

Structural Challenges, Police Reform Proposals and Protection of Lives and Property in Nigeria: Insights from SARS

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Abstract. This paper was based on the analysis of the inability of the national police to fulfil its mandate of protection of lives and property within the domestic environment of Nigeria. From the standpoint of the dire level of insecurity in Nigeria, the paper sought to highlight, critically, some basic reasons why police reforms have often failed to produce the expected results in Nigeria, taking clues from the activities of the defunct Special Anti-robbery Squad, SARS. The paper adopted a mono-method, qualitative, desk-research approach, which depended on secondary sources of data, structured survey, and interpretive analysis of historical facts relating to the functions of Nigeria Police. It was discovered, among other things, that the poor performance of Nigeria Police is more of an orientational, than structural, problem. It was concluded, therefore, that the right change in the orientation and approach of the police, the government, and other stakeholders to police reforms will make the police function expectedly. So, it was recommended that the process of change of orientation, approach, and, maybe, structure of the police should be designed to be a collective effort of all the stakeholders.

Keywords: Police Reform, Police Reform Proposal, Protection of Lives and Property, Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), Structural Challenges.

1. Introduction

Government has the responsibility to protect the lives and property of its citizens. Therefore, in an ideal situation, the exercise of its power should be guided by that purpose (Kasali and Odetola, 2016). On the other hand, the police is, inherently, the most visible element for the exercise of this governmental responsibility within the domestic environment of the state; the primary enforcer of the state laws for social

control for preservation of lives and property in the state (Yahaya, 2019). From Nigeria's political independence in 1960 to the contemporary times, the ability of the police to aid the government in performing this role in the country has been more of a mirage than real success. The surprising aspect of the whole issue of the police's inability to function expectedly is that the bulk of the problem has always lied with it; the police, rather than securing lives and property, have been the primary destroyer of the same. The structure of the Nigerian Police, which was inherited from the colonial arrangements, have coupled with numerous other factors like incommensurate monitoring of the execution of police duties, nearly inexistent sanctioning of errant officers, high level corruption, and underfunding to constantly maintain the non-performance of the institution, both in the military and civilian regimes (Hills, 2008). Thus, while the police has destroyed many lives and property, they have also dispossessed many law-abiding citizens of their belongings, robbed them of their rights, and led some of them into criminal behaviours that emanated from a consequent loss of confidence in the Nigerian State (Asogwah, Ugwu, and Odom, 2005).

The foregoing experiences form the basis for the demand for reformation of the Nigeria Police, even from the era of nearly 30 decades of military interregnum. The ad hoc creation of police units with military posture, including the Special Anti-robbery Squad (SARS), evolved as attempts to re-equip the institution to protect lives and property within the society, but rather than achieve the goals, the situation of domestic insecurity has worsened. So, the clamour for police reform has also heightened. Moreover, the inability of the various regimes to keep to their promise of comprehensively reforming the police has largely contributed to the menace. From

the whole saga of police malfunction, the associated losses, and the anti-police protests, certain identifiable factors of hindrance to successful, citizens' friendly, policing in Nigeria can be pinpointed in relation to the operations of the defunct SARS, as explained in the latter part of this paper. Focusing Nigeria Police reforms on attempting to manage, effectively, these factors can be a guide to successful transformation of the police. This is the focus of this paper.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper anchored on the assumptions of the functionalist theory, which is used in explaining gradual, long-term, holistic change in human society. Accordingly, this paper builds on the assumptions that: The society basically functions to create a state of equilibrium for all its components; the state always seeks to achieve stability through its reaction to change within its jurisdiction by adjusting to maintain its state of equilibrium; as a complex entity, the state is a social organization of parts, and that the constituent elements are meant to promote the achievement of the ends of the society (Bell, 2017). It, then, follows that no society can function expectedly without specifically essential order, balance, and coherence, alongside the consequent stability, especially for a minimum degree of integration of its constituents. Furthermore, a society can only maintain its functionality under certain conditions. Such conditions include the assurance that sufficient proportion of the needs of the populations must be met; that a sufficient proportion of the population must participate in maintaining the system by properly playing their expected roles; and that the institutions and the people in the society must consistently believe in and follow the society's shared values and norms, without which social stability will be disrupted.

