


# Analysing the manipulation of the youths, election violence and democratic retrogression in South Africa

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## Abstract

Since the introduction of elective democracy in the 1990s, South African youths have played a significant role in the democratic process. Sadly, though, while some are building from the past experiences of the 1976 youth, others are deeply engrossed in crimes, violence, and thuggery. Several factors have been identified as the drivers of South African youth into different forms of criminalities. Prominent among them are the pauperisation of the youth by the state, unemployment, and their manipulation by the political elite. Rather than replicating the character of the youth of the 1970s who fought for better education and life, as well as the freedom of the black population during the dark days of apartheid. Some of the youths have turned to drugs and election violence, while others have become personal securities to top politicians, owing to difficult economic hardship. The paper opined to address this anomaly, there is a need for the South African youth to rediscover themselves by positioning themselves in politics and never expecting the government to empower them cheaply. Furthermore, the voice of the youth must not only be heard but be felt through character, integrity, discipline, and quality leadership. Through this, they will be able to shape policies, the direction of government, and the future of generations to come. Qualitative research techniques were used for this study. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions in five sampled locations in KwaZulu-Natal. The thematic and inductive methods of analysis were used to aid in the analysis of the generated data.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Democratic Retrogression, Election violence, youths, South Africa.

## Introduction

Expectations were very high when the apartheid regime in South Africa was dismantled and replaced with democratic rule. The first all-inclusive elections in 1994 marked the beginning of a new dawn for all categories of South Africans and, especially, the youth. It could be recalled that the youth of the apartheid era, especially in the 1970s and the 1980s, participated actively and played a crucial role in the liberation movement (Liliesleaf, 2017). With the introduction of democracy as a form of government that is supposed to create an environment that enables individuals to realise their potential, the role and the voices of South African youth began to disappear. This is because the post-Apartheid youth have, in fact, failed to recreate the energy, enthusiasm and mental philosophy or demonstrate the philosophical persuasions exhibited by the youth of the 1970s and 1980s (Glanvill, 2011). While it can be argued that the South African youth have played a key role in shaping certain policies of the government that relate to education through the “Fees Must Fall Campaign”, this by no means is sufficient (Ngcebetsa, 2018). Despite this effort, they are nonetheless still being confronted with many challenges, prominent among them are being used for the wrong reasons, particularly by the politicians during election periods.

Election violence is not new to South Africa and, most importantly, in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province, where the study was conducted. Election violence is not just inimical to democratic consolidation but contributes significantly to democratic retrogression (Plaut, 2018; Ashindorbe, 2018). In the body of literature, a lot has been written on election violence in KZN; however, not much has been said about the linkage between youth participation in elections, election violence and democratic retrogression. As a result, our knowledge of the role played by these variables is based on speculations and conjecture.

It is important to clarify here that the category of youths referred to in this study is those who participate in elections and, especially, the unemployed youth. Sadly, the post-apartheid youth have undoubtedly failed to recreate the energy, enthusiasm and mental philosophy the apartheid youth had. This study, therefore, sought to contribute to the growing body of literature on the manipulation of the youth who participate in elections, election violence and democratic retrogression in South Africa. This paper argues that, for the youth of South Africa to be recognised and accepted as stakeholders in their politics, they must not only be free from the manipulation of the politicians but that their voice must be heard and their presence felt positively in all facets of national life. In other words, the South African youth must get involved in the process and be seen actively playing a positive role in shaping the direction of the politics of the country instead of allowing the old guard to continue to determine their destiny.

Following this introduction, the next section reviews the literature on youth participation in elections and election violence to clarify the role they play in democratic retrogression in KZN and South Africa as a whole. This is followed by the third section, which describes the methods employed in collecting data for the study. The fourth and fifth sections present and analyse the data using the qualitative research method and thematic analysis, and then a conclusion is drawn.

