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Turkey's Military "Democracy"

JEREMY SALT

Turkey began its transition to democracy in 1946; more than half a century later it remains a considerable distance from the generally accepted standards of a modern democratic state. Freedom of expression is restricted, human rights are abused, and four bouts of military intervention since 1960 have demonstrated the fragility of the political system. Indeed, the past 40 years make it clear that the court of last resort in Turkish politics is not the ballot box but the military. And the events of the past two years underscore that for the senior echelons of the military, secularism is a higher value than democracy. These events have also demonstrated yet again the "supra" status of the Turkish military: it has placed itself above the restrictions, scrutiny, and public criticism that apply to all other sectors of society, placing it virtually above the state.

COUPS AND MEDDLINGS

In contemporary Turkey, overt military intervention dates to 1960, when the army overthrew the Democratic Party government of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, later executing Menderes and two of his cabinet colleagues. In 1971 the generals carried out a "coup by memorandum," forcing the resignation of the government and the appointment of a prime minister who met their approval. In 1980 they sent tanks into the streets again, arrested the politicians, and declared martial law. It was three years before civilian government was permitted to resume, and even then restrictions prevented the dominant figures of the 1970s from reentering the political arena. Obviously, the circumstances surrounding each of these interventions varied greatly. Intervention in 1960 was driven by a feeling within the military that the government had lost its way: it was motivated by personal ambition, and it had disregarded the traditional values that underpinned the Turkish nation and pursued economic policies that were rapidly eroding general living standards. In contrast, intervention in 1971 and again in 1980 was strongly focused on the inability of the politicians to control the left-right violence sweeping the country.

Early in 1997, the military intervened again. Beginning in February the generals launched a carefully calibrated campaign of destabilization against the Refah (Welfare)–True Path Party coalition government of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan. A seasoned politician, Erbakan had been the leader of the pro-Islamic National Salvation Party in the 1970s. After the military intervention in 1980 he was banned from politics until 1987, when he campaigned in elections as head of the Refah Party. Although Refah had various factions, it was probably most accurately described as a party of Muslim values rather than an "Islamic" party. Its declared purposes were achieving social justice and a "just economic order," and promoting Muslim values in Turkey through education and propaganda. But its critics argued from the beginning that it had a hidden agenda: the conversion of Turkey into a state governed by *sharia* (Islamic law). It was on this basis—of what the party was likely to do at some point in the future as well as what it was alleged to be doing in the present—that the military acted against Refah in 1997.

Taking about 7 percent of the vote in the 1987 general elections and (in alliance with other parties) about 16 percent in 1991, Refah had organized so well by 1994 that it swept the municipal elections, shocking the secular establishment by picking up

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the greater municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara. When general elections were held in December 1995, Refah captured nearly 22 percent of the vote, more than any other party. Frantic efforts to keep Refah out of power led to a coalition government bringing together the center-right Motherland and True Path parties. In June 1996, after this government had collapsed, there was no option but to invite Erbakan to form a government, which he did in coalition with True Path. It was not the first time an activist Muslim party had been in government, but it was the first time one had become the senior partner and thus captured the prime ministership.

While assuring Turks and foreign governments alike that he had no intention of damaging existing relationships (and making no attempt to carry out his campaign threat to "tear up all agreements with Israel"), Erbakan in his first six months in office signaled a new approach in foreign policy, directed mainly toward strengthening relationships with the Islamic bloc. He quickly made a series of state visits to Muslim or predominantly Muslim countries, including Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Egypt, Libya, and Nigeria, and he sponsored an attempt to establish an economic bloc of Muslim states.

Relations with Syria and Iran were clearly a priority, and Erbakan took Turkey into an agreement to buy billions of dollars' worth of natural gas from the latter. European governments were also sponsoring business deals with Iran, and Turkey's overtures could be regarded as sensible steps toward normalizing troubled relations with an important neighbor. But in the context of perceived "fundamentalism" in Turkey, they gave Erbakan's critics ammunition to accuse him of trying to turn Turkey into an Iranian simulacrum. Moreover, by entering into the natural gas agreement Erbakan acted against the express wishes of the United States, whose Congress was just then passing legislation to impose a global ban on such transactions with Iran by any government or foreign company.

Within Turkey, Erbakan fostered the spread of Muslim values by such measures as allowing female bureaucrats to wear the *hicab* (head scarf) at work and adjusting work hours to suit the exigencies of Ramadan, but it could not be said that he embarked on anything that was radically new. In fact, the economic and social environment was ripe for Refah's twin messages of "social justice" and a "just economic order." Since the reintroduction of Islam into the political arena in the 1940s, the scope for expression of Muslim views had gradually expanded to the point that in the 1990s Turkey had a flourishing Muslim media, education system, banks, and a political party, as well as *tarikats* (Sufi brotherhoods), pious foundations, and religious associations dating back to Turkey's Ottoman past. Although specific issues bore the brunt of the generals' ire in 1997, it was the overall growth of this Muslim environment that appeared to be the real cause of their alarm.

Indeed, Refah was only the political tip of an amorphous social movement involving a range of Muslim organizations and individuals. Explaining why Refah captured so many votes at the expense of parties of both the left and right first required an understanding of why the religious sentiment that propelled Refah into government developed so strongly in the 1980s. There is evidently a close connection between this strengthening of Muslim feeling and the broad effects of globalization on Turkey, not just on the economy or culture in the narrow sense but on Kemalist, secularist, nationalist ideology itself, in whose name the system was defended by politicians and generals alike. The effects of the economic change of direction undertaken by Prime Minister Turgut Ozal after his election in 1983 were striking. Out went the old state-centered model of economic development and in came deregulation, privatization, the floating of the lira, and all the other hallmarks of IMF-inspired restructuring.

The results were a mixed bag. Infrastructural progress and economic growth were impressive, but the real living standards of the majority of Turkish people fell and the gap between the rich and poor widened. Inflation has reached unprecedented levels, hovering consistently around 100 percent for the past decade. Money was poured into communications, highways, and the vast Greater Anatolia Project irrigation system in the southeast, but labor and social rights, as they are understood in Europe, remained severely circumscribed. Unable to come up with a more convincing program for social progress, the secular parties of both the center-right and the center-left steadily lost voters throughout the 1990s.

THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

If the restructuring of Turkey's economy along globalized lines had substantial social consequences, the cultural effects of globalization were no less unsettling. The onrush of "foreign" values through the media created unease among many Turks, and not just those who voted for Refah. These values

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were transmitted by privately owned television stations carrying programs from the United States and across Europe via cable television; glossy magazines featuring articles on daring subjects; and advertisements for a continually expanding range of foreign consumer goods, directed at the young in particular, setting the criteria for what was fashionable to eat or wear. All of this tended to dislocate the sense of what was normal even ten years before.

By the 1980s demographics had carried Turkey's developing kulturkampf into the cities. The steady inflow of migrants, escaping both a lack of opportunity in the eastern provinces and the devastating effects of the continuing struggle between the military and the Kurdish separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the southeast, brought into Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, and other cities millions of people whose ethnic background (largely Kurdish) and social values were significantly different from those of the existing population of western Turkey. The importance of this movement of people can hardly be overstated: Istanbul's population rose from about 5 million in 1988 to somewhere between 10 million and 12 million in 1997. The millions of people streaming westward brought with them the culture of the Anatolian town or village, conservative and mosque-centered. Living in squalor in slum districts (*gecekondus*) springing up around all the large cities, they quickly became targets for movements espousing alternatives to a political order that had largely ignored their needs. In the 1970s they responded to leftist movements and parties and in the 1980s to Refah.[1]

The physical manifestation in the cities of this cultural dichotomy in Turkish society foreshadowed its expression through the ballot box. The poor crowding into Turkey's cities at least had the right to vote, and from the late 1980s on they used it against the center-right and center-left parties they held responsible for failing to alleviate their plight. This was the background to the open collision between the military and Refah in the first six months of 1997; the surface conflict over "fundamentalism" barely concealed the more complex if not primordial struggle taking place between the old political actors and the new.

The old actors—the so-called secular elites—engaged in endless and bitter infighting but ultimately closed ranks against the newcomers. These elites included the military, the mainstream center-right and center-left political parties and the newspapers that reflected their views, senior bureaucrats, judges, university administrators and academics, and to some extent the financial and commercial establishment represented by the Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen. The new actors included Refah and Muslim elites who mirrored the old class at every level except in the upper echelons of the army; many could best be described as modernizing Muslim technocrats. They had their own political party, media, and intelligentsia, as well as their own dynamic businessmen's organization, the Association of Independent Businessmen and Industrialists, popularly known as the "Anatolian tigers."

While the ostensible point of conflict between these classes was the danger "fundamentalism" presented to the secular republic, behind the sloganizing could be discerned the determination of the old established actors to maintain their ascendancy within and over the Turkish state and society. No one within the old elites rose to the defense of Refah in the name of defending democracy, until the campaign against the party had been carried to the point of driving it not only out of government but out of the political arena altogether. The concern expressed by other political parties at that stage was largely a matter of self-interest: they had benefited from the campaign against Refah but now began to feel it had gone too far.

Anatomy of a coup

When the generals finally moved against Refah early in 1997, they did so with the precision and determination of a military campaign. A démarche issued on February 28 at the meeting of the National Security Council, a joint civilian-military body, demanded that Prime Minister Erbakan take steps to protect the secular nature of the state, including changing the education laws to force the closure of religious imam-hatip (prayer leader and preacher) schools. In the coming months, as Erbakan temporized, the military maintained pressure: it set up the West Working Group to monitor the activities of suspected fundamentalists; and senior bureaucrats (including the judiciary), academics, and journalists were called in for briefings on the dangers posed by "fundamentalism" and by the "terrorism" of the PKK. In its briefings the mili-

[1]Paradoxically, it was Ozal and the architects of military intervention in 1980, especially General (and later President) Kenan Evren, who emphasized a return to religious values, apparently in the belief that this would reinforce the social cohesiveness of Turkish society and repair the damage done by the sharp polarization that marked the 1970s.

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tary general staff warned that "giving freedom of movement to religious extremism and to the outlawed [PKK] in the context of democracy would be tantamount to the state committing suicide. There cannot be any such concept of democracy."

The establishment of a nexus between "fundamentalism" and "terrorism" was critical to the propaganda war being waged by the generals. The most cursory observer would have known that while thousands of civilians had died in the struggle between the military and the PKK, no one was dying on the streets as a result of Refah "fundamentalism"; and yet, underlining the sacrosanct status the military enjoys in Turkish society, there was no serious public challenge to the military's tactics or assumptions by the "secular elites" supposedly committed to pushing ahead with the transition to democracy in Turkey. As for media coverage, the chairman of the general staff operations department remarked to the *Turkish Daily News* that the press "has been a source of pride on this issue [fundamentalism]. We meet this with appreciation."

As the standoff between the government and the military continued, the military—over Erbakan's head—consolidated Turkey's relationship with Israel. The two countries' navies and air forces had already signed agreements in 1996 that allowed Israeli planes to stage maneuvers in Turkish airspace and cadets and officers from both countries to take part in exchange training programs at military academies. These agreements also marked the beginning of a period of close cooperation in weapons refurbishment and development. That year also saw President Suleyman Demirel became the first Turkish head of state to pay an official visit to Israel. In 1997 Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy visited Ankara, with reciprocal visits to Israel by Turkish military and civilian delegations. The chief of the general staff, General Hakki Karadayi, his deputy (General Cevik Bir, a leading figure in the military's campaign against Refah), and Defense Minister Turhan Tayan paid separate visits to Israel to discuss, among other things, Israeli upgrading of Turkish fighter aircraft (F4 Phantoms) and tanks (M60s), the joint production of Popeye II air-to-ground missiles, which Turkey wants for its F4 jets, and Turkey's purchase of small arms, helicopter airborne rescue systems, early warning reconnaissance aircraft, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. Naval maneuvers in the eastern Mediterranean involving Israel, Turkey, and the United States were also held early in 1998.

A PERSONAL STORY

ALONG WITH ITS ACTIONS against "fundamentalism" in the political arena, the army had begun shedding officers with religious proclivities. An army doctor—a gastroenterologist whose "big fault" lay in being a Muslim who worshipped and had gone on the hajj—wrote of how his own career was abruptly terminated in a letter to the editor in the October 17, 1997, *Turkish Daily News*: "In 1994 the pictures of all personnel and their spouses were sought. I was put on record because my wife's picture showed her with a head scarf. I [had] not received any punishment in my 27-year-career as an officer. No direct warning was issued to me. I learned from the August 2, 1997, issue of the newspapers that I was being sent into retirement in accordance with a YAS [Supreme Military Council] decision. According to the daily *Hurriyet*, we had been sent into retirement for being 'religious extremists' though there was no specific evidence against us. The decision was made by the YAS members 'who knew me personally' on the basis of documents and information compiled by a certain group without our meeting with any legal procedure, any claim, any interrogation or making any defense and in the absence of any prosecutor or judge.

"With this decision not only was I pushed away from the GATA [Gulhane Military Academy of Medicine] where I served for 22 years and where I contributed to the training of thousands of students and many academicians whom I dearly love, and I believe that they return this affection, but I was also barred even from being treated there as a patient although I have contributed to the recuperation there of so many patients. I have lost the rights acquired as an academician and though the laws ban it pressure is being exerted to prevent us from being appointed to another job.

"According to Article 125 of the Constitution, the YAS decisions are not subject to judicial review. So there is no way we can seek restitution of our rights from any judicial or administrative authority. Two years prior to the year 2000 in Turkey, a country which claims to be upholding the rule of law, even a staff member of a faculty is being denied the 'freedom of being judged freely at free and independent courts' envisaged for all by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Basic Freedoms Convention adopted by the Council of Europe in 1950."

The writer of this letter was only one of many army officers retired in 1997 because of their religious convictions. According to figures released by Defense Minister Ismet Sezgin, YAS dismissed 237 officers in 1997, compared to just 98 the year before. While reasons for the dismissals were not given, some of the dismissed officers were subsequently employed by Refah-dominated municipalities. *J.S.*

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Both Israeli and Turkish defense officials maintained that the close military and intelligence cooperation between their two countries was not directed against any third party, but there could be little doubt they intended to send a message to regional "troublemakers" such as Iran, Syria, and Iraq with which Turkey has difficult if not bad relations. As Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai remarked in Ankara during his January 1998 visit, when Turkey and Israel locked hands they would form a formidable fist. The relationship with Israel gathered momentum against the clear reluctance of Erbakan; the reorientation of Turkey's regional stance in favor of Israel and against Iran and Syria appeared to be the natural corollary of the internal drive by the military against "fundamentalism" and "terrorism."

By mid-1997 the generals were able to secure a change of political leadership—without putting tanks in the streets. Under pressure from all sides, Erbakan resigned on June 18. He apparently hoped that discredited former Prime Minister Tansu Ciller would be appointed to that post, but President Demirel instead asked Motherland Party leader Mesut Yilmaz to form a new government. The Refah–True Path coalition had not even lasted for a full year—six months of which it had been under siege by the military. Virtually no one had challenged the military's version of the "fundamentalist" threat. That Erbakan had come to power through the ballot box, that he had not made any overt attempt to introduce sharia, and that it was the generals who were disrupting the processes of democracy attracted little public comment or criticism.

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THE COURTS STEP IN

Even before Erbakan succumbed to the pressure to resign, Refah was fighting for its survival in the Constitutional Court, Turkey's highest court and a stronghold of Kemalist sentiment. On May 21 the state's chief prosecutor, Vural Savas, asked the court to shut down the party on the basis of an 18-point indictment. Savas accused the Refah government of breaching articles 68 and 69 of the constitution, which underwrite the secular nature of the republic. He also highlighted statements allegedly made by Erbakan to the effect that Refah would come to power whether in a bloodless or bloody manner, and that Refah was the "army of Islam" and no one's prayers would be accepted who did not vote for Refah. The accusations against Erbakan also included charges that he had hosted an *iftar* (breaking of the fast) meal for the heads of religious sects at his official residence and that he had allowed female public servants to wear head scarves. Two Refah deputies were accused of calling for the establishment of a state based on sharia and a third of saying that the closure of imam-hatip schools would end in bloodshed.

On January 16, 1998, the full bench of the Constitutional Court announced its decision. Refah was to be closed and six of its most senior members, including Erbakan, were banned from taking part in any political activities for five years. The vote to close the party—the twenty-first party banned in Turkey since the first military intervention in 1960—split the bench, with nine judges in favor and two against.

In explaining its decisions the court found that by allowing the wearing of religious dress in government offices and universities, Erbakan had encouraged antisecularism; that in referring to the coming of a "just order" in a speech to the Refah Party's parliamentary group in 1994 he meant a state based on religious law; that he had pursued the goal of establishing a sharia state in Turkey since the establishment of the National Order Party (the forerunner of both the National Salvation Party and the Welfare Party) in 1970; that the Refah mayor of the central Anatolian city of Kayseri, Sukru Karatepe, also banned from taking part in any political activities for five years, had opposed the secular order in a speech in 1996; that Refah member of parliament Ahmet Tekdal had delivered an antisecular speech during the hajj pilgrimage in 1994; that Halil Ibrahim Celik, another Refah deputy, had shown a "longing for violence" when he delivered a speech saying that blood would be shed if imam-hatip schools were closed, and that Turkey would be worse than Algeria; and that the party had remained indifferent in the face of antisecular speeches made by its deputies. Overall, the court found that the Refah chairman, deputy chairman, and individual members of parliament had used democratic rights and freedoms to try to destroy democracy and establish a state based on sharia.

The decision turned 147 Refah parliamentary deputies into independents, but within a short time all but five announced that they would join a new Islamist party, the Fazilet (Virtue) Party. By driving

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Erbakan out of politics and clearing the path for the ascendancy of younger and more dynamic Muslim activist politicians, the court may have done the Islamist sector a service. Erbakan himself declared the court's decision was a "serious judicial error." Both within Turkey (by liberal commentators) and abroad the decision was denounced as a step that could only hinder the evolution of a pluralistic society.

The closure of the party and the possibility that Erbakan and his former colleagues would be charged in a state security court was followed by the jailing of the Refah mayor of the central Anatolian town of Kayseri on charges of breaching the secular provisions of the constitution. Even more controversially, the dynamic and popular Refah mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was prosecuted in Diyarbakir over statements he made in the southeastern town of Siirt. The charges centered on Erdogan's declaration that "Turkey's mosques will be our barracks, the minarets our bayonets, the domes our helmets, and the faithful our soldiers." The lines are from a poem by Ziya Gokalp, an influential figure in the development of Turkism and Turkish nationalism from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Erdogan was sentenced to 10 months in prison, but remained free pending an appeal.

The government also began cracking down on the wearing of Islamic dress in government offices and schools, investigating hundreds of teachers for breaching dress guidelines issued by the ministry of education. The ban extended to university students, who were prevented from taking year-end examinations in Istanbul unless they complied with the regulations. In a widening purge in the months after the closure of Refah, Islamist provincial officials were also reported to be facing dismissal.

WHO ELECTED THE GENERALS?

Turkey cannot develop into a democratic and pluralistic society as long as the military retains its supra-state role. Moreover, while "fundamentalism" was being singled out as one of the greatest threats to the integrity of the republic, scandals involving links between politicians and the mafia continued to mount along with unexplained deaths and jailings of political dissidents and writers. Yet given the action taken against leftists in the 1980s in the name of suppressing communist extremism, against Kurdish political activists in the name of suