeholder sectors are not part of the negotiations and in charting the destiny of the nations.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Philippine history is replete with many stories of rebellion and secession. These began during the Spanish regime, were carried on during the American administration, and even at present, they are still bothering the Philippine government and the communities affected. In Mindanao alone, the government has been spending time, efforts, and resources to contend the armed movements.

In this context, E. Cantalopez (2010) discusses how the *Bangsamoro* people have awakened to the reality of landlessness in their own homeland. E. Cantalopez cited also to Abhoud Syed Lingga (2009) who said that the “Moros or *Bangsamoro*” have already established a Sultanate form of government long before the Spaniards came. However, Abhoud Syed Lingga (2009) and E. Cantalopez (2010) related how the armed struggle came into existence, beginning with the quest for Mindanao independence led by Datu Udtog Matalam up to the rebel movement of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) waged in the early 1970s and the secessionist movement of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) started in the late 1970s. The time may have been too long and the cost of war may have already been huge, but no peace is looming yet for the Mindanaoans.

Poverty is still a reality; and access to social services has not been experienced by many communities, especially in the poorest regions which are the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and Region XXII (ADB, 2005).

Several negotiations and peace talks have already been held yet no significant results could promise peace. It is a public knowledge that the peace talk that forged for the establishment for the *Bangsamoro* Juridical Entity (BJE) bogged down when the Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) was not signed by the top government officials in 2008.

After several talks held in Malaysia, including the one that ended with a series of armed confrontations in 2008, another set of government panelists are currently setting up another round of talks in the same neighbor country. Whether or not an agreement favorable to the *Bangsamoro* people would be attained, remains to be seen. This shows that an armed struggle takes time, aside from the observation that even during the peace talks, armed confrontations happen, lives, and properties are destroyed and a large number of people are displaced. Currently, for instance, several bombs have been exploded and a bomb scare is felt all over the island.

In every conflict, there is actual root cause and with corresponding appropriate means of solving it either involves the use of force or military power nor peaceful or non-violent manner of treating such conflict in order to come up with a final solution thereto. In the case of the existing 39-year old political problem, involving the *Bangsamoro* people and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines, there are series of military experiments and peace negotiations made by the government with the rebel representing the *Bangsamoro* people with the aim in view of solving the political problem without tracing down into the main root cause of the problem.

The series of armed confrontations are doing more harm than good even to the combatants themselves. The government has also entered into series of peace agreement formerly with the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) to the provisions of the Philippine Constitution; and the GRP (Government of the Republic of Philippines) – MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) Final Peace Agreement of 1996 granted limited and powerless autonomy to the *Bangsamoro* people in southern Philippines. All of these, including the series of all out wars, military propaganda, and counter insurgency programs are of crystal clear that these could not leapt to solve the *Bangsamoro* political problem.

Hence, this study focused on the necessity to determine the perspective of the respondent-members of the Maguindanao Professional Employees Association (MAPEA) towards peaceful settlement of the existing *Bangsamoro* political problem. It, further, seeks to derive important suggestions as to the appropriate procedure to solve once and for all the existing conflict in a peaceful manner. A non-violent manner of solving the *Bangsamoro* political problem is highly desirable to the concerned people in the region who have been experienced the havoc of the endless war. The researcher expects the respondents to point out nonviolent or peaceful manner of solving conflict as favorable approach to the *Bangsamoro* political problem.

OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GRAND STUDY

The researcher believes that there could be solutions to the *Bangsamoro* political problem. I think that it is necessary that the opinions or perceptions of ordinary Maguindanaoans should also be surfaced.

This study sought to find out the solutions of the *Bangsamoro* political problem from the perspective of the members of the Maguindanaon Professional Employees Association (MAPEA). This included data on the root causes of the conflict, also as perceived by the members of the organization. Choosing them as respondents could present a fresh dimension regarding perceptions of how to solve the *Bangsamoro* political problem.

The researcher gathered responses from the members of the MAPEA to answer the following questions: (1) What are the root causes of the *Bangsamoro* political problem?; (2) What were the solutions of the civil society organizations to settle the *Bangsamoro* political problem?; and (3) What are the possible solutions to the *Bangsamoro* political problem as perceived by the members of the Maguindanao Professional Employees Association?

Some sectors of the Mindanao society have expressed dismay over their lack of opportunity to participate in the peace process. This study may serve as an avenue for such participation. This may give the members of the MAPEA the chance to express the solutions they want to share for a peaceful settlement of the *Bangsamoro* political problem.

The results of the study may be used by NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) workers and the advocates of nonviolence for solving personal,

relational, cultural, and structural conflicts. They could be individuals, organizations, or institutions trying to advocate that when conflicting parties resort to violence, they beget more violence.

Further, this study may serve as reading materials for peace and development students. Peace education involves huge issues and concerns and, thus, relatively speaking, there is still dearth of relevant materials. This study may contribute to the generation of materials necessary to make the public well informed about the different perspectives on the *Bangsamoro* political problem.

Generally, peace involves all aspects of life and living. Not much knowledge yet has been established about how to attain it. Besides, the wide variety of contexts produces wide variety of experiences. This study may contribute to the general bank of knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter exhibits a description of the general research design, population and sampling design, instruments, data collection, and statistical analyses.

This grand research study used a descriptive research design which is intended principally to identify the strategies for a peaceful settlement of *Bangsamoro* political problem. The main data are the perceive solutions to the peaceful settlement of the *Bangsamoro* political problem.

The grand study will be conducted in the province of Maguindanao, specifically in the Chartered City of Cotabato where the office of the Maguindanao Professional Employees Association (MAPEA) was established for the convenience of all of its members. Hence, the questionnaires will be distributed to the respondents in a random manner to ensure the credibility of their answers to each question. Most of the interviews were done in Cotabato City and in Datu Odin Sinsuat were some of the officers of the MAPEA were working. Two interviewees were found by the researcher in Talayan, Maguindanao.

The respondents of the study were members and officers of the MAPEA. The researcher chose them because they represent the highly educated sector of the society; and researcher guessed that probably, even if they are Moro people, and they might agree that there is a need to assert the people's right, they might have different solutions to the *Bangsamoro* political problem.

The researcher used two types of data gathering techniques: the survey and interviews. The survey gathered all the data and the interviews were done to validate the data.

The sample size of the study is determined by percentage of the total number of the respondents who are actually registered members of the Maguindanao Professional Employees Association (MAPEA). The actual members of the said association are around 1,500 (one thousand and five hundred) members. The researcher had pursued randomly with one hundred fifty respondents. The answers given by one hundred fifty members constituting 10 percent of

the total number of the respondents were given full credit and confidentiality, just reflected the actual perspective of its members. After determining that the percentage of the population to be considered is 10, the researcher used the systematic sampling with a start to identify who among the members were to be selected as respondents. The researcher got the list of the 1,500 members and chose from there around 150 names as respondents.

The survey questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part asks the perceptions of the respondents on the root causes of the *Bangsamoro* political problem. The second part asks the solutions done to solve the *Bangsamoro* political problem; and the third asks the possible solutions for the peaceful settlement of the *Bangsamoro* political problem. The interview guide consists only of the main questions. Despite this, the researcher was able to gather sufficient information because follow up questions were asked in the course of the interview.

The study used the quantitative and qualitative designs. The survey was the main data gathering technique. Interviews were conducted to validate the survey data and find out deeper explanations to the issues and concerns identified in the survey questionnaire. The respondents were also asked what they thought were items that should be included in the solutions suggested in the survey questionnaire. No one among them added another item.

ONE OF THE MAJOR FINDINGS

In this section, an explanation of the study based on the qualitative manner is necessary. It is to gather the answer of critical questions, especially related to what are the root causes of the *Bangsamoro* political problem; and what were the solutions of the civil society organizations to settle the *Bangsamoro* political problem? So, knowing the historical background is very important here.

The conflict in Mindanao between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has been going on for more than three decades. Although it has been violent, but most of the time the protagonists are engaged in peace talks. Every time, shooting war between the protagonists erupts which usually take place in short span of time; it is always followed by lengthy negotiations; though every time war break out, the consequences is painful and the costs are tremendous (Iribani, 2006).

M. Daylusan-Fiesta (2004); C. Cerezo (2010); E. Cantallopez (2010); M. Mua (2010); and N. Macapantar (2010) related the history and the development of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the separation from it by a group of leaders led by Salamat Hashim and which later became the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). This is part of their discussion of the history of the Mindanao conflict. They talked of the situations of violence before, during, and after the declaration of Martial Law in the Philippines. They related how it all started with the dismay over the Jabidah Massacre in 1968 where a group of 150 young Muslims were recruited and trained, so they could lead the retaking

of the island of Sabah which the Philippine government claimed to be once part of the country's territory.

The information about the massacre spread throughout Mindanao like wild fire. This urged then congressman, Datu Udtog Matalam, to file a bill in Congress for the separation of Mindanao. He also urged for cooperation by all Muslims to cooperate with what he called the "Mindanao Independence Movement". The movement did not prosper. A group of Muslim political leaders organized the youth and called the group the *Bangsamoro* Youth Army and this later evolved to become the MNLF and the MILF.

Abhoud Syed Lingga (2009) said that the causes to the conflict afflicting Mindanao were varied. He classified them as immediate and remote root causes. He, then, identified the "core of the issue" as the struggle for self-determination, the continuing assertion of the *Bangsamoro* people for the restoration of their independence. He defined also the concept as the right of the peoples to freely determine their political status and freely their economic, social, and cultural development; and added to say that its diverse interpretations could include decolonization, freedom from foreign domination, nationalism, the minority right interpretation, democratic governance through democratic practices, and popular sovereignty and representative governance. The development of the Sultanate took two centuries. This was well thought and based on long experiences. It was also based on the tenets of Islam.

L. Gaspar and Maravillas (2002) described it as a political institution shaped by Islamic law. They said that its political dominion was widened through religious expansion in the same manner that the Spanish colonizers expanded the dominion of the monarchy through the propagation of the Christian faith. The political domain was co-equal to the religious domain. They said, further, that all its laws, with the exception of those which pertained to traditional customs, were consistent with the precepts of Islam and most authorities, from Sultan to Headman were persons of religious inclination.

Upon the arrival of the Spanish colonialists, the *Bangsamoro* were already in the process perfecting a state formation and governance. In the middle of the 15th century, Sultan Shariff ul-Hashim established the Sulu Sultanate; followed by the establishment of the Maguindanaw Sultanate in the early part of the 16th century by Shariff Muhammad Kabungsuwan. Their experiences on state formation continued with the establishment of the Sultanate of Buayan, the Pat a *Pangampong ko Ranao* (Confederation of the Four Lake-Based Emirates) and other political subdivisions. These states were already engaged in trade and diplomatic relations with other countries including China (Gaspar & Maravillas, 2002).

For centuries, the Spanish colonial government attempted to conquer the Muslim states to subjugate their political existence and to add the territory to the Spanish colonies in the Philippine islands, but history tells us that it never succeeded. These states with their organized maritime and infantry forces succeeded in defending the *Bangsamoro* territories; thus, preserving the

continuity of their independence. That is why it is being argued, based on the logic that you cannot sell something you do not possess, that the *Bangsamoro* territories are not part of what were ceded by Spain to the United States of America in the Treaty of Paris. Spain had never exercised effective sovereignty over these areas. Their attempts were always successfully met with resistance by the Muslims (Majul, 1999).

S. Jubair (2008) said that the *Bangsamoro* resistance against attempts subjugate their independence continued even when USA (United States of America) forces occupied some areas in Mindanao and Sulu. Although, at this time, the resistance of the *Bangsamoro* governments was not as fierce as during the Moro-Spanish wars, but the combined resistance of group-organized guerrilla attacks against the American forces and installations and what remained of the Sultans' military power compelled the USA government to govern the Moro territories separate from other territories of the Philippine islands.