### **Contextualising Youths and election violence: A review of literature**

Election has remained one of the key components of liberal democracy all over the world. It is essentially the means by which leaders are chosen and politically empowered to preside over any territorial entity by a people. More than that, the election does not only empower people politically but at the same time effect changes to political power (Ashindorbe, 2018). Elections may be considered an officially acceptable process of selecting a person(s) for public office or registering a political proposition through voting (Gwinn and Norton, 1992). The processes of electing representatives are well prescribed and are contained in the constitutions or the electoral Acts of such a state as a legal document. Elections are not just cardinal characteristics of democratic governance but a confirmation that sovereignty truly belongs to the people. Majekodunmi and Adejwon (2012) assert that elections only make meaning to people in a democratic context as they lead to the choice of decision-makers through the majority of citizens. Thus, elections and democracy are inextricably linked (Aniekwe and Kushie, 2011). For any elections to be considered acceptable and used as a yardstick for democratic sustainability, they must be free and fair. Simply put, the elections must be seen to be transparent and create room for a level playing field for all participants. Notably, the electoral laws must be applied to all political parties and individuals as well as the institutions of government. Although the notion of a free and fair election presupposes several conditions, including the absence of manipulation, violence, and fraud, it emphasises the impartiality of the electoral body (Electoral Commission). It encourages mass participation by the electorate at all stages of the electoral process (Alemika and Omotosho, 2008). An election is viewed as a mutual security pact and operates with the coherent consent of the elite under conditions of bound uncertainty (Przeworski, 1991:12).

## Election Violence

Electoral violence is a form of political violence differentiated by its timing, perpetrators and victims, objectives, and methods (Bekoe 2012: 2). Some election violence emanates from policy formulation and implementation of electoral laws, leading even to the conduct of the polls. When such policies are made to favour a particular interest, such as political parties, ruling elites and or an ethnic group- particularly in developing countries of Africa- violence is likely to erupt as the process's sanctity and the poll have already been tainted with. Thus, any random or organised action taken (often by the ruling party) to determine, delay or in any way influence an electoral process through the application of threat, verbal attack, hate speech, blackmail, destruction of property, physical assault and assassination is viewed as electoral violence (Fischer, 2002:8).

One common feature that differentiates electoral violence from political violence is that electoral violence is often utilised with the aim of achieving specific political objectives that will usually affect the entire electoral process and outcome. Secondly, it may take place at all levels/stages either before the election, during the election or after elections and thirdly, different actors are involved (state and non-state actors), which is why the process of electoral dispute resolution is often complex as many parties are involved and often end in deadlocks (Seifu, 2012). Election violence could assume different forms: pre-election period, violence during elections and post-election violence. All these three forms of election violence could play a vital role in any democracy and its consolidation.

To capture political power, the political elite employs all forms of intrigue and manipulation to guarantee them winning elections. In the process of intrigues and manoeuvrings, violence becomes inevitable. Electoral violence, therefore, has been defined as a subset of political violence (Taylor, 2018). Taylor further reasoned that election violence could be thought to be a kind of election malfeasance and, thus, very similar to election rigging, vote-buying and other forms of electoral malpractices /fraud. On the other hand, Schuld (2013) describes election violence to include a more severe form of political assassinations that has become a recurrent dismal. Certainly, the province of KwaZulu-Natal is notorious for political killings, which explains why election violence is without doubt a common feature of most elections in KZN (Höglund and Jarstad 2011). Despite all attempts by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders to stem the menace of election violence in KZN, the desired result has not been achieved yet. This calls for more efforts across the board to ensure that the incidences of election violence are permanently addressed.

Studies have shown that the youth have been at the centre of most election-related violence, particularly when it comes to thuggery, burning and destruction of the electoral materials across Africa and other developing democracies (Samuel, 2017; Okello, 2016; Eneji and Okeorji, 2018; Isola, 2018). The involvement of the youth in election-related violence is not a surprise, considering the way and manner in which they have been neglected by successive governments for many years. Eneji and Okeorji (2018) reveal that the youth have been enmeshed in violent contestations due to structural conditions, which have necessitated this violence. Eneji and Okeorji (2018) argue that poverty, unemployment, lack of education, drugs and lack of social security have exposed most of the youth to being manipulated by politicians and other criminal activities outside the realm of elections.

