

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5045>



Venezuela

# A challenge for the left

- Debate - Venezuela -

Publication date: Tuesday 11 July 2017

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**Over the last two months, Venezuela has faced a terrible wave of violence. Already there are more than 60 dead amidst looted schools, burned public buildings, destroyed public transport and evacuated hospitals. The mass media broadcast a chain of macabre reports of the government and have installed the image of a dictator in conflict with the opposition democrats.**

But the facts of what happened do not corroborate that story, especially with regard to the dead. When the total number of dead was 39, a first report noted that only four of these were victims of the security forces. The rest died in looting or confusing shootings inside the opposition mobilizations. [1] Another assessment noted that 60% of those killed were totally unrelated to the confrontation. [2]

These characterizations are consistent with estimates that attribute many of the killings to snipers linked to the opposition. More recent investigations highlight the fact that the bulk of the victims lost their lives through vandalism or settling of accounts [3]. There are also countless reports of incursions by paramilitary groups linked to the right and evidence of a high degree of violence with local protection in opposition-run municipalities. [4]

These assessments chime with the fascist brutality used against those attached to Chavismo. [5]. Burning a government supporter alive is a practice more closely linked to Colombian paramilitaries or the underworld than to traditional political organizations. Some analysts even estimate that out of a total of 60 dead, 27 were sympathizers with Chavismo. [6]

Others say that some 15,000 people trained as shock troops took part in the opposing marches. They used hoods, shields and homemade weapons to create a chaotic climate and establish "liberated territories". [7]

The evaluations presented by the opposition are diametrically opposed, but have been refuted by detailed reports on the victims. [8] As no one recognizes the existence of "independent" assessments, it is appropriate to judge what happened by recalling the background. In the *guarimba* of February 2014, 43 people died, most of the deaths being outside the context of political clashes or police repression. We should also consider how the opposition reacted to an equivalent challenge. Their governments settled the "Caracazo" of 1989 with hundreds of dead and thousands of injured.

The Venezuelan situation is dramatic, but this does not explain the centrality of the country in the news. Situations of greater gravity in other countries are totally ignored.

Since the beginning of the year in Colombia, 46 social leaders have been murdered and 120 have died in the last 14 months. Between 2002 and 2016 paramilitary forces massacred 558 popular leaders and the number of trade unionists annihilated in the last two decades amounts to 2,500. [9] Why no mention of this continued bloodshed in Venezuela's main neighbour?

The outlook for Mexico is more frightening. Every day a dead journalist is added to the countless number of murdered students, teachers and social activists. In the climate of social war imposed by the "actions against drug trafficking" 29,917 people have disappeared. [10] Should this level of massacre not give rise to more journalistic attention than Venezuela?

Honduras is another example. Together with Berta Cáceres, fifteen other activists have been killed. Between 2002

and 2014 the number of environmental defenders killed was 111. [\[11\]](#) The list of victims of the horror ignored by the hegemonic press could be extended to the political prisoners of Peru. Also, very few know about the suffering faced by the Puerto Rican independence leader Oscar López Rivera during his 35 years in prison.

The majority of the Latin American population simply doesn't know about the tragedies prevailing in the countries governed by the right. This double standard of information confirms that Venezuela's role in the media is not due to humanitarian concerns.

## Modalities of a coup

Media coverage underpins the opposition's coup. As they cannot perpetrate a classic Pinochet-like assault, they attempt disempowering processes centred on the dislocation of society. They return to what was attempted in February 2014, to complete an institutional coup similar to those carried out in Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2014) or Brazil (2016). They intend to impose by force what they would later validate at the polls.

The right lacks the military force used in the past to bring down governments. But it tries to recreate that intervention with skirmishes in front of barracks, setting fire to police stations or marches towards the military headquarters.

Its plan combines sabotage of the economy with street violence through armed groups, which unlike the case of Colombia, act anonymously. They mingle with the underworld and terrorize traders [\[12\]](#).

These actions include the fascist methods espoused by the most violent currents of anti-Chavismo. They appropriate the insurgent symbols forged by popular movements and present their predatory actions as heroic deeds. The leader of the right, Leopoldo López, is not an innocent politician. Any court adjusted to law would have sentenced him to life for his criminal responsibilities.