1.2 Materials and Methods

This paper adopted a mono-method, qualitative, desk-research approach. The necessary data/information were collated from secondary sources of data like newspapers, Internet essays, books, special reports, and journal articles. The paper is born from structured survey and interpretive analysis of historical facts relating to the functions of Nigeria Police and the society, with emphasis on the activities of SARS and the resultant #EndSARS protests.

2. Conceptual Issues

2.1 The Concept of Police and Nigeria Police

Police, herein, implies the primary law-enforcement agency of the state, which helps to maintain social control, public order, and safety. The term refers to the name of the body of officers that represent the civil authority of a government, which prevents, detects, and investigates aberrant behaviours of dissidents in the society (Whetstone, Walsh, Brodeur, Banton, and Kelling, 2021; Simpson, 1977), thereby, maintaining peace, enforcing the law, and protecting the rights of people within the domestic environment of the state (Brewer, Wilford, Guelke, Hume, and Moxon-Browne, 1996; Simpson, 1977). The concept is used to describe "...members of a public organization having the legal competence to maintain order and enforce the law..." (Whetstone *et al*, 2021: para. 2). Nevertheless, because the foregoing definition incorporated the end and not the means of police functions, and omitted some of the dimensions of its expected functions, Egon Bittner, an American sociologist, introduced a more acceptable definition in 1970 (Whetstone *et al*, 2021: para. 2). He defined the police, based on the common features of the various agencies that are involved in policing, as any civil organisation having legal competence to enforce coercive, and non-negotiable measures to resolve problematic situations in the society. The police is, therefore, any agency that functions to manage, urgently, situations that can harm lives and property in the society, before they fully mature. Bittner argues that the police achieves this goal through the threat, or actual use, of non-negotiable coercion. Although the act of policing is executed by numerous agencies (Whetstone *et al*, 2021: para. 2; Bittner, 1970), even in Nigeria, the concern of this paper precludes all other agencies apart from the Nigeria Police.

Accordingly, Nigeria Police is the civil authority of Nigerian Government, which is assigned the task of protection of lives and property from harmful situations in the society. The activities of the Nigeria Police properly aligns it to Bittner's perception in every respect of its operations, with little regard for morality, human rights, and international best practices. The choice kind of coercion for the Nigeria Police includes all levels of intimidation, torture, and extreme violence, all embedded in endemic corruption within the institution. These choices of operational procedure have often been non-negotiated, except in situations where corruption bends the rule.

3. Structural Challenges of the Nigeria Police

Structural challenges, herein, refer to the problems or difficult situations, which emanate from the structure of an entity. In application to the Nigeria Police, it refers to the hindrances posed to the appropriate functionality of the police by its structural arrangements. Concerning the structure of Nigeria Police, the provisions for the organisation of the agency are contained in the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999* and in the Nigeria Police Act, 1990. According to the constitutional provisions, the Nigeria Police is subject to being organised and administered according to the prescription of an Act of the National Assembly (Section 214(2)(a)). It is meant to be under the command of the Inspector-General of Police. Any contingents of the force that is stationed in a state within the Federation is meant to be under the authority of the Commissioner of Police of that State, who is under the Inspector-General of Police (Section 215(2)). Furthermore, the Nigeria Police has three major structural elements. The first is the Command or Authority Structure found in Section 215(2) of the 1999 Constitution and Section 6 of the Police Act (1990), which places the supreme authority of the police on the Inspector-General of Police, assisted by the Deputy Inspectors-General of Police, whose population is not fixed. Then follows the Assistant Inspector-General as provided in Sections 5 and 8 of the Police Act. Then follows the Commissioner of Police (Section 5 of the Police Act and Section 215 (2) of the Nigeria Constitution, 1999, as the controller of the contingents of the police in any of the states of the Federation. Others in the structure are in the following order: The Deputy Commissioner of Police, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, the Chief Superintendent of Police, the Superintendent of Police, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, the Inspector of Police, Sergeant Major, Sergeant, Corporal, and Constable.

The second element of the institution's organisation is its administrative structure, which comprises of seven departments including the Department of Administration, which directs, supervises, and coordinates the various departments within the Directorate; the Department of Operations, which plans, organises, and monitors the execution of internal security measures, especially during emergencies; the Department of Logistics and Supply, which purchases items, plan building construction and maintenance, alongside other related functions; the Department of Investigation and

Intelligence, which investigates crimes, initiates prosecution, and handles forensic and other related matters. Others include the Department of Training and Command, which formulates and implements supervision of police training policy, supervises and coordinates the activities of the police and its staff colleges, and liaises with the civilian institutions of higher learning at home and abroad for effective interchange of ideas, among other functions; the F-Department, whose responsibilities include handling of research and information management; the ICT Department, which handles the technological aspect of law enforcement. The third structural arrangement of the Nigeria Police is its organisational structure, which aligns with the geo-political zoning of Nigeria. The structure consists of the Federal Headquarters, Zonal Headquarters, State Command Headquarters, Divisional Headquarters, Police Stations, Police Posts, and Village Posts.

The obvious inability of the Nigeria Police to cope with the rising incidence of crimes, especially armed robbery, beginning from the 1980s, brought about the notion that the institution is not adequately structured to promptly respond to the evolving crime-related emergencies. This was responsible for the sudden creation of the Rapid Response Squads, as structural adjustment or partial reform of the Nigeria Police. However, the creation of these squads was not necessary. Adequate equipment of the police officers with the right training and weapons, under the aegis of the departments of Logistics and Supply, Training and Command, and Operations. Otherwise, why have the problems of insecurity of lives and property, for which the ad hoc adjustments were made, persisted? Moreover, at different times, during the military and civilian regimes alike, the Nigerian Government has made efforts to reform the police. For instance, during the military regimes of the 1990s and at the early part of the Fourth Republic (2000 – 2003), several efforts were made to reform the police, especially in the areas of staff recruitment, purchase of equipment, and provision of logistics, with emphasis on transportation and remuneration (Eme and Anyadike, 2017); but the problem of insecurity rather heightened.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the Nigeria Police is properly organised, at least in the structural sense. So, what is considered to be its structural challenges do not really lie in the physical or hierarchical arrangements of the different components of the agency. They rather lie on the orientation, training, and moral etiquettes of the police officers, from the Command to the village posts, as shown in the following sub-sections. It is

the adopted mode of operation of the aspects of the structure, which handles staff recruitment, training, monitoring and control of personnel behaviour that poses the challenges, which are described as structural, as is evident elsewhere in this paper. Müller (2020) had rightly observed that the Nigeria Police is plagued with endemic problems in the areas of recruitment, training, efficiency, discipline, and expertise in specialized fields. In addition, Ibekwe and Aduma (2020) averred that corruption and dishonesty are widespread among the police officers, and that the vice has often engendered low-level public confidence, failure to report crimes, and the tendencies to resort to self-help among the citizens of Nigeria. According to Crank and Caldero (2000), these problems, obviously, result from the failures in the recruitment, selection, and training processes, which are embedded in dishonesty and corruption, which are orientational challenges. Thus, the problems that call for restructuring of Nigeria Police are essentially orientational problems, not structural problems. This is why Ibekwe and Aduma (2020) had argued that the Nigeria Police cannot function expectedly unless its officers desist from wittingly transgressing the values and norms that they are employed to uphold and protect. To them, orientational restructuring will likely be the most desirable beginning of any meaningful reform of the Nigeria Police.

4. SARS as an Ad Hoc Police Reform

Simeon Danladi Midenda, who was the Superintendent of Police in 1992, created SARS (Chow, 2020) to combat the rising incidence of armed robbery in Nigeria (Ojewole, 2020). SARS was one of the many tactical units that were set up under the Criminal Investigation Department of the police command of each state in Nigeria, to assist in gathering intelligence reports and interception of armed robberies (Inyang and Ubong, 2015). Its creation was not pre-meditated. It was not a proactive measure to reform the Nigeria Police for any objective reason. It was a mere reaction to the helplessness of the dwindling security of the lives and property of the Nigerian masses. Therefore, the training and general equipment of the masses were prone to generate malfunctions and failure of the new extension of the police structure from its onset. Rather than expend more resources to strengthen SARS with time, the government simply expanded its mandate to include the investigation and prosecution of murder, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and firearms deals. These additional areas of responsibility soon made the squad to operate with greater impunity, and after a while, the squad became entangled in the same

crimes it was meant to curb. According to Inyang and Ubong (2015), SARS resultantly gained notoriety, particularly in Southern Nigeria, for the broad mandate it enjoys and the lucrative benefits of demanding bribes and unlawfully claiming properties of individuals.

5. Protection of Lives and Property in Nigeria and the Call for Police Reform

Largely, the Nigeria Police has been somewhat useful in its expected function of protection of lives and property. However, the frequent abuse of the coercive powers of the police, by its officers, undermines their achievements in securing the society. Their involvement in widespread human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, rape, extortion, unlawful and sometimes indefinite detention without trial, alongside other dehumanizing treatment of their victims have often, largely, discredited the Nigeria Police (Amnesty International, 2020; Sahara Reporters, 2020; Kasali and Odetola, 2016; Adegoke, 2014; Ojukwu, 2011; CLO, 2001). Moreover, there has been widespread corruption leading to laxity in the operations of the police. Consequently, there has been alarming increase in crime rate and resultantly increasing public distrust of police officers (Müller, 2020; Graan and Ukpere, 2015). The unwillingness of the government and the police to address the abuse of power by the police led to a series of protest in which Nigerians, especially the youth, peacefully demand for an end to police brutality, extrajudicial executions and extortion, especially by the Special Anti-robbery Squad (SARS), as well as the abolition of SARS (Amnesty International, 2020). Rather than trusted sources of protection, the Nigerian populace perceive the police officers as friends of the criminals (Müller, 2020). Ojukwu (2011: 34) succulently described the characteristic elements of the perception of Nigeria Police officers as follows:

Corrupt, murderers, brutal and heartless, drops-out, impolite, poor and beggarly, zombies, violators of law, lousy and disorganized, power-drunk, agents of oppression, extra-judicial executioners, worsen people's problems, lack confidence, ungodly inefficient, ineffective, easily influenced, do not pay bills, dirty, indecent and easy virtue, abusers of office, public enemy, shooting without cause, illiterate, unfriendly, incompetent, failure, abusers of rights and cheats.

Corroborating the foregoing, it has been noted that over the years, SARS officers have been implicated in widespread human rights abuses, extrajudicial

killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, rape, extortion and unlawful detention, indefinite detention without trial and other dehumanizing treatment or punishment (Kasali and Odetola, 2016). While many, if not most, of the officers of the Nigeria Police encourage insecurity of people's lives and property, by failing to perform their roles expectedly, the resultant insecurity also affects their own safety, even though in sparsely separated instances. In addition to the fact that many people have become very reluctant to usefully support, or cooperate with, the police (Inyang and Ubong, 2015), angry mobs have sometimes resorted to lynching suspected police officers when the opportunity calls. This has mainly happened in situations where officers of the police openly shot and killed, or brutally maimed, presumably innocent people (Graan and Ukpere, 2015).

The heightening insecurity and the inability of the police to cope with it led to the clamour for reform of the police in Nigeria, especially in the ongoing Fourth Republic. But the incidences that made it become as serious as it did were most related, not to the entire police in Nigeria but, to the ad hoc extension of it – SARS. The need for restructuring the police was highlighted in 2000 with the creation of the Network on Police Reform (NOPRIN). At this instance, the Ministry of Police Affairs, Office of the Inspector-General of Police, and some non-governmental organisations, that were involved in police-related activities in Nigeria, produced a five-year development plan in which they set forth their new vision of the Nigeria Police. The NOPRIN had identified thematic issues for reform. Unfortunately, like other regimes, the democratic government of President Olusegun Obasanjo lacked the will to take decisive and far reaching measures to transform the police force (CLO, 2001). Even the Sovereign National Conference (SNC) deliberations under the leadership of President Goodluck Jonathan ended in confusion when the matter of police reform was brought up (Osah and Inokoba, 2018). From 2010 onwards, there were much displays of displeasure with the menaces of police performance in Nigeria. However, after a while of government's portrayal of administrative ineptitude towards the unveiling circumstances of rising insecurity, the masses, especially the youth, took to the formation of the #EndSARS movement in 2017. This was when the Nigerian youth started using the hashtag to share their experiences on the social media regarding the violence and assault perpetrated against them by SARS (Amnesty International, 2020). It took another three years (October, 2020) before the movement became fully blown, following the circulation of a

video of police officers, thought to be members of the SARS unit, who allegedly killed an unarmed young man. The peaceful protests, which started on October 8 took a new turn on October 20, 2020, when members of the Nigerian security forces opened fire on two groups of unarmed demonstrators in Lagos, reportedly killing at least a dozen people.

6. Government Response to the Call for Reform of Nigeria Police

Since the introduction of SARS in 1992 (a form of structural addendum to make the police function expectedly), the Government of Nigeria has made four other related promises, especially in response to SARS and general police malfunctioning. The years of the promises include 2010 (Chow, 2020), 2014 (by President Goodluck Jonathan), 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2019 (by President Muhammadu Buhari). In 2010, President Jonathan had promised that his administration was going to reform the Police. He even earmarked 71 billion Naira to the reform. Nevertheless, this had very little effect on the operations of the Police in Nigeria. According to Jide Babalola, the failures of police reforms in Nigeria have been because of poor funding, inefficient organisational structure, and rampant corruption. Indeed, of all these listed factors, corruption was the greatest problem, especially as only a very small proportion of the amount budgeted for the Police gets to it for implementation of its proposals (Chow, 2020).

In this Fourth Republic, state governments in Nigeria have clamoured for devolution of the Nigeria Police to allow for the establishment of State Police. This has been a very controversial issue over which the stakeholders have been unable to reach consensus. Thus, this kind of reform of the police has remained unattainable till date (Osah and Alfred, 2020; Nkwede, Dauda, and Orija, 2018; Ugbede, 2018; Odeh and Umoh, 2015; Adedeji, 2012). In December 2017, while the Inspector General of Police announced plans to reorganise SARS, refine the training programme for police recruits, and legally address the teaming cases of human rights abuse by the Nigeria Police and SARS, President Buhari signed the Anti-Torture Act into law. Following the mandate of Nigeria's Vice President (Yemi Osinbajo) for the Inspector General of Police (Ibrahim Idris) to restructure SARS, ban all forms of stop-and-search raids, require police officers to wear uniforms with full identification tags, and create a federal human-rights desk to address police violations in 2018, the Nigeria Police announced that it had

restructured SARS and the Police accordingly. But the implementation of these widely proclaimed mandates was very poor. This is why Amnesty International asserted that evidence of implementation of the Anti-Torture Act was [*and is still*] wanting, especially as there has not been any report of prosecution of errant police personnel. This is an indication that there has been poor or even inexistent monitoring of the implementation of the Act and other related attempt at police reforms in Nigeria (Ojewole, 2020). In the same 2018, a Police Reform Bill was proposed as an Act of the National Assembly on 30th May. The bill was passed by the Senate on 17th April 2019 and signed into law by President Buhari. Nevertheless, these reforms were never implemented (Müller, 2020). In October 2020, the Nigeria Police dissolved SARS and President Buhari promised that the dissolution of SARS was just the beginning of the plan of extensive reformation of the organisation (Chow, 2020). Nevertheless, the Special Weapons and Tactical team (SWAT) was created in the same October 2020 to replace SARS. This was just a change of identity, not an ideal reforming or restructuring of the police (Osah and Alfred, 2020).

7. The Missing Aspects of the Nigeria Police Reforms

Certain core areas or aspects of proper reform of the Nigeria Police can be gleaned from the preceding segments of this paper and from the assertion of Alice Hills, who rightly observed that reforming the Nigeria Police "...can make a normative and organisational difference, but in the absence of fundamental socio-political change, its effects tend to be superficial, localised and temporary" (Hills, 2008). From this statement, it is obvious that the missing links in Nigeria's Police reforms include that:

- (i) The attempts made, so far, have hardly promoted any serious form of normativeness, that is, the establishment of generally accepted and implemented work ethics, norms, or standards. Rather than a coherent and cooperative effort toward achieving the same goal of promoting security of lives and property within the country, the different teams of the same police often dispatch their functions under differing commands, based on whose interest they have to serve at any instance. This is an indication of the omission of normativeness, coherence, and cooperation from the various reforms so far made;
- (ii) It is obvious that the reforms have failed to reorganise the police in ways that can help to rid it of the colonial mentality and mode of operation, which

are not citizens-friendly. As aptly averred by Asogwah, Ugwu, and Odom (2005), the police in Nigeria has often functioned, like in the colonial settings, as a tool of oppression instead of a promoter of justice, public safety, and domestic security. Nigeria's Police is still organised as a quasi-military squad. Until this orientation is changed, the Nigeria Police cannot effectively protect lives and property in the country;

(iii) Because the reforms have failed to establish uniform modes of operation, which promotes fair application of police operational rules across people of the different strata of the society (Akinlabi, 2017; Agbiboa, 2015), they have failed also to achieve any kind of socio-political change in the level of commitment to cooperation between the police and the populace. Therefore, the reforms have often missed the achievement of deep-seated, generalised, and enduring effects in the interaction of the police and the populace, outside the usual state of mutual suspicion and unproductive level of cooperation. The retained practice of deploying police officers to communities where they are strangers and where they do not have any primordial link with the people makes them to be continuously alienated from the population they often are meant to protect (Asogwah, Ugwu, and Odom, 2005). This is a major reason why many people still fear to cooperate with them for collective security. In this situation, they keep serving the elites who deploy them and not the masses;

(iv) The reforms have always missed the establishment of functional monitoring and enforcement schemes for compelling the police officers to operate within the limits of the established laws guiding their operations. If such structures were in place, the police in Nigeria would have been able to protect, effectively, the lives and property of the country's populace;

(v) Another missing aspect of police reforms in Nigeria is that the reforms have hardly included commensurate infrastructural and equipment supplies. Moreover, they have often been unrealistic in the fiscal reforms of the organisation, especially in terms of funding and salary scales. This has often created an atmosphere of limited supplies and abject poverty among most of the officers. While the high ranking officers are well-paid, the low-ranking ones receive stipends. This situation has often promoted corruption within the system (Asogwah, Ugwu, and Odom, 2005).

8. Conclusion

The entire saga of demand for the reform or restructuring of Nigeria Police by the country's

populace, especially as it concerned SARS, was a worthwhile engagement. However, while the government has made series of widely spaced and incomprehensive efforts to reform the Nigeria Police, certain core aspects that should have been given the utmost attention have always been omitted. It is obvious that the core of the areas of need of the Nigeria Police, which is the often neglected aspects of the reforms, is more of an orientational than structural problem. Therefore, the reforms should begin with a change of the orientation of the Nigeria Police on the use of force and violence in their operations. Moreover, a uniform and standardised operational ethic should be promoted across board. Thereafter, other areas of concern can be addressed more easily as part of a wider mission of safeguarding life and property and preventing the likelihood of a future #EndSARS protest.

9. Recommendations

From the findings of this discourse, and borrowing from the entire police reform saga, especially as it relates to SARS and the #EndSARS protest, the following recommendations have been made as means of ensuring a successful, citizens-friendly Nigeria Police:

- The government, in collaboration with other domestic security stakeholders, should organise serious and rigorous, multi-stage, re-orientation programmes for the police officers. The officers should be engaged in such programmes in batches and only those who successfully complete the programmes should be retained in Nigeria Police;
- Such re-orientation programmes should be based on character reformation, ethics of moderate application of force and violence, as well as equal application of the operational standards of the police to all the people across the Nigerian populace, regardless of their class differences;
- An appropriate means of monitoring and reporting of the extent of application of the recommended operational ethics should be put in place to ensure that the policies and all associated ethical codes are implemented accordingly. This can consist of the creation of a department that would be held accountable for this role of monitoring the activities of police officers and for arrest and prosecution of the associated defaulters;
- To regain the confidence and cooperation of the masses, the government should bring, always to justice, the perpetrators of human

rights violations among the police officers. The process of sanctioning errant officers should be timely and open to the public;

- Instead of the usual one-man-mandate, the government should create panels of inquiry for necessary investigations and recommendations, and of security experts for putting the panel outcomes into operable and worthwhile ethical standard and policy formulations, as well as allow the participation of the members of the public in the different stages of the reform process.

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