In the KwaZulu-Natal province and in the wider South African society, election violence could start with mere protest action, which could gradually turn into real violence (Schuld, 2013). Among some of the factors that have triggered election violence among the youth in South Africa are the feelings of constant alienation by their political leaders (David, Mayisa, Struwig, Gordon

and Roberts, 2016). Disillusionment with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has been building over the years owing to the failure of the ruling party to fulfil most of its promises to the youths. Angered by the insensitivity of the ANC to the hardship of ordinary citizens, especially among the black population, makes them vulnerable to the manipulation of the elite that elicits these violent reactions. Taylor (2018:7-8) outlines a number of factors that motivate young people into election violence, such as the weaknesses of electoral management bodies, the presence of pre-existing social conflicts, the partiality of international election observer groups toward particular candidates and the failure to prosecute perpetrators of election-related violence. Samuel (2017) also identified how fierce competitive elections among political rivals have resulted in violence during and after elections. Elections, of course, can exacerbate tension, and this, without doubt, has a negative aftermath on the consolidation of democracy.

It has been argued that young people have found themselves embroiled in this undemocratic disorder because of their hopeless and disadvantaged status within the current South African political landscape (Mugisha, Ojok, Kiranda, and Kabasa, 2016). Admitting the fact that youth are much unrepresented in the political arena, how come they suddenly become violent actors? Two plausible explanations can be derived from this question: In the first instance, youth demographic dominance is used to champion the interests of particular dominant elites with little or no response to the mirage of issues confronting the youth. By extension, many youths in South Africa and Africa are exploited by the older political elites who use them as a climbing ladder to attain their own political gains. In the second instance, however, young people see electoral violence as the last resort to creating their own spaces within the political arena (Okello, 2016). Thus, so long as the youth in South Africa continue to react to their social dislocation through violence, the future of democracy is seriously in doubt. The persistence of election violence championed by the youth will, without doubt, culminate in democratic retrogression. However, a strategic political shift that focuses on the youth will doubtlessly transform them into useful instruments for national development rather than an instrument of violence by the elite.

### Methodological Issues

This paper draws on a qualitative research technique in which data was collected across five locations (Umlazi, KwaMashu, Ulundi, Nongoma, and Nkandla) of KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa.

The data for this study was collected through the instrumentality of interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques.

**Table 1:** Samples and population of the study

Divisions of Province	Population	Sample	Sampling method	Interview	FGD (Members per group)
<b>KwaZulu- Natal</b>					
KwaZulu-Natal Province	Politicians	5	Purposive sampling	5	FGD1(10)
	Electorates	5		5	FGD2(8)
<b>Total</b>		<b>10</b>		<b>10</b>	<b>18</b>

Source: Field Work 2019. Sample Size= 10

As shown in Table 1, a total of 10 people were interviewed, while 18 participated in two separate focus group discussions across the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The category of people interviewed included politicians and electorates. Among the research participants are five politicians and five electorates. Given the importance of this study, the research participants were further

categorised to include males and females who have, at one point or the other, participated in politics and elections before. Out of the 10 participants, four were serving Councilors, two were seasoned politicians, and the remaining four were youths who were politically conscious. This same categorisation was carefully followed in the selection of the participants for the focus group discussion. All the participants for this study were purposively selected to participate willingly.

To elicit the views of the interviewees, a focus group discussion was incorporated to aid in collecting quality data for the study. The questions for both the interview and the focus group discussion revolve around issues like: the motivations for youth involvement in election violence, and why do the politicians like to use the youth, and how can this problem be addressed? The questions for the interview were open-ended, with ample opportunity for the respondents to express themselves beyond the question asked. All these questions sought to understand how the political elite have succeeded in manipulating the youth over the years, into participating in a series of election-related violence, and what can be done to mitigate the menace.