The right favours a climate of civil war to demoralize the bases of Chavismo, affected by the lack of food and medicines. It explicitly presses for a foreign intervention and negotiates with the creditor banks an interruption of the credits to the country.

The opposition intends to lynch Maduro to bury Chavismo. It addresses its battle in the streets, in the conquest of public opinion and in the collapse of the economy. It considers the elections as a simple coronation of that offensive.

But it faces growing obstacles. The predominance of violence in its marches alienates most discontented people and wears out the demonstrators themselves. As happened in 2014, the rejection of the fascists undermines the opposition as a whole. They have failed to penetrate popular neighbourhoods, where they always face the risk of an adverse armed confrontation. [\[13\]](#)

The Venezuelan big bourgeoisie instigated the coup with the regional support of Macri, Temer, Santos and Peña Nieto. It has been promoting a destabilizing plan for months at the OAS. But it has not achieved results in that area either. The sanctions against Venezuela did not thrive due to the opposition of several foreign ministries and the unanimity that in the 1960s had led to the expulsion of Cuba has not existed.

The US supports the coup in an attempt to regain control of the main continental oil reserve. The State Department seeks to repeat the operations in Iraq or Libya, knowing that after Maduro is overthrown no one will remember where Venezuela is. It is enough to observe how the media avoid any mention now of those countries where the Pentagon has already intervened. Once the adversary has been liquidated, they concern themselves with other issues.

The strategic goals of imperialism are not registered by those who highlight the flirtation of a Yankee newspaper with the Venezuelan president or the verbal ambiguities of Trump. [14] They suppose that these irrelevant data illustrate the absence of conflict between the US and Chavismo. But they do not note that the vast majority of the press virulently attacks Maduro and that the billionaire in the White House denies every day what he affirmed the previous day.

Trump is neither indifferent nor neutral. He simply delegates to the CIA and Pentagon the implementation of a conspiracy designed through the Sharps and Venezuela Freedom 2 plans. [15] These operations include espionage, deployment of troops and terrorism. They are operated in secrecy, while the mainstream press disqualifies any denunciation of such preparations. They especially question the “exaggerations of the left” so that no one annoys the conspirators.

Some analysts estimate that Chevron's presence in Venezuela - or the PDVSA's continued negotiations with the US - illustrates a close partnership between the two governments [16]. They deduce from this the absence of a coup scenario. But these connections do not alter in the slightest the imperial decision to overthrow the Bolivarian government.

The activities of Yankee companies in Venezuela (and their counterparts in the United States) have persisted since the beginning of the Chavista process. But Bush, Obama and Trump have all sought to regain direct imperial oil management. They intend to establish the model of privatization in Mexico and expel Russia and China from their backyard.

## The Attitude of the Left

If the diagnosis of a reactionary coup is correct the position of the left should not cause divergences. Our main enemies are the right and imperialism and to defeat them is always a priority. This elementary principle must be reaffirmed at critical moments, when the obvious can become diffuse.

Whatever our criticisms of Salvador Allende, our central battle was against Pinochet. And it was appropriate to adopt the same behaviour against the Argentine gorillas of 1955 or the saboteurs of Arbenz, Torrijos and the various anti-imperialist governments of the region. This same position applies in Venezuela today, to support a common action against the right escalation.

In crisis scenarios, it is also essential to distinguish those responsible for the crisis. The mistakes made by Maduro are as numerous as they are unjustifiable, but the culprits of the present deterioration are the capitalists. The government's errors are not on the same level. Those who make the enormous error of identifying the two sectors confuse responsibilities of a different nature. [17]

The government's mistakes have been verified in the inoperative change of banknotes, the inadmissible external indebtedness or the lack of control of prices and contraband. But the collapse of the economy has been caused by the wealthy who manipulate currencies, trigger inflation, manage imported goods, and discourage the provision of basic goods.

The government does not respond or responds badly for many reasons: inefficiency, tolerance to corruption, protection of the BoliburguesÃ-a, collusion with millionaires disguised as Chavistas. That's why it does not cut support to the private groups that receive cheap dollars to make expensive imports. But the collapse of production has been an action of the ruling class to overthrow Maduro. Not acknowledging this portrays an unusual level of myopia.

This blindness prevents us from recognizing another key fact of the moment: Chavismo's resistance to the rightist onslaught. With very questionable methods and attitudes, Maduro does not give up. He maintains the verticalism of the PSUV, favours the proscription of critical currents and preserves a bureaucracy that suffocates the responses from below. But unlike Dilma or Lugo he does not surrender. It is the opposite of the capitulation that consumed Syriza in Greece.

This position explains the hatred of the powerful. The government made the excellent decision to withdraw from the OAS and made the break that the left has always demanded. This decision should give rise to overwhelming support, which very few have made explicit.

Like any administration harassed by the right, the government uses force to defend itself. The communicators of the establishment denounce that reaction with an uncommon degree of hysteria. They forget the justifications that they usually contribute to governments of another character facing similar situations.

In its response, the ruling party has surely committed injustices. It is the unfortunate cost of any significant confrontation with the counterrevolution. These adversities have been present in all the battles against reaction from Bolivar to Fidel. Self-indulgence must be avoided on this delicate terrain, but without repeating the slanders that the opposition propagates.

Currently Maduro directs his guns against right-wing brutality and not against the people. That is why comparisons with Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein are meaningless. He has not perpetrated any massacre of leftist militants, nor has he participated in US-instigated warlike adventures. The analogy with Stalin is more ridiculous, but remember that the spectre of Hitler haunts many opponents associated with Uribe or the nostalgics for Pinochet.

## Social democratic postures

In recent years many opponents of the right have come to blame Maduro for Venezuela's plight. These views repeat the old social democratic attitude of joining in with reaction at critical moments.

They question the legitimacy of the government with the same arguments as the opposition. Instead of accusing the CIA or the OAS they focus their objections on Chavismo. They adopt this position in the name of an abstract democratic ideal divorced from the battle to define who prevails in the management of the state.

This position has influenced several post-liberal thinkers linked to autonomism. Not only do they blame Maduro of the current situation. They affirm that he has reinforced an authoritarian leadership to maintain the oil rentier model. [[18](#)]

This characterization is very similar to the liberal thesis that attributes all the problems of Venezuela to populist policies, implemented by tyrants who waste the resources of the state. In more diplomatic language, the diagnosis is similar.

Others emphasize more categorically the responsibility of Chavista leadership. They also call for avoiding the "conspiratorial simple-mindedness of blaming the right or imperialism" for the country's problems. [[19](#)] But are the conspiracies of reaction imaginary? Are the assassinations, the paramilitaries and the Pentagon plans paranoid Bolivarian inventions?

Without answering this elementary question, this position also rules out any comparison with what happened in Chile

in 1973. But it does not explain the invalidity of that analogy either. It presupposes the differences between the two situations without noticing the enormous similarities that exist in the areas of shortages, the conservative irritation of the middle class or the intervention of the CIA.

The parallels objected to in the case of Allende are accepted in the case of the first Peronism, which is seen as a direct antecedent of Chavismo. But is the resemblance in the years of stability or in the times before the coup of 1955? Concern about the escalation of violence suggests that the similarity is related to this last period. And in such a situation: What was the priority? Confronting Peron's authoritarianism or resisting the gorillas?

The social democrats and post-progressives emphasize Maduro's authoritarian guilt. [20] That is why they minimize the coup danger and dismiss the need to prepare some defence against the provocations of the right.

But the consequences of this attitude will be verified when the oligarchs and their bandits regain the government. What has happened recently in Honduras, Paraguay or Brazil, does not even raise alerts among those who demonize Chavismo.

They also object to extractivism, indebtedness and oil contracts. But they do not explain whether they postulate anti-capitalist and socialist alternatives in the face of these evident failures of Maduro. The same is true of shortages and speculation. Do they propose to act more firmly against the bankers and the commercial octopuses? Do they promote measures of confiscation, nationalization or direct popular control?

For the adoption of these initiatives could conceivably be arrived at with the government, but never with the opposition. The detractors of Chavismo evade this difference.

## Post-progressive appeals

The social democratic perspective marked the urgent call for peace signed by many intellectuals. This declaration promotes a process of pacification, rejecting both the authoritarian drift of Chavismo and the violent attitude of sectors of the right. [21]

The call propitiates a balance to overcome polarization and resorts to a language closer to the chancelleries than to popular militancy. This tone is in line with the implicit attachment to a theory of two demons. A middle way is advocated in opposition to both extremes.

But this equidistance is immediately denied by the primary responsibility assigned to the government. It underlines that guilt not only by ignoring the harassment of the right. Imperialism is hardly mentioned in passing.

The text received a resounding response sponsored by REDH and subscribed to by many intellectuals. This critique rightly objects to the fascination with conventional republicanism and recalls the pre-eminent gravitation of extra-constitutional forces in critical situations. [22]

The liberal relapse of post-progressive thinkers recreates what happened with the social democrats of the 1980s. This group's opposition to Leninism and the Cuban revolution resembles the current hostility to Chavismo. Several signatories of the appeal have travelled through the two periods.

But the current social democratic trajectory is belated and lacks the political reference provided by the Spanish

PSOE. The social-liberal drift of that party has completely demolished the initial progressive imagination. This isolation may explain the current reunion with the old liberalism.

In some cases this ends up crowning the division that affected different variants of autonomism. The positions in relation to the Bolivarian process unleashed this fracture. Those who chose to stand on the opposition path question those who “cling to Chavismo”. [23]

But this second sector has overcome the previous inadequacies and has understood the need to fight for state power, with socialist perspectives similar to Latin American Marxism.

The other segment, on the other hand, continues to navigate the ambiguity of generalities about anti-patriarchy and anti-extractivism, without offering any concrete examples of what it proposes. As they become absorbed by the liberal universe, their enigmatic vagaries no longer enrich the thinking of the left. Between forgetting the class struggle and fascination for bourgeois institutionalism, their denunciations of extractivism become a picturesque curiosity.

## Dispensors of dogmatism

A convergent discourse with social democracy is also propagated with sectarian arguments. In this case, Maduro is presented as a corrupt governor who is consolidating a dictatorial regime. [24] On other occasions this same illegitimacy is described with more indirect (de facto president) or sophisticated (Bonapartist leader) categories.

But all the variants coincide in underlining the primary responsibility of an authoritarian government that is ripping the country apart. The harmony of this approach with the media story is obvious. But the main problem lies not in rhetoric, but in practical action.

Every day there are marches of the right and the government. As for the standard-bearers of socialist rigor, which of the two mobilizations do they attend? With which are they identified? If they consider that officialism is the main enemy they should make common cause with the *guarimbas*.

In Buenos Aires, for example, a mobilization demanding the departure of Maduro was held in May. [25] All the passers-by who observed this march clearly perceived who would immediately take over the presidency of Venezuela if the current president is overthrown. They also noticed the total coincidence of this call with the messages emitted daily by the news programs.

It is not the first time that sectors from the left converge so sharply with the right. An antecedent in Argentina under Kirchnerism was the presence of red flags in the soy producers marches and in the demonstrations of the *caceroleros*. But what was pathetic in Buenos Aires can become dramatic in Caracas.

Other visions equate Maduro with the opposition, estimating that under the masquerade of an apparent contraposition major convergences are hidden. That is why they speculate on the moment when this convergence will become explicit. [26]

This curious interpretation contrasts with the pitched battles between both sectors observed by other mortals. It is a little difficult to interpret the *guarimbas*, murders and threats by the Pentagon as a fictional quarrel between two close friends.



The only logic of this presentation is to remove drama from the current conflict, to interpret it as a simple inter-bourgeois struggle for the appropriation of income. For this reason Maduro's totalitarianism is seen as an equivalent (or superior) danger to that of the opposition.

The biggest problem with this approach is not its misunderstanding, but the implicit neutrality it provides. Since all are equal, the auto-coup attributed to the government is equated with the coup from the right.

But that equivalence is obviously false. In Venezuela, the two reactionary sides of the same coin, embodied for example in the Middle East by jihadism and dictatorship, do not exist. Neither is there the type of counterpoint between troglodytes which prevailed in Argentina between Isabel Perón and Videla.

The clash between Maduro and Capriles-Lopez resembles Allende's confrontation with Pinochet, Peron's with Lonardi, or more recently Dilma's with Temer. As they are not equal the triumph of the right would imply a terrible political regression.

Neutrality in the face of this dilemma is synonymous with passivity and betokens a degree of capital impotence in the face of great events. It implies giving up participation and commitment to real causes.

As this attitude assumes that Chavismo is finished, it limits its whole horizon to writing a balance sheet of that experience. But the greatest failure in political action never affects unfinished or frustrated processes. The worst is the lack of transcendence in the face of great deeds.

Whatever the problems with Maduro, the denouement in Venezuela defines the immediate destiny of the whole region. If the reactionaries succeed, a scenario of defeat and a sense of helplessness against the empire will prevail. The end of the progressive cycle will be a given and not an issue of evaluation among social scientists.

The right wing knows this and that is why it is accelerating the campaigns against the intellectuals who defend Chavismo. *Clarín's* recent barrage is an advance of the onslaught they prepare in a post-Maduro regional scenario 2017. [27]. Sectarians do not even register this danger.

## Fictitious commitments

Immediately, there are two political options at stake: the right demands an advance to general elections and the government is convening a Constituent Assembly. The opposition is only willing to take part in elections that will secure it first place.

Of the 19 elections held under Chavismo, the Bolivarians won 17 and immediately recognized the remaining defeats. On the other hand the right never accepted adverse results. It always claimed fraud or resorted to a boycott. When it triumphed in partial elections it demanded the immediate fall of the government.

In December 2015 they obtained a majority in the National Assembly and proclaimed the overthrow of Maduro. They tried several subsequent repudiations, resorting to the installation of fake deputies and falsifying signatures for a recall election.

Capriles, Borges and López are now promoting fictitious elections, in the midst of economic warfare and street provocation. They are sponsoring Colombia-type elections, where hundreds of popular activists are murdered from



vote to vote. They intend to go to the polls like Honduras under the pressure of the crime of Berta. They promote the vote that prevails in Mexico among the corpses of journalists, students and teachers.

It would be a terrible mistake to join in elections designed to prepare a cemetery of Chavistas. Maduro is being asked to hold elections in a climate of civil war, something no government usually accepts.

Venezuela is going through a situation similar to that prevailing in Nicaragua at the time of the first Sandinismo. The military siege and the shortages depleted a people who voted for the right through simple exhaustion. In these conditions the elections have a pre-established winner.

On the other hand, the comparison with the scenario surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union is meaningless. Venezuela is not a power that faces internal implosion, after a long divorce of the regime from the population. It is a vulnerable Latin American country harassed by the United States.

Some thinkers take this oppressive role of imperialism for granted, to suggest that it is not determinative of the current crisis. [28] They suppose that the insistent denunciations of that domination constitute “a known fact” or a simple ritual of the left. But they forget that it is never enough to underline the devastating impact of the aggressions of the North against governments in conflict with Washington.

The whole spectrum of ex-Chavistas who support the demand for general elections confuse democracy with liberal republicanism. They have lost sight of how the right to self-government is systematically obstructed by bourgeois institutions.

Because of this impediment, the vast majority of constitutional regimes have lost legitimacy. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the ruling class uses voting systems to consolidate its power. It exercises control by controlling the economy, justice, the media and the repressive apparatus. Real democracy can only emerge in a socialist process of transformation of society.

It is true that Maduro cancelled the recall referendum, suspended regional elections and outlawed opposition politicians. These measures are part of a blind reaction to harassment. But the Chavista leader is confronted with the greater hypocrisy displayed by the proponents of current electoral regimes.

It's enough to observe that in Brazil impeachment was imposed by a group of bandits, with the support of the judges and parliamentarians which manipulate the system of indirect presidential election. There was no question of the OAS intervening to correct this gross violation of democratic principles.

Nor is the establishment indignant at the election that anointed Trump, after receiving several million votes less than Hilary Clinton. It seems natural to them that monarchy prevails in Spain or England while they accept the manipulation that surrounds any election in Mexico. The sacred democracy they demand for Venezuela is completely absent in all capitalist countries.

## The possibilities of the constituent assembly

It is evident that the best opportunity for a transforming Constituent Assembly was lost several years ago. The current call is purely defensive and tries to deal with an exasperating situation.

But it is useless to discuss only what was not done. There will always be time for those balance sheets. The important thing is to decide now to what extent the call can reopen a path of popular initiative.

Prior to the call for the Constituent Assembly, the government confined itself to developing a purely bureaucratic confrontation between one state power and another. It sponsored the clash of the executive against the legislature or the Supreme Court against the National Assembly. Now it appeals formally to communal power and it will be necessary to see if this proposal is translated into a real mobilization.

There are countless signs of weariness and scepticism within Chavismo. But no one chooses the conditions in which to fight and the main dilemma revolves around the continuation or abandonment of the struggle. Whoever has resolved not to lower their arms bets on the resurgence of the popular project.

Several leftist currents who are very critical of Maduro consider that the current call could unlock a dynamic of communes against bureaucratic manoeuvres. [29] They see the Constituent Assembly as an imperfect instrument to develop the conflict with the sectors of bourgeois, corrupt and Boliburgués Chavismo.

The Constituent Assembly could also contribute to breaking the tie of recent months between *guarimbas* and government mobilizations. If properly addressed, it could break the front of the opposition, separating the discontented from the fascists.

But it is evident that without drastic measures on the economic-social plane, the Constituent Assembly will be an empty shell. If the productive disaster is not attacked by the nationalization of the banks, foreign trade and the expropriation of the saboteurs, there will be no recovery of popular support.

The palliatives tried are insufficient to increase the participation of grassroots organizations in the distribution of food. There are radical measures that cannot be postponed. In any alternative it will not be easy to redirect the economy after so many mistakes in the area of debt, the creation of special investment zones or tolerance to capital flight.

Chavez carried out a large redistribution of income with novel methods of popular politicization, but failed to cement a process of industrialization. He collided with the opposition capitalists and with the internal Boliburgués-*a* and did not know to deactivate the rentier culture, that undermines all the attempts to forge a productive economy. The hesitations in breaking with the capitalist structure explain these adverse results.

The current context is more difficult because of low oil prices and the blockade of regional integration projects under conservative restoration. But it should also be remembered that all revolutionary processes start in adversity, and the Constituent Assembly provides a framework for resuming the initiative.

Some critics of this call object to the sectorial and communal modality of choice. They say that with that format the "assembly will be fraudulent, corporate or illegitimate." [30] Here, too, they repeat the right wing's deification (when appropriate) of conventional constitutionalism. That claim is not surprising among establishment communicators, but it is disturbing among enthusiasts of the Russian revolution.

After three decades of post-dictatorial regimes, many have forgotten the duplicities of bourgeois democracy. It should be remembered how Lenin and Trotsky defended the legitimacy of the soviets in 1917, disregarding a constituent assembly that rivalled the revolutionary power.

The current Venezuelan situation is very different. But the Bolshevik revolution not only taught us to register the social background, class conflicts and interests at stake. It also indicated a way to overcome the hypocrisy of

bourgeois liberalism and confirmed that acts of force against reaction are part of the confrontation with right-wing barbarism.

The left must define whether it converges with the opposition in the boycott or participates in the Constituent Assembly. There is also a third option for a tiny hearing, with “yes, no and the opposite” messages.

Solidarity is urgent in the rest of the region. As with Cuba during the special period, it is necessary to put the shoulder to the wheel in difficult situations. It is to be hoped that many comrades will take this attitude before it is too late.

## Intellectual regroupment

Venezuela does not only raise intense debates. It has also determined significant clusters of intellectuals who have signed opposing appeals. This positioning has been more relevant than the controversial details of the different statements. A broad division has been completed.

The social democratic appeal challenged by the text of the REDH was supplemented by other strong responses. The political delimitation has been dizzying. Faced with the tension created by the manifestos, several signatories called for preserving fraternal dialogue. That respect is indispensable, but indignant reactions are explained by what is at stake. If the right is imposed, there will be time for laments and research seminars about what happened.

As the first declaration contained a call for peace, many thinkers spontaneously joined in favouring a halt to violence. In assessing more closely the content of the text, some withdrew their adherence and others made defensive arguments. They highlight their continued solidarity with the Bolivarian process or their differences with other signatories.

But what has been most significant has been the rapid and widespread reaction of the anti-Chavez document and the great rejection generated by the social democratic proposal. That impulse led to a sudden convergence of left intellectuals and radical nationalism. If this interweaving is consolidated, Venezuela will have awakened a reunion of critical thinking with the revolutionary traditions of Latin America.

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