

THE CAUSES OF (VIOLENT) CONFLICT IN VALLEY SWAT: POST- 9/11 IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Pakistan's support against the Afghanistan Taliban in U.S war against terrorism, after the incident of 9/11, gravely affected its Pakhtuns belt as it shares border with Afghanistan. Pakistan has experienced a strong wave of militancy in its tribal areas augmenting a serious battle between Taliban and military of Pakistani. Swat became one of the major epicenters of Talibanization when Taliban established their writ in the peaceful valley and challenged the state apparatus. The government of Pakistan responded to Tehrik-i-Taliban Swat (TTS, an offshoot of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) through military operations to eliminate Taliban from valley. This paper attempts to glean into the history of conflict in valley Swat which eventually engaged the military and the government in eradicating the militant groups from Swat valley.

Key Words: Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Talibanization, militancy, military operation, religion, Fazlullah, Swat,

Introduction

The 9/11 incident brought new security concerns for Pakistan and gravely changed the internal security dynamics- "Pakistan is confronted with multifarious challenges posed by terrorist, ideologies, and organizations" (Amin & Lodhi 2017,1).The post 9/11 incidents provided course to the United States (US) to invade Afghanistan which eventually involved Pakistan as a "front line state" (Musharraf, 2006). The US-

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Pakistan partnership exacerbated “militancy and extremism” (Azam & Javaid, 2017) in Pakistan. Militancy and Talibanization increased in tribal areas- previously called FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area), now merged districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Militancy bred in under the Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariati-i-Muhammadi (TNSM) (Luras & Aziz, 2010). The then President Musharraf banned TNSM after the 9-/11 incident. But the TNSM rejected the state’s policy and decided to continue to its movement (Haider & Suhrawardy 2002) - Musharraf’s policy would not control the rise of militancy in Swat- that became the center of militancy. Sufi Muhammad was put in jail with his son-in-law, Mullah Fazlullah- but Fazlullah was freed after 17 months from jail and he took over TNSM filled in the absence of Sufi Muhammad and captured the Swat valley with the help of Taliban (Orakzai, 2011).

As a reactionary and offensive force, Mullah Fazlullah emerged as strong religious leader, he cleverly changed the people’s mindset - brainwashing of innocent people of Swat was resulted in a serious conflict between the security forces and Fazlullah’s followers. Fazlullah and his followers forcefully established their writ in the princely state. After his release from jail in 2004, Fazlullah started preaching his own interpretation of Islam through an illegal FM Radio station he set up, which led to a grave violent conflict in 2007 – and his followers killed many innocent people and burnt girls ‘Schools (McCoy, 2014). Owing to his oppressive tactics and narrative against the security forces “he was known as [forced] “Amir- ul-Momineen” in Swat (Noreen, 2020).

Fazlullah challenged and threatened the Musharraf’s regime. The government strongly retaliated to his anti-state activities and launched a minor military operation in 2007. Operation was not effective and successful and the wave of Talibanization continued to gain its momentum. In the mid-2008, the government launched another military operation but it also

failed. Amid of tension, Sufi Muhammad was released in 2008 and the government offered a settlement of the dispute through a peace agreement. But Fazlullah had many concerns in the agreement regarding the implementation of Sharia law in Swat. Finally, state decided to eliminate the militants from the Swat valley and launched a large-scale military operation in the mid-2009.

In this paper we have attempted to explain that how the militant(s) leader did create an environment to the people to gain socio-economic support in Swat? And how incident of 9-/11 did pave the way to a violent conflict in Swat valley? This paper also explains that how the rise of Mullah Fazlullah transformed the local militants' outfit.

Rising Militancy in Swat under Mullah Fazlullah

Sufi Muhammad, the core leader of TNSM, was imprisoned in 2001-his arrest created a space in Swat for the leader of the militant movement- the TNSM. This space was captured by his son-in-law -Fazle Hayat. He was born at Mam Dherai, in Swat. He changed his name to Fazlullah in the 1990s he was recognized as a religious leader in Swat. He did not receive any formal credentials from any religious or educational institutions. He, however, had been fighting with his father-in-law, against the US (United States) and NATO forces in Afghanistan (Khattak, 2010) and stayed away from valley- but Pakistani security establishment arrested him when he returned and put him in jail.