After receiving ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to proceed to the field for data collection, the researcher had to seek further permission from the African National Congress (ANC) to interact with its members. With the granting of permission, the researcher engaged politicians and the electorates on issues relating to the role of the youths in championing election violence in KZN without hesitation. First of all, the researcher had to explain to the participants the purpose of the research and that their participation was voluntary. The study adopted interpretivism as a philosophical approach used to study social order through the subjective interpretation of the participants involved (Bhattacharjee, 2012:19; Creswell, 2012). The researcher identified the participants face to face as they were purposively selected to participate in the study (Archibald and Munce, 2015:34). The face-to-face interview took a minimum of 40 minutes per participant, while the focus group discussion took a maximum of 1 hour 30 minutes. Permission was also sought for to use an audio recorder for the interview and the focus group discussion.

The generated data was subjected to a qualitative method of analysis by the researcher. With regard to the responses from the interviews and focus group discussion, all the transcripts were processed and analysed after coding. First of all, all the interviews and the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. This study utilised four steps in thematic analysis. These include the identification of major themes; allocation of codes to main themes; thematic classification of responses, and thematic integration of responses into texts. Qualitative data analysis was also utilised in the focus group discussions and interviews to derive patterns and meanings. Matrix was also utilised to aid the classification of responses and easy analysis of all the responses. In simple terms, what the Matrix does in any data analysis is that it significantly contributes to the display, presentation, pragmatic evaluation, and the dissemination of findings in a study (Averill, 2002). The author argues that Matrix analysis is one of the strategies used to advance knowledge and enhance the development of evidence in qualitative research.

### **The manipulation of the youth, election violence and democratic retrogression**

It is no longer news that youths have, over the years, been foot soldiers of politicians, championing the course of election violence all over Africa and KwaZulu-Natal in particular. This menace is not just bad but detrimental to social, political and economic development rather than negatively contributing to democratic retrogression. The youth in South Africa have been manipulated due to their vulnerability and their selfish interest, too. This section examines the manipulation of the youths into election violence by the elite and its impact on democratic retrogression in KZN. Matrix 1. Below is a detailed record of the responses of respondents to facilitate easy analysis.



**Matrix 1:** Summary of youth's involvement in election violence

Subtheme/sub question	Respondent responses	Source(s)
Poverty, Unemployment and Vulnerability of the youths	<i>Because they are the most vulnerable. They are vulnerable not because they are agile, but they are vulnerable. This is a young man who has no job, who has no business, and then free money is coming from somewhere. Sometimes free cars coming and some promise that can make life beautiful for you."</i>	FGDKZN2
	<i>Yes, because the politicians give them what they lack</i>	FGDKZN 1
	<i>No. it's because the youths are idle and want to be seen doing something, be it good or bad. They, politicians can psyche the youths as they have much influence on them.</i>	SPAKZN
	<i>Because most of the youths have been deliberately kept in poverty and unemployed by the state for this purpose. And they must be the ones to do it because the power and influence of money cannot be resisted. And because these youths are very active, and through their untapped energy, they can be manipulated in the wrong way.</i>	KHUKZN
The youths, energetic, drugs and the political elite	<i>...Do other sexes have the strength like the youths? Is it the women? Is it old people? Do they have the strength to carry a gun and shut people?</i>	GRAKGS
	<i>Because most of the youths are using drugs, alcohol, cocaine, cigarette, etc so, they can be used by the political elite</i>	KUNKZN
	<i>The youths are energetic and unemployed hence, they are susceptible to be used. Some are being used as a hit squad for politicians, personal security and bouncers for the politicians</i>	SBOKZN
	<i>The youths have the energy, the exuberance, they have the strength to muster everything and handle all the harsh condition.</i>	OBETKGS
	<i>Because the youths are the most active group of people, and our energy is needed by the politicians always at any time.</i>	SNHKZN
	<i>Youths are the majority in society and besides, they are still young and energetic. So, they can be easily manipulated.</i>	NKOKZN
The clash of interest between the youths and the Politicians	<i>...it depends on the interest because the youths too have their own interest. Whoever you are going to use for political achievement (to achieve a political goal), must have their interest. So, the youths have their own interest but what strikes their interest is the political education they are being given...</i>	ENGRKGS
	<i>...the youths are looking for money here and there. Therefore, they will do anything to survive. Reasons being that poverty has affected so many of these youths and the only means to survive is to do what is available for survival. So, what they are desirous at the time of election is money.</i>	NKOKZN

**Poverty, Unemployment and Vulnerability of the Youth**

Apart from poverty and unemployment, the youth remain very vulnerable, as the data have revealed. Their vulnerability stems from the fact that they are idle and easy prey to the politicians who would need their services when the need arises. This could mean that since these youths have always been at the mercy of the politicians, the politicians have devised a way of psyching the youths to do their bidding, principally because they (the youth) have been deliberately impoverished by the state. Considering their energetic nature as well as their idleness, they become very useful tools in the hands of politicians. A participant noted that:

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"Because most of the youths have been deliberately kept in poverty and unemployed by the state for this purpose. And they must be the ones to do it (violence) because of the power and influence of money, which cannot be resisted. And because these youths are very active, and through their untapped energy, they can be manipulated into the wrong way" (KHUKZN).

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It is very clear from the remarks here that the youth have become redundant in society mainly because the state has failed to prioritise them. Therefore, they are disposed to give their energy

and time to those who need them. Interestingly, the data reveal that the pauperisation of the youth and their vulnerability makes them susceptible to the manipulation of the politicians for election violence, which in turn leads to democratic retrogression

### **The youth, energetic, drugs and the political elite**

The youth are generally known to be energetic, and this energy exposes them to many social problems, such as drugs and the manipulation of the elite. Their energy is easily tapped as a hit squad, personal security for politicians, bouncers in clubs and for politicians. This may mean some have channeled their energy into taking cocaine, a substance the politicians like to see them use and get high. A respondent observed that:

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The youths are energetic and unemployed; hence, they are susceptible to be used. Some are being used as a hit squad for politicians, personal security, and bouncers for political gains (SBOKZN).

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From the data in Matrix 1. above, it is evident that the youths are viable instruments in the hands of the politicians who use them for political adventure. Some have resorted to taking drugs such as cocaine and other deadly substances inimical to their health. So, their youthful exuberance has been gainfully harnessed by the political elite to advance the course of their political career.

### **The clash of interest between the youths and the Politicians**

From the data in Matrix 1. Above, it has been revealed that the youth who participate in election violence do so not just because they are being manipulated by the politicians but surprisingly because they (the youths) have their own interests. Part of the interest of the youths is to benefit from the booties that come from the primitive accumulation by the politicians. This clearly explains why the youth have found politicians to be their best friends: because of the benefits of good cash, cars, foreign trips, and, above all, a life of luxury. Some of them want to ride beautiful cars, wear designer clothes and shoes, and have fun with the best ladies in town, hence, their participation in election violence. Engaging in this act is far better than living in abject poverty and chronic unemployment. A research participant stated that:

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...it depends on the interest because the youths too have their own interest. Whoever you are going to use for political achievement (to achieve a political goal), must have their interest. So, the youths have their own interest, but what strikes their interest is the political education they are being given... (ENGRKGS).

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Rather than becoming true ambassadors of their countries, which are built around honesty, integrity, and patriotism, most of the youths, as shown by the data, would rather join the bandwagon of unpatriotic groups than stay away. Meaning they are willing to sell their integrity for monetary gains because it is better than living in poverty. After all, it is a 50/50 thing because they will get what they want, and they (the youths) will equally get what they want; fair and balanced! Reacting to the way the youths have suddenly changed their behaviours owing to the effects of money and poverty, a respondent noted that:

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...the youths are looking for money here and there. Therefore, they will do anything to survive. Reasons being that poverty has affected so many of these youths and the only means to survive is to do what is available for survival. So, what they are desirous at the time of election is money (NKOKZN).

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Desperate times lead to desperate decisions and actions. This is the reality in KZN among the young people now for sale to the highest bidder, especially the political elite. This means survival to an ordinary young South African is far more important than any so-called form of morality. The implication, then, is that since poverty is severe and unemployment is at the highest levels, desperate youths will give up anything for survival.

In summary, this section has revealed the relationship between the manipulation of the youth into active participation in election violence and the resultant effect that leads to democratic retrogression. Without a doubt, the youth have been used by politicians for the wrong reasons, including election violence. However, the study also shows that besides poverty and unemployment, which have been labelled as factors for their involvement in election violence, the youth also have their agenda for allowing themselves to be used by politicians. They see it as a means of making easy and fast money rather than being poor and redundant. These, put together, undermine democracy and its consolidation efforts.

### What is the implication of these findings?

The findings of this study are discussed below using the elite theory to support the manipulation of the youth into election violence. The elite is known to be a tiny group of individuals who exert so much influence in a political society. The theory helps give an understanding of how societies are structured socially, economically, and politically. The origin of Elite theory can be traced to the philosophical works of Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), and Robert Michels (1876–1936). Mosca explained how tiny minorities out-organise, out-smart, and outwit large majorities, arguing that “political classes” – Mosca’s coinage for political elites – usually have “a certain material, intellectual, or even moral superiority” over the people they rule over (Higley, 2010; Lopez, 2013). The elite theory has been adopted to aid your understanding of youth involvement and participation in election-related violence in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

### Manipulating the youths for election violence and democratic retrogression

There is no doubt the young have been very central in most election violence across Africa. However, their involvement has not been healthy for the growth of democracy, especially in KwaZulu-Natal. The data revealed that some of the reasons for the involvement of the youths in election-related violence include Poverty, unemployment and their vulnerability (David and Manu, 2015). Interestingly, more data show that beyond their manipulation by the politicians, the youths have their own selfish interest in participating in the election even outside the influence of the politicians. They want to benefit from the loot of the politicians, which is why they even go ahead to approach them for any possible assignment. Below is the summary of the Matrix of all responses.



**Matrix 2:** Summary of research on youths' involvement in election violence

Research question	Emergent theme/s	Interaction with literature	Sources
Youths' involvement in election violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Poverty, Unemployment</li> <li>Vulnerability of the youths               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The youths, energetic, drugs the political elite</li> <li>- The clash of interest between the youths and the Politicians</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Lack of free and fair elections</li> <li>-Destruction of life and property</li> <li>-Increasing levels of instability and lawlessness</li> <li>-Sharp divisions and unhealthy rivalries</li> <li>-Intimidations and political killings</li> <li>-Loss of credibility in the electoral process</li> <li>-Political parties and the leadership style</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maduegbuna (2015)</li> <li>- Ndulo and Lulo (2010)</li> <li>- Ashindorbe, (2009)</li> <li>- Taylor (2018)</li> <li>- Eneji and Okeorji (2018@)</li> <li>- Plought (2018)</li> <li>- Isola (2018)</li> <li>- Samuel (2017)</li> </ul>

**Conclusion**

This paper interrogated how the youth are being manipulated into electoral violence in KwaZulu-Natal and the consequences of that to the democratic retrogression in South Africa. Through the data collected, it was revealed that the conduct of the politicians in seasons of elections has been terrible, hence the tendencies towards manipulating the most vulnerable group, the youth, in violence. The study further showed that the historical past (colonialism) and the current influence of the colonised societies still resonate significantly on the day-to-day affairs of the former colonies with implications that seem to impede stability. It further identified Poverty, Unemployment and Vulnerability of the youths as some of the loopholes that allow for the manipulation of young people into violence during election time. Consequent upon their pauperisation, the youth, though energetic, have resorted to drugs, which make them susceptible to being used by the political elite. Interestingly, young people have devised a new means of survival under the harsh economic realities that they face daily. In seeking to achieve their objectives, there is a clash of interest between the youth and the Politicians. Certainly, this has constituted a real setback to the maturation of democracy. Clearly, this study has unpacked the reasons for the manipulation of the youths into election violence and the consequences of democratic retrogression in South Africa.

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