

## The MAS Six Years in Power in Bolivia

Review Essay by Ton Salman

- *The Rise of Evo Morales and the MAS*, by Sven Harten. London/New York: Zed Books, 2011.
- *Evo Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo in Bolivia; The First Term in Context*, edited by Adrian J. Pearce. London, Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2011.
- *El estado de derecho como tiranía*, by Luis Tapia. La Paz: CIDES/UMSA, 2011.
- *From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia: Class Struggle, Indigenous Liberation and the Politics of Evo Morales*, by Jeffery R. Webber. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011.<sup>1</sup>
- *La democracia desde los márgenes: Transformaciones en el campo político boliviano*, by María Teresa Zegada, with Claudia Arce, Gabriela Canedo and Alber Quispe. La Paz: Muela del Diablo Editores/CLACSO, 2011.<sup>2</sup>

Publications evaluating the first years of the MAS and Evo Morales in power in Bolivia are starting to crop up, both inside and outside of Bolivia. There are for instance the books by Aranzibar Arze (2008), Böhrst *et al.* (2008), Mayorga (2011), Laserna (2009), Zegada *et al.* (2008) and PNUD (2010), as well as numerous journal articles.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, the time has come to begin an evaluation in earnest.

The five books under review here contribute in important ways to the effort of evaluating the Morales presidency and the MAS regime since 2006. Sven Harten's book focuses on the characteristics and development of the very atypical political party that made this major political shift in Bolivia possible: the MAS. The contributions collected by Adrian Pearce attempt to cover the dimensions of the changes in historical, political, legal and international relations. Luis Tapia, a Bolivian intellectual once closely involved in the coming about of key ideological features of currently implemented policies, presents a political-philosophical reflection on the ways in which, according to him, the MAS did *not* deliver. Webber provides a very critical analysis of how, in his view, the MAS betrayed its original revolutionary zeal and settled for reforms that have left the foundations of capitalism intact. Zegada *et al.* portray how the MAS programme and administration transformed the 'political field' in Bolivia, addressing issues such as the new channels for democratic participation, the extension of the political sphere towards civil society, the nature of the state and its institutional edifice, and the balance between representation and participation in a 'consolidatable' democracy.

There seem to be two key arenas saturated in controversy when assessing the two subsequent MAS governments. The first one is the economic transformation. Here, issues like the national economic structure, nationalizations and the role of the state in strategic economic sectors, redistribution policies, sustainable development, and industrialization, employment and the legacy of extractivism are the

central themes. The guiding question is: how radical and ‘structural’ are the changes that the current government is pushing through? The second arena is that of democracy. Here, the controversies revolve around the rule of law and institutionalized liberal democracy versus ‘communitarian’ or participatory democracy. In response to this, debate has emerged around the role (and privileges?) of pro-government social movements (and the role of political parties). Additionally, the communal administration of justice, the exact status of individual and collective citizenship in a ‘plurinational’ state has triggered much discussion. Finally, the sometimes autocratic and power-hungry inclination of the government and its ‘impatience’ – to put it mildly – towards the opposition has often resulted in fierce disputes. The central question here is: has democracy improved, or deteriorated?

### **Probing democracy: the constitution, elections and foreign policy**

The aim of Pearce’s edited volume *Evo Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo in Bolivia* is to understand the history of MAS, its current difficulties and its future challenges. Pearce first introduces the chapters and their themes. The first chapter by Herbert Klein covers very broad terrain in that he traces the historical, demographic, migration and education-related, economic and social changes of the last decades that eventually provided the conditions for the success of MAS. His Bolivia-in-a-nutshell is a real *tour-de-force*. The second chapter by Sven Harten is on the formation and development of the MAS, a topic we will address below when we concentrate on his book. The third chapter is by Willem Assies, to whom the volume is dedicated. This was one of his last texts as he died unexpectedly before the book was published. Assies addresses the new constitution of Bolivia that was approved in a referendum in January 2009. He contextualizes the coming into being of this constitution both historically and internationally and finishes up with an inventory of controversial themes. Chapter four by John Crabtree analyses the spectacular growth in electoral support for the MAS over the years 1999 to 2010. Crabtree delves into factors such as the leadership of Morales, the structure of political opportunity, the political discourse of MAS that appealed to a wide range of discontented sectors of the population and social movements, the combination of *indigenismo* and *clasismo*, and the ineffective opposition. Next, in chapter five, Martín Sivak analyses the shift in Bolivia’s foreign policy away from ‘Americanization’ to ‘Bolivianization’. He explains how the terms in which the relations were cast have changed: wars against communism, drugs and terror are today, by the Bolivian state, no longer accepted as frameworks for dialogue, diplomatic representation and collaboration. As a consequence, relations have been cold ever since the US ambassador was expelled in 2008 with the accusation of meddling in internal political affairs. Certain Bolivian measures such as declaring the control of coca cultivation a domestic affair, tightening relations with Venezuela and Cuba (and even Iran), and returning the ‘favour’ of demanding a visa (to which costs are attached) for entrance into the country have made it difficult, even under Obama, to restore the friendship – even though one of the consequences has been Bolivia’s loss of preferential access to US markets. Lastly, chapter six by James Dunkerley is written as a diary in a personal and at the same time reflective and associative style that comments on a series of events in Bolivia between 2008 and 2010. It

addresses the transformations but also habitual traits of Bolivia's social, historical and political vicissitudes, and subtly applies the idea of *pachakuti*, the cyclic nature of historical time. It is also witty and clever, and a pleasure to read.

As a balanced, representative collection of contributions evaluating the most salient arenas in which the MAS and Morales have sought to make a difference, the book succeeds only halfway. There is no systematic attention given to the impacts of economic measures and their reformist or revolutionary character (see Webber 2011), to the way the government strategically dealt with the opposition, or to the way the 'emancipation' of the indigenous population occurred or failed to occur. And yet, these were hotly debated themes in post-2006 Bolivia. The contributions also tend to discuss more about measures, policies, characteristics of party composition and the innovative features of the constitution than about the controversies that they generated or the conflicts that they triggered. The economy is also not a primary interest of the authors. Nevertheless, as a whole this book is an informative read and the contributions are, without exception, by very qualified scholars.

*Evo Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo in Bolivia*, however, lacks the focus and systematic critical appraisal of events that we find, for example, in *La democracia desde los márgenes: Transformaciones en el campo político boliviano*, written by a team of researchers under María Teresa Zegada. In this very insightful book based on extensive literature, newspaper analysis and a series of interviews with key observers and protagonists, we find an analysis of developments based on carefully chosen theoretical ideas and concepts, such as the idea of the 'political field'. This allowed the authors to go beyond the institutional realm and focus on fields and issues of conflict, actors, societal relations, and even the disagreements about cultural meanings. This situates *La democracia desde los márgenes* – even more than the compilation by Pearce – squarely in the debate on democracy rather than on economy.

In my view, the book is excellent. It is sophisticated in its exploration of the conceptual and truly innovative features of the MAS administration. After having laid out their points of departure and analytical strategy in chapter one, they turn in chapter two to the 'collapse' of the old state institutionality and the concomitant fields of conflict. They explain how *a new type of framing of discontent*, on representation, neoliberalism, autonomy, national sovereignty and on a new constitutional groundwork accompanied the disintegration of the 'old' state. The new framing was mostly done outside the official political area, in social movements and civil society at large. It laid the groundwork for the victory of the MAS as well as for tensions between society and the polity within the new political configuration. In the third chapter, the authors present a detailed account of the proposals to construct a new state. They address components such as communitarian democracy, the notions of decolonization, participation with representation, the 'citizen power', communal justice, and the allotted indigenous presence in representative bodies. In the remainder of the chapter, the features of the old and the new constitution are systematically compared.

Chapter four focuses on the disputes about democracy. It offers a detailed account of the contents and appraisals of communitarian democracy, but also gives a very cautious analysis of the problems with 'upgrading' such communitarian dem-

ocratic traditions to the state level. The authors, conspicuously, conclude that in the new constitution 'representative democracy continues to articulate the Bolivian political terrain' (p. 196), and not the innovative ideas. The next chapter explores how social movements created and used new forms of involvement in politics, and in contrast the sixth chapter addresses how the MAS, allegedly being 'a government of social movements', does not really live up to the mark. This opinion is substantiated by a critical analysis of the persisting traits of corporativism, of the unfulfilled promise of the principle of 'governing by obeying', and of the attempts to subordinate the social movements. The authors also assert that ethnic discourse versus nationalistic choices demystifies, in the end, the idea of a 'social movements government'; yet they also stress that this idea still has great discursive strength, giving it real societal impact. The final chapter ('conclusions') evaluates the conceptual approach the authors applied and attempts to wrap up the findings. One of these findings is: 'Although the structure and functioning of the state remained based on the republican liberal axis, in terms of the conformation of powers through representative democracy as well as in the organizational form and division of powers, new formats of exercising democracy that tend to amplify participation have been incorporated' (p. 311).

This book does have a few flaws in that it does not give a full account of the economic transformations. It does not really address in a down-to-earth way the foul and shady acts the government committed from time to time, but tends to speak of these incidents in an abstract way that neutralizes them. The book is somewhat repetitious. Beyond these minor points, this book is a very complete, nuanced and profound analysis of ambitions and practices, discourses and realities, cleanness and clutter, and promises and forsaking. It seriously and analytically addresses both sides of the current developments that can be illustrated as follows. On the one hand there have been provincial authorities undemocratically denying electoral campaigning to those groups that are not 'with the process of change' (p. 300), 'because now it is our turn' (p. 316), versus, on the other hand, the fact that the new pluricultural state, at least in symbolic terms, suggests 'the opening of a horizon of comprehension towards [a state] of larger plurality (culturally, socially, economic and also political)' (p. 143). It is the best contribution so far to the often overheated and somewhat opinionated scuffles about the state of democracy in Bolivia.

### **Dreams and achievements in democracy and economy**

Sven Harten's book *The Rise of Evo Morales and the MAS* is a thorough and broad-based study on the why's and how's of this remarkable Bolivian political feat. Once again, it situates itself among the controversies in the arena of democracy. Harten presents a historical reconstruction of the transformation of a group of *cocalero* confederations (of which Evo Morales was the leader) into a movement-party that succeeded in galvanizing the anger and frustrations of hundreds of thousands of *de facto* excluded poor Bolivians and their social organizations and movements. He sketches Evo Morales' political coming of age, and elaborates on the clever use by MAS of notions like 'the people' (*el pueblo*, in particular in chapter seven) and the marginalized indigenous cultures and values. He offers an analy-

sis of the different ‘nature’ of the MAS as a political party and its attempts to re-structure state institutionality. Harten provides both a detailed and plausible account of facts and events, developments and outcomes (yet it was noted with surprise that he did not refer to important authors such as Assies 2003 and 2006, and Albro 2010).

Although the bulk of Harten’s chapters is on the prelude to MAS’ double electoral victory (2005 and 2009) and not on the period of government, we still learn a lot about the attitudes and strategies of MAS as a governing entity. Chapters eight and nine in particular elaborate extensively on the MAS discourse and philosophy *after* the electoral victory, and the ways in which clashes and contradictions were addressed by the MAS as governing party. One telling example is the tension between ‘the liberal notion of constitutional government’ (p. 196) on the one hand, and adherence to more ‘direct’, indigenous, plurinational and social movements participation in governing, on the other hand. However, these chapters also emphasize the conceptual dimensions of these issues rather than the trial-and-error practices and the sometimes turbid manoeuvring that also characterized MAS operations. And on the whole, Harten’s goal to ‘tell the story of Morales largely through the history of the [...] MAS’ (p. 5) tends to be quite sympathetic and even admiring towards what Morales and MAS have accomplished. No doubt, these achievements are impressive, and two consecutive absolute electoral majorities underline it. But although the more problematic aspects of this rise to power are also mentioned by Harten, most often they are coined as issues that ‘one may question’ (p. 67) or issues that MAS will have to resolve or reconcile in the (near) future.

It would be unfair to criticize Harten’s analysis because it only covers events up to the end of 2010, since 2011 especially was a year in which there were many difficulties for MAS. In particular, it would be unfair because Harten very accurately anticipates some of the problems that eventually did appear. For instance, he delves into the complexities of imagining a ‘plurinational nation’ (pp. 186 *ff*), and the ambivalent nature of the constitution when it comes to the institutionalization of participation channels in a new democratic system (pp. 217-25). He also mentions the tendency of a ‘centralization of power’ (p. 231), and the risk of ‘de-institutionalization’ (p. 233). These are indeed subjects that began to haunt the MAS administration in particular in 2011. But there are other problems as well; problems Harten does not anticipate. In 2011 the criticism became much stronger that MAS had assumed authoritarian and manipulative tactics to push decisions through. Among other things, the practice of ousting opposition authorities (at municipal and departmental levels) through judicial means triggered much condemnation. Even many MAS sympathizers today believe it is no coincidence that mostly opposition authorities have been forced to step down (and in many cases were replaced by MAS representatives) after accusations of corruption or other offences. Even worse, the relationship of the MAS with a large number of social movements that traditionally belonged to its core has deteriorated significantly. Among these movements are the COB, the salaried miners and the teachers’ unions, but more tellingly also various indigenous movements such as the CONAMAQ and CIDOB, which represent large numbers of highland and lowland indigenous peoples, respectively. The MAS image of being a defender of Mother Earth, and of being inspired by indigenous cosmologies alluding to reciprocity between the natural and

social spheres was seriously damaged by the TIPNIS case. TIPNIS was a long march by lowland indigenous peoples in defence of a natural reserve and indigenous territory (TIPNIS) and against a motorway that the government wanted to build through it. The march was first given little attention, then violently repressed and accused of being 'rightist' before the government finally gave in. But the story is not yet over: at the moment of writing these lines, a 'counter march', according to many instigated by the government, is reaching the city of La Paz demanding the abrogation of the law that prohibits the construction of the road through the reserve – in the name of 'national progress'.

It is remarkable that both these books by Harten and Zegada *et al.* tend to largely neglect the fact that MAS was not immune to foul and overtly power-hungry politics. In their approaches, the authors concentrate on conceptual and strategic levels and rarely descend to the messy and sometimes tawdry daily politics.

The contribution by Jeffery Webber, *From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia: Class Struggle, Indigenous Liberation and the Politics of Evo Morales*, focuses on the economic achievements and failures. At the outset of his book the author launches a series of theses that he will address. One series of theses basically brings home the idea that what started as a 'revolutionary epoch' between 2000 and 2005 ended as reformism once the MAS became government. A second series of theses claims that the Morales administration eventually settled for 'reconstituting' the neoliberal model, instead of destroying it.

The first chapter sketches the socio-economic panorama of Bolivia in the current epoch of global neoliberal capitalism. The second chapter takes us to the 2000-2005 period in which popular forces had obtained so much muscle that real revolutionary changes in the country seemed within reach. The third chapter analyses how the MAS party in the course of time renounced its own and the popular forces' revolutionary potential and opted for 'moderate reformism' (p. 99). In the author's view, the MAS eventually did abstain from confronting the right-wing opposition head on. For instance, in the cases of the hydrocarbons policies and its management of the Constituent Assembly, it opted for watered-down solutions. Webber, subsequently, focuses on the dimension of economic transformations, and deprecates the MAS results with regard to the alleged new economic structure, nationalizations and the role of the state in strategic economic sectors. He also criticizes the meagre outcomes of redistribution policies and attempts at sustainable development and industrialization. He does not believe that the MAS, in spite of its rhetoric, really attempted to overhaul the – capitalistic – economic basics. In chapter four, two examples are given to illustrate that the MAS administration did not support the more radical popular rebellion, but instead ended up giving in to the 'interests of capital in the MAS asymmetrical, multiclass coalition' (p. 144). One example is on the confrontations in the *Huanuni* mine in 2006. On the one hand, a group of salaried miners employed there pressed for nationalization of all mining and for strengthening the state mining company COMIBOL. On the other hand, a group of cooperative miners (organized in FENCOMIN) were trying to take over the mines themselves. In addition they supported the idea of covenants with transnational mining companies. In the end the government refused to give in to the demands of the salaried workers. It apparently did not want to scare off investments by foreign private companies. Another example is on the expelling of a

right-wing prefect in the department of Cochabamba. A strong movement in the department wanted the corrupt and manipulative prefect, Manfred Reyes Villa, to resign. The government was not against this idea, but wanted to control and direct the uprising. The bottom-up formation of a 'Revolutionary Prefecture Government' that was not controlled by MAS was therefore denounced by the government. The 'strategic party line' was considered of higher importance than supporting the radical demands of the people (p. 115-24).

In chapter five the author reviews the appraisals of a group of Bolivian intellectuals on the MAS and its achievements, and in chapter six he concludes that we face 'a disappointing failure of the Morales government to break with neoliberalism in any sustained and serious manner' (p. 226). In the conclusion the main points are wrapped up, and once again the verdict is that the MAS 'retained its core faith in the capitalist market as the principal engine of growth and industrialization' (p. 232). Webber's predominant focus on class, however, tends to overlook or simplify the plural antagonisms and the multidimensional diversity of Bolivia, even if he extensively discusses the ethnic dimension of Bolivia's composition. In the end, however, he still categorizes the radical indigenous movements as basically belonging to 'the left-indigenous forces' (p. 99), as if these were a homogeneous whole.

### **Democracy, tyranny and the rule of law**

In Luis Tapia's book *El Estado de derecho como tiranía* we do not find a detailed narrative of the achievements and failures of six years of MAS governance. Tapia evaluates the nature and let-down of the ambitious project MAS was supposed to carry through in a more theoretical and detached way. Tapia is consistently critical about the postures of the MAS government. To illustrate his admonishments he refers to some concrete events, incidents and decisions by the MAS administration. Additionally, being a philosopher and political scientist by training, he connects his criticism with the theoretical insights of, among others, Antonio Gramsci, Bolivian political scientist René Zavaleta, Louis Althusser and Alessandro Pizzorno. His book provides intriguing reading, especially when recalling that Luis Tapia, along with the current vice president Alvaro García Linera, once was a prominent member of a prestigious group of Bolivian intellectuals called *Comuna* that developed several key ideas and concepts currently central in the MAS discourses. But Tapia, unlike several of his fellow comrades at that stage, did not enter politics. He kept on teaching, reading and writing. He is obviously heavily disappointed in how MAS has developed after assuming power. The accusations are serious: MAS 'stopped being the general articulator at the organizational level of the forces of the indigenous, the peasants and the popular sectors' (p. 41); and 'there was no experimenting with alternative forms of political relations, with organization of political life, or dissolving the relation between those who direct and those who are directed' (p. 72). Additionally, MAS 'maintained the traits of the relation between political parties and civil society that were moulded in neoliberal times, that is, access to public offices goes through party membership or negotiation with that party' (p. 161); and MAS 'has been reproducing the political inequality that is contained in the principle of representation' (p. 164).

On the whole, Tapia claims that MAS, and in particular its governing echelons,

betrayed the ideals of genuine plurinationalism, of restructuring the economy, of democratization through the opening of new participation channels, and of political pluralism. On many occasions, such as during the Constituent Assembly process, MAS was disloyal to the multicultural popular and indigenous movements and organizations that had enabled its present position by opting to monopolize power in the political realm. ‘MAS did not generate any important debate in the interior of civil society, rather, it inhibited and cancelled them’ (p. 161). Many of these criticisms are, beyond doubt, true. Repression, disqualification, exclusion (also towards former allies) and some sectarianism characterize the reaction of the government more often than open dialogue. The MAS promise to improve and enhance democracy has been dealt quite a few blows in recent months. So, in reviewing the transformation both in the political and economic spheres, Tapia is close to Webber, and far more outspoken than Zegada *et al.* But we should remember here that both Webber and Tapia represent the critics that are in the so-called *it-went-not-far-enough-camp*; whereas we should not forget there are also many critics in the *it-already-went-too-far-camp*.

Tapia’s book also has some flaws. It is not very structured and presents quite a bit of repetition, and sometimes applies concepts in a somewhat awkward way. For instance, the title of the book derives from Tapia’s assertion that the ‘rule of law’ (the *estado de derecho*) can be used in a ‘tyrannical’ way and that both the neoliberal regime (p. 174) and MAS (p. 184) did exactly this. The problem, in my view, begins with the definition of the rule of law. It is ‘the fact that the whole of government institutions that a country designs, constructs and reproduces, are contained in a political constitution’ (p. 168). This definition admittedly serves well to denounce constellations in which, in a way, the law rules but in which the contents of politics are about ‘the organization of the reproduction of inequality and discrimination along the lines of class, culture, language, gender and ideology’ (p. 170). No doubt, manipulative, exclusionary, and ‘false’ democracies controlled by elites firmly seated in power do exist. But are they really places where the rule of law is respected? I believe Tapia’s definition to be debatable. I will evade the challenge to present another, more ‘accurate’ definition, but I do believe that the rule of law has a lot to do with guaranteed rights and liberties, with real equality *vis-à-vis* the law, and with legal assurances for all, including minorities, delinquents and political opposition members. That is to say, the rule of law, conceptually, may not yet be a comprehensive and unrestricted democracy, and may exist simultaneously with powerful attempts to perpetuate deep societal clefs. Nevertheless, it is a key notion alluding to the right to challenge such unjust arrangements. This would suggest that whenever democracy ends up curtailed, the rule of law is also inevitably affected. Is it, then, the rule of law that constitutes tyranny? Or is it its restriction, manipulation or perversion that produces tyranny? Was there not *enough* rule of law? Should not a genuine rule of law contain the guarantee that, through democratic means, the reproduction of inequality can freely and effectively be denounced, criticized and changed? It will, obviously, not happen very often; any political system has a range of mechanisms (from repression to hegemonic soft power) at its disposal to perpetuate power inequalities. But to me it seems it is not the rule of law that is to blame.

## Evaluating the MAS government: work in progress

All five books provide important insights into the achievements, as well as the roving and blundering of the MAS as a governing entity. But it is very hard to oversee this area with any objectivity, since we are still so close in time to many events, reactions, incidents, assumed tendencies, clashes and strategic manoeuvring. There are too many dimensions in which change, both intended and unintended, is occurring, and hardly any consolidation is as yet perceivable. Additionally, many authors are either too close to MAS or too antagonistic to provide a more balanced account – I probably would not do any better. However, in my view, there is one exception, and that is the book by María Teresa Zegada and her team. They produced an even-handed, detailed overview (and at the same time pleasant to read) of a range of issues connected to the new democracy that some in Bolivia are working hard to build, and others are criticizing or thwarting.

In terms of the two arenas – the economy and democracy – that are most controversial in evaluating the MAS performance, it is clear that most of the books reviewed here focus on the questions of democracy. If we look at the choices made regarding the arena of the economy, it would appear that the MAS did not attempt head-on to undo capitalism, but rather – with ups and downs and steps forward and back – searched for a mixed model. In this model, state participation in the economy increased and private enterprise was subjected to new (tax) rules and restrictions; yet at the same time free enterprise kept its place and (foreign) investments were welcomed. This obviously bothers left-wing scholars that had hoped for more radical transformations in Bolivia (like Webber), but at the same time it should come as a relief for those who feared that the days of the ‘free economy’ were numbered. Far more research, however, is needed to assess in detail the effects of the – perhaps still wavering – economic policies on issues like the reduction of poverty, economic growth, employment, industrialization, the battle against extractivism and *rentismo*, and sustainability.

In the democratic arena, issues are even more complex. The democratization promise ended in disruption, authoritarianism and co-optation for some, and for others, issues remain largely unsettled. The new constitution has on the one hand liberal democratic guarantees, representation, and individual liberties, and on the other attempts to build a different democracy which additionally would match with democratic forms stemming from Bolivia’s cultural and ethnic diversity. That is both the constitution’s strength and weakness. It has led to some worrying incidents, but is at the same time an unprecedented and fascinating experiment. What we do learn from these books is that the current *proceso de cambio*, the process of change, is substantial, heavily debated and controversial, and will, in all likelihood, leave deep marks for a long time to come. New evaluations based on even more comprehensive knowledge about (the consequences of) current measures and current battles and covering a longer period of time are urgently awaited.

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## Notes

1. The book by Webber has also been reviewed by this reviewer in *Journal of Agrarian Change* 12(2), 2012.
2. This book is available on line at: <http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/becas/democracia-margenes-bolivia.pdf>.
3. Including, yet not mentioning many others, two special issues of *Latin American Perspectives* edited by Kohl and Bresnahan (2010, issues 37, nos. 3 & 4).

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