Fazlullah was released after negotiation – to earn money he started working as a chair-lift operator. Swat River has been a shortcut source of income and transportation from Mam Dherai area (later known as Imam Dherai) to Fizzagat, and it was set up by his one of siblings. Fazlullah continued teaching of Quran to the small children at a small mosque in his own village, Mam Dherai (Khan, 2007). His attitude changed and launched an

illegal FM radio in 2004 with the backing of the local hardliners followers-he received economic and mechanical support from a village next to Fazlullah's town (Hussain, 2011). He himself, frequently, acknowledged that he was not a cleric but continued his struggle in implementation of Islamic decree in Swat (Khan, 2009).

Fazlullah was known as *Radio Mullah* (Maulana Radio). His program and movement was recognized as a militant movement of Taliban in Swat when he joined Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007. His movement was recognized as Tehreek e Taliban Swat (TTS) - and referred to a branch of TTP (Peter, 2010).

Rising Conflict and Violent Strategies of Fazlullah in Swat

An expert, on Swat political affairs, explained the strategy of Fazlullah – Fazlullah believed to alter the socio- economic and political power structure in Swat. The strategies that shaped Fazlullah's narrative included philosophical impact; and *socio-psychological* control (Hussain, 2011). This author lives in Swat and understands the local social fabric which is extremely dominated by religion- Fazlullah, however, exploited the Swat's social and religious culture and raised his own stature as a powerful cleric. He used different stages to become an influential “king without crown” (Rizwan, 2020).

Stage One: Ideological Influence

The narrative raised by Fazlullah was grounded on Wahabi philosophy, which emphasis on *Jihad* (Hussain, 2011) but Mullah misinterpreted this notion and used against women, and state. FM radio greatly supported his ideology and assisted him to spread his ideas in Swat as it was an easy and strong source in dissemination of his self-interpreted sermon.

He started influencing the minds of people by talking their daily problems (Rizwan 2020). Once he captured the minds

of people effectively, it became easy to prepare them for *Jihad* against state and security forces.

No movement would achieve its goals without sufficient indigenous support- Fazlullah gained support and the supporters among the conservative Pakhtunns- the former followers of TNSM and Sufi Muhammad became his partner and strengthened his movement. Women were the soft target-they were strongly inspired and influenced by his lectures on FM. He addressed speeches the inheritance (property) rights of women, which never been addressed in Swat because of *riwaj* (customs). Women of Swat were the most influenced community and they happily donated their jewelry for his prescribed cause (Khattak, 2010; McCoy, 2014).

Stage Two: Social Contagion

To create the venues for receiving of Fazullah's ideology, social contagion was the next target. At stage two, Fazullah declared the US and Pakistan's forces as opponents; and started construction of small religious institutions and markaz (center) for the influence of his own interpreted ideology at Imam Deri on shared land. Fazlullah provided his support to the people in resolving their daily problems and social rifts. People of Swat would regard him due to his poor knowledge of Islam –but he was misusing Paskhtun youth and local population for his political purpose (Rizwan 2020). Fazlullah was interested in attracting women supporters (Islam, 2018). As women were naïve and easy to convince.

Every movement needs financial support. The main financial support for *Madrassa* and *Markaz* came from the local community which was working in the Middle East and Western countries (Hussain, 2011) to support TTP in Swat. After his strong hold in valley Fazlullah stopped parents to send their daughters in schools- he discouraged them. He issued a decree that “music and tv” is un-Islamic. He criticized the people those

would not donate to his seminary (Khattak, 2010) and anti-government movement- those opposed his ideology got killed ruthlessly (Ali, 2007) his brutal actions left sever implications for the generation in Swat valley.

A large number of local communities followed him and he reached a climax in 2007- Fazlullah's fiery speeches on the "evils of television" immensely effected people's minds and they destroyed their television sets on the roads. Every faction from a different walk of life, started donating-women donated their jewelry and helped him in construction his seminary which was his head quarter to control the Swat valley.

Fazlullah's movement became popular owing to poor judicial system in tribal areas- people took him as a liberator and socio-religious protector. People expected that Fazlullah would fight to revive the judicial system of the past in the former princely state (Khan, 2012). Fazlullah used the weakness of the local community astutely. In Pakistan the internal fault lines have always been exploited to protect personal interests than democracy (Khan, 2009). In the name of religion and justice Fazlullah received Rs.35 million from his followers to the construct of the *Markaz* at Imam Dherai, which was later destroyed during the military operation in 2009 (The News, 2007).

Fazlullah also, directly threatened the polio campaign, to stop polio vaccinations across Pakistan. To him it was a conspiracy of the international non-Muslims states to stunt the population growth rate of Muslims. Fazlullah's *Sharia* movement was geared up with the help of his supporters- they destroyed the centuries old statues of Buddha in September 2007-this action alienated the international community particularly worldwide Budhas followers (Khaliq 2016)-defacing of the statue developed negative image of Pakistan. Pakistani Taliban considered statues of Buddah, was un-Islamic and had to be destroyed. During his speeches the Taliban leader kept saying that: we have to work

for a society and to purge of all problems and evils including music, and dance (Freemuse Radio, 2008). People believed that they would get rid of weak and poor judicial system (Khattak, 2010) because he created a strong impression that he was a “liberator” (Rizwan, 2020).

Stage Three: Social Control and its Expansion

Stage three increased an ideological momentum – and TTP had gained acceptance in Swat. In 2007, Fazlullah established his own private force called “Shaheen Force” (Hussain, 2011), this Force combined into Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and, on one hand, established a separate judicial system and provided speedy justice to the people of Swat. On the other hand, his private forces launched killing of dominant individuals in upper Swat. Several criminals joined the Shaheen Force. The Shaheen Force was announced in 2007 that consisted on 4000 to 5000 local militants. Their duties included stopping women from leaving their homes without full veils, barber shops were closed- males were forced to keep beards (Banori, 2009).

Fazlullah’s security and communal control in the valley extended as he had already isolated the community by watching television and the internet. He banned girls’ education and began “war on Pakistani school girls” (Hassan, 2009). This ban was extended to all types of education (Orakzai, 2011). Insecurity increased when Tahreek Taliban Swat (TTS) began slaughtering people suspected of spying for the government authorities. Taliban captured the suspected people, they forced them to admit their crime of working for the security intelligence agencies and later suspected were slaughtered publicly (Rizwan 2020).

Fazlullah’s movement became dynamic and hierarchical after joining TTP (Hussain, 2011) and gained more power and momentum in 2007 -in fact this was the time when his policies and actions forced the state and security establishments to take action against his parallel state with in state. .

Organizational Structure of Tahreek Taliban in Swat (TTS)

Militancy emerged in Swat after the 9-/11 incidents- TTS was not as organized because of its low profile and activities. Fazlullah formed a *Shura* (council). Sirajuddin was the first spokesman of TTS was also a member of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JM), a Kashmiri organization. Muslim Khan, a well-known character in area, replaced him in the late 2007. Khan had been connected with the student wing of Pakistan People's Party (PPP). He had knowledge of several languages; Pashto, Urdu, Arabic, English and Japanese languages and epitomized the TTS well in providing updates to the media. He worked in the United Kingdom, Kuwait, US and Japan. He established a pharmacy after his return from abroad and provided his support to Fazlullah and the TTP. (BBC Urdu, 2008).

Linkage between TTS and TTP: The Militants Outfit

A common perception in the country is that there was no militancy or presence of any terrorist organization in Swat or other tribal areas, although Pakistani security claimed of finding caves full of arms during the military operation in 2009 (Khattak, 2010). Till the mid of 2000, there was a peace and harmony in the tribal areas and conflict hardly upset the state and security establishment in Pakistan.

TTP outfit was designed by Baitullah Mehsud. Mehsud was known as the supreme leader of Pakistani Taliban. It was a strong organization of all Taliban groups in Pakistan (Saddique, 2010). Fazlullah had association with Baitullah Mehsud and Mullah Omar in Afghanistan. Their relations developed in 2007 after the military when General Musharraf's government attacked Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) Islamabad. Fazlullah's armed students and followers took weapons against the military. Fazlullah threatened *Jihad* against the government which was supporting

the US against war on terrorism. Fazlullah actualized his threats against government and security forces by initiating attacks against them through his fighters. In an interview, Fazlullah said that “it was the responsibility of every Pakistani to use arms against those are bombing their own innocent people (Saddique, 2010).

Mullah Fazlullah and his cronies had strong connections with TTP. Fazlullah had no significant role in the decision-making body in TTP, which was run by the Taliban leaders in Waziristan (Khattak, 2010). The activities of the Swat chapter of TTP involved challenging the writ of the government explicitly. To counter them, frequent military operations were carried out by the military to clear the valley from the local militants (Amin& Lodhi 2017).

Government Response to the Swat Militancy and Insurgency

The government took responsible actions against the militants and insurgents of TTS in Swat and deployed the soldiers in Swat valley fight against the local militants those challenged the writ of the state- several military operations were launched but operation and they did not achieve the required objective except “operation Rah-e- Rast” which had achieved significant objectives and established perpetual peace in Swat valley.

Operation Rah-e-Haq (Just Path): First Phase of Military Action

The mid of 2007 was crucial and troubling for the security forces- the Frontier Constabulary (FC) force and police attacked the militia force of Fazlullah. The Shaheen Force was more powerful. Fazlullah had expanded his control in the respective localities. He encouraged suicide bombings, destruction of infrastructure, schools, and attacks on security forces were common in Swat. Consequently, the army was deployed in Swat in August 2007. But violent conflict and militancy increased after

the military operation against Red Mosque (Hussain, 2011) this incident increased the militancy and terrorism in tribal areas including Swat.

Fazlullah led Taliban movement targeted the Pakistan security forces and augmented unrest in in the valley. The provincial government announced the first military operation, 'Rah-e-Haq' in October 2007 against Fazlullah and his followers. The purpose of the operation was to remove Fazlullah and his support from the villages of Swat and its localities, because Fazlullah and his followers had established a "parallel government" and had strong control of all police stations in Swat and displayed their own sign board "Taliban Police Station" (The News, 2007). Taliban attacked the military post and captured almost 50 soldiers. Police forces left their stations and all the police were controlled by the Taliban (Rehman, 2014).

Without military operation the government merely had potential to stop the rising military in Swat, consequently, in 2007 Pakistan army launched the first phase of "Operation Rah-e-Haq". This operation was successful in achieving normalcy in the affected area. Military operation compelled the Taliban to evacuate the captured and controlled buildings both official and public places in Swat area, including the *Markaz* they built in Imam Dherai- headquarters of Fazlullah's activities.

By the end of December 2007 Fazlullah and some followers successfully escaped and entered Afghanistan. They opted to live in mountains to change the "war strategy" (Orakzai, 2007). They continued their anti-state attacks until a new provincial and central government took office in 2008 (Daily Times, 2008)-the new government designed the new policy to deal with the menace of militancy.

The New Government: Awami National Party and its Strategy

General elections 2008 made the new history in Pakistan. Pakistan People Party (PPP) captured power in the center and its ally, Awami National Party (ANP), won in KP. PPP, did not have majority, but it formed a coalition government in the center. During election campaign ANP committed that it would restore peace in all troubling areas in KP including Swat. ANP's government initiated dialogues with the leaders of TTS. Sufi Muhammad was released as a goodwill gesture by the provincial government (BBC, 2008). Sofi Muhammad and the government agreed on 16 points on May 21, 2008 (Khattak, 2008).

The core crux of the agreement was: the government would implement *Sharia* in Swat; and Taliban would stop their attacks on attacks on the security forces and would not damage the government and public properties. The government, however, agreed to free some of the Taliban who were arrested during the military operations (The New York Times, 2009). This agreement was a transitional period that provided time to the Taliban and the government to revisit their policies and strategies.

Operation Rah-e-Haq (Right Path): Second Phase of Military Operation

As reports show thta agreemnt would not continue between the Taliban and the governmnet. Fazlullah wanted full withdrawl of the forces from Swat,but the government was reluctant. Fazlullah renounced the agreement and ordered his personal Force to attack the state's security forces. Initially, the Taliban violated the agreement by killing two local Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officers. Pakistan army quickly launched the second stage of operation "Rah-e-Haq" in the mid 2008 (Dawn, 2008), all political parties supported the military operation against the Pakistani Taliban. Many Taliban leaders were killed

in operation. The army pursued its strategies such as massive shelling, targeted destruction of houses, shops, markets and carpet bombing (Rome, 2011).

Swat's security environment in the years of 2008 to 2009 was turbulent. Approximately two million people were forced to leave Swat – they migrated toward and Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore, and other cities of the country. Swat was completely under the control of militants. It was the period of the rule of the Taliban and they were running their own judicial system to punish the criminals “for committing wrongdoings” (Waraich 2009).

The military actions created exasperation among the local people against the government and army-this operation seriously triggered suffering for the people (Rome, 2011). Many, internal and external, elements were involved in Swat conflict- with their strategy but the victims were the innocent civilians of Swat (Rome 2011).

Swat Peace Accord : What Went Wrong?

January 2009 was the decisive year. Taliban's ruthless policies were distorting Pakistan's image. International forces were also pressurizing Pakistan to take action to stop the increasing militancy in Swat-that was the most affected place. The third stage of “Operation Rah-e-Haq” was launched in the valley but it could not achieve the certain objectives-Swat became a critical place in Pakistan. The provincial government, therefore, signed a new accord with Sufi Muhammad in February 2009 (BBC, 2009).

The provincial government surrendered and agreed for the implementation of *Sharia* in Malakand Division which was dominated by Sofi Muhammad and his son-in-law. The peace accord integrated all the demands of the Taliban as a result the government withdrew the army from the valley and the militants, in return, laid down their arms, stop the use of personal weapons

in public places, condemn suicide blasts, and collaborate with local policemen (The News, 2011) in the valley. Peace accord was appreciated by the state and society.

In 2009, Pakistani government was convinced to accept the Taliban' demands. President Asif Ali Zardari endorsed a regulation Nizam-e-Adl Regulation 2009, this regulation was passed by the Parliament (Haq, 2009), thus a unanimous consensus was developed at state level to achieve peace in a conflict zone. Regulation provided an opportunity to the Taliban to impose *Sharia* but this regulation would displease Afghanistan, the US and India- these states strongly opposed the peace accord between the Taliban and government. France as member of NATO and the US ally in Afghanistan showed its concerns on "Swat peace deal" (Daily Times, 2009). The US officials also urged to confront with the Taliban (Kronstadt, 2010). Generally, the international community would not appreciate Pakistan's peace deal with the Pakistani Taliban.

Pakistani prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, ignored the external concerns and defended the stat's policy, he said "it was an internal problem of Pakistan and there was no other substitute for the government to deal the Swat's Taliban" (Kronstadt, 2010). As a victor, Sufi Muhammad came to Swat because peace agreement increased his social and political power. He organized peace rallies in different parts of the valley-he guaranteed a strong harmony in Swat by following the controversial agreement- as many international forces were not supporting this deal- internally it was an achievement of the government because Fazlullah stopped his followers to attack the forces (The News International, 2009).

Sufi Muhammad, despite peace accord forces the government in implementing *Shariah* in Swat and Malaknd Division-he kept criticizing the government-parliament and judiciary in the country. It made the situation worse because the media portrayed it very negatively (Rome, 2011) - the FM radio

also continued to work against the state and its institutions. Constant anti-state radio transmission aggravated the security environment in Swat where Taliban had full control.

A tragic incident which augmented tension in Swat was the release of an old video. This video was released by an activist in which the Taliban were flogging a minor girl for her wrongdoing. This video increased internal and external alienation towards the Pakistani Taliban. This incident attracted international media and human rights activists. The government agencies claimed, after year, that the video clip was not original and that its propagation was financed by the Non-Governments Organizations (NGOs) to create Pakistan's image as an extremist state (Rome, 2011). In fact, all videos were fake, "Taliban had no knowledge about the video, some NGOs were involved to draw international attention toward Swat that Taliban controlled valley and they succeeded". (Ahmedzeb, 2012). Although peace was restored on both sides, it also helped to both to reinforce their positions and galvanize their strengths for the final and decisive round of the military operation.

The Taliban completely strengthened their position and also made inroads into Dir and Buner with the consent of the then Commissioner of Malakand Division. The Taliban had captured important localities and merely were 60 miles away from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. The Taliban had challenged the state and society, situation was grave when a religious political leader, Molana Fazlul Rahman, openly declared in the National Assembly that "Taliban had reached Tarbela and had only to cross Margalla Hills before reaching Islamabad (Kronstadt, 2010).

Taliban' move toward Islamabad changed the political and security environment. Taliban had violated the peace agreement and entered Dir and Buner- Taliban' violation forced the government and the military establishment to use the state machinery against the increasing Talibanization and militancy-

subsequently state launched the military operation in Taliban dominated areas. Both the government and the Taliban blamed each other (Dawn, 2012), they would not respect their words. Military also supported the political policy against the Taliban.

The operation was in progress when the government declared a new military operation, operation Rah-e-Rast, against the Taliban of Swat (Rome, 2011) and continued till the end of Taliban rule.

Grand Military Operation: Eradication of Talibanization

State has the authority to use force against the anti-state factions and also it may negotiate with them if essential for peace-but Taliban violated peace agreement and declared war against the government. Before striking against the militants, the security forces ordered the people to leave the Swat valley till the end of the operation. The Taliban had already controlled the key towns- Mingora in Swat and Daggar in Buner. Taliban' rapid movement was alarming for Pakistan as well as the international community.

The government convened an All Political Parties Conference (APC) in Islamabad .The main leaders of political and religious parties attended the meeting to develop a consensus against the Taliban. A unanimous resolution was passed and signed collectively to fight against the Taliban insurgency (Dawn, 2009). Taliban commanders were killed during the operation and TTS spokesman, Muslim Khan, was arrested during operation (Dawn, 2009). By the end of June 2009, the army had eliminated and defeated the Taliban. But deadly attacks continued when the IDPs were returning to their homes (Kronstadt, 2010).

Every military operation has impacts on the civilians-thus post-military operation also affected the civilians' lives of Swat. The random attacks and gunfire by gunship helicopters caused civilian casualties, and the devastation of infrastructure. The

displacement of thousands of Swat's people increased agony (Rome, 2011). Taliban are not present physically but they managed to protect their ideology. The operation Rah-e-Rast would not change the mindset nurtured by the Taliban (Rome, 2011). The atmosphere of fear in the valley still exists (Dawn, 2009), the fear among the people increased, though the situation calmed down soon after the military's successful operations. People of Swat still suffering and living with the old misery (Hadid, 2018).

Conclusion

Though the incident of 9-/11 prompted the militancy in ex-FATA but it soon reached and spread in peaceful valley Swat making it the main hub of Talibanization-Taliban controlled the Swat valley and challenged the writ of the then government of Pakistan. The major reason which gave edge to Taliban to become strengthen in the valley was the slow judicial system. Taliban had shaped their narrative earlier in the late 1980s and early 1990s by filling the gaps created due to slow justice system.

The parent organization of TTS was TNSM established by Sufi Muhammad. In the name of *Shariah*, TNSM exploited its religious strengths and demanded for *Shariah* implementation in Malakand Division. The situation became conflictual when the state accepted TNSM' demands by passing *Shariah* Regulations in 1994 and 1999 respectively. President Musharraf' policy strongly influenced the hardliners including TNSM. The tragedy of 9-/11, however, aggravated the condition when the supreme leader of TNSM, Sufi Muhammad, took 10,000 *mujahedeen* to Afghanistan for *Jihad* (Burns 2001) and also created anti-army and anti-state environment in Malakand Division generally and valley Swat particularly. TNSM was banned by President Musharraf but could not stop the creation of TTS, as aftermath of 9/11, an off shoot of banned TNSM and TTP.

The government only took action against TTS when Fazlullah, son-in-law of Sufi Muhammad, challenged the country's security as well as Taliban threatened the lives of people. State has the full capability to deal with the militancy and extremism but it always needs public support and political will to eradicate all type of evils from society. In Addition, s strong judicial system may help in establishing harmony and peace in Pakistan.

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