The individual *Bangsamoro* persons also showed defiance against American occupation of their homeland. They would attack American forces in martyrdom operations called *parang sabil*. *Parang sabil* is likened to a suicide strategy and which was done by a fighter when there are no more alternatives left, but to fight even if the fighter is sure it would cause his life. But he would do this only when he is sure he could kill the enemy. Many *parang sabil* fighters were able to kill Spanish and American intruders.

When the USA government promised to grant independence to the Philippines, the *Bangsamoro* leaders registered strong objection to be part of the Philippine Republic. In the petition to the United States of America's President on June 9, 1921, the people of Sulu said that they would prefer being part of the USA rather than to be included in a nation with a repressive government (Jubair, 1999).

In 1924, there was a *Bangsamoro* leaders meeting in Zamboanga in which the Moro leaders proposed in their Declaration of Rights and Purposes that the "islands of Mindanao and Sulu, and the island of Palawan be made an unorganized territory of the United States of America" in anticipation that in the event the USA would decolonize its colonies and other non-self governing territories, the *Bangsamoro* homeland would be granted separate independence. Had it happened, the *Bangsamoro* would have regained by now their independence when the United Nations decided on the decolonization of territories under the control of colonial powers. Their other proposal was that if independence had to be granted, including the claimed territories, fifty years after Philippine independence, a plebiscite be held in Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan to decide by vote whether the territory would be incorporated in the government of the islands of Luzon and Visayas, remain a territory of the United States of America, or become independent. The proposed fifty-year period ended in 1996, the same year the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) and the Philippine government signed the Final Agreement on the Implementation of the Tripoli Agreement in 1975.

The Moro leaders warned that if no provision of retention of the United States of America would be made, they would declare an independent constitutional Sultanate to be known as Moro Nation (Jubair, 2008). True enough, no independent state was ever declared.

B.R. Rodil (1994) said that the American imperialists too must be held culpable for their contribution to the Mindanao problem. He added that they used a combination of military force and deception as instrument to divide and rule tactics, the American succeeded in bringing the native inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu under effective colonial rule through such methods as the organization of the Moro company of the Philippine constabulary, the Bates Agreement, the policy of attraction implemented partly through popular education, the *pensionado* program and the so-called training for self-government. It must be pointed out that the same conquest of the Moros brought about a convergence of Moro and Filipino interests which for more than three centuries were at loggerheads.

The continuation of the basic American imperialist policies into the Commonwealth and the Republic has transformed this convergence into a common interest against a common threat. For now, by their politico-economic elites, including their Moro counterparts like the present Moro governors who side the Arroyo administration in blocking the *Bangsamoro* struggle for self-determination and freedom, must be held responsible too for the elongation of Mindanao problem.

The introduction of the Torrens system of acquiring land by the Filipino-American government has greatly motivated the Mindanao problem. Long before the Spanish and American colonial regimes, the native inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu had practiced the communal system of land ownership. This means a Moro clan or a bigger form of community traditionally occupies a definite territory with clearly defined boundaries. Ordinary people could ask lands from these bigger clans who were in most instances are the *Sultans* or *Datus*. These were the political and religious leaders when the Spaniards came to Mindanao.

Within this larger territory, families, not individual may own and cultivate parcel of land which in turn can be transmitted from generation to generation as *pusaka* or inherited property or heirloom. This practice was practically ignored by the Torrens system. What prevailed at the establishment of the Republic was the race for landownership under absolute equality before the law propagated by Manuel L. Quezon. Act number 2874 otherwise known as Public Land Act passed in November 29, 1919 allowed the Christians to apply for a maximum of 24 hectares, whereas the non-Christian, or the Moros, were limited to not more than 10 hectares per applicant (Rodil, 1994).

In 1968, Congressman Ombra Amilbanga filed House Bill number 5682 that sought the granting and recognition of the independence of Sulu. When the bill found its way to the archive of Congress the then provincial governor of Cotabato, Datu Udtog Matalam, issued the Mindanao Independence Movement

(MIM) manifesto on May 1, 1968 calling for the independence of Mindanao and Sulu. When it became to the *Bangsamoro* leaders that it would not be possible to regain independence through political means because of lack of constitutional mechanism, the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) was organized to pursue the liberation of the *Bangsamoro* people and their homeland from the Philippine colonial rule through revolutionary means (Kadil, 2002).

C. Cerezo (2010) related how the MNLF was formed out of the *Bangsamoro* Youth Army organized by the first MNLF Chairman, Nur Misuari. He, as cited by B. Kadil (2002) who presented a background of the establishment of the MNLF, said that the contemporary *Bangsamoro* struggle for independence and clamor for an independent state may have started in 1968 right after the Jabidah Massacre. MNLF fought against the government forces and the violent armed confrontations ended up in the peace talk in Tripoli, Libya in 1975.

The product was the Tripoli Agreement which provided for the autonomy of 13 provinces of Mindanao upon approval by the Filipino people in a referendum. In the referendum, only four provinces voted in favor of the autonomy.

B. Kadil (2002) also talked about the establishment of the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) from among the officers and rank and file of the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front). When in 1996, the GRP (Government of the Republic of Philippine) – MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) Final Peace Agreement was forged, the MILF continued the struggle. L. Gaspar and Maravillas (2002) described how the fighting resulted in the All-Out War declared by the Estrada administration. In this war, loss of lives and destruction of properties were massive.

The All-Out-War, considered a major war, happened in the year 2000. In this context, N. Macapantar (2010) described what happened in this armed confrontations that were almost Mindanao-wide in coverage as it affected most provinces in Mindanao: Maguindanao, Central Mindanao, Zamboanga Sibuguey, Zamboanga del Sur, Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-tawi, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao Sur, Lanao Norte, and others. N. Macapantar said also that some lives were lost in the three municipalities dominated by the Iranun tribe: Barira, Buldon, and Matanog of the province of Maguindanao (Macapantar, 2010).

Finally, the study found out the following. *First*, the root causes as perceived by the members of the Maguindanao Professional Employees Association or MAPEA are the following: (1) poverty and underdevelopment; (2) the pursuit of the restoration of the *Bangsamoro* Ancestral Domain; (3) violation of the right to self-determination; (4) landlessness of the *Bangsamoro*; and (5) marginalization of the *Bangsamoro* people.

Second, the alternative solutions done by NGOs or Non-Governmental Organizations to solve the *Bangsamoro* political problem, as affirmed by the respondents, are the following: (1) establishment of a Culture of Peace Program; (2) establishment of Peace Zones or Spaces for Peace; (3) presence of the Local Monitoring Team; and (4) Media strategies popularizing the effects of the war.

Third, for the peaceful settlement of the *Bangsamoro* political problem, the following solutions had been affirmed by the respondents: (1) continued peace talks; (2) civil society participation in the talks; (3) heightened awareness of the people; (4) institutionalization of a dialogue program; and (5) increase of government budget and intensification of NGO peace building work.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

There is a need to raise the level of consciousness of the people, like what the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) workers did, in the communities that are part of the locale of the study. As soon as some improvements were observed, mechanisms such as the local and international monitoring teams and the media helped in the preservation and protection of the little experiences of peace in the communities.

The perspective of the members of MAPEA (Maguindanao Professional Employees Association) does not differ from what have already been done to solve the *Bangsamoro* political problem. Just like other organizations, they are hopeful that the conflict would end. This is a new learning.

Based on the conclusions, the researcher presents the following recommendations: (1) the government must conduct a serious nationwide consultation regarding the root causes of the Mindanao conflict, so that they would be able to confront the issues head on; (2) the professionals, especially of Maguindanao, should take a lead in persuading the government through all non-violent means; and (3) the civil society organizations should continue their actions, they need to intensify and widen the scope of the actions by coordinating with other civil society organizations in Mindanao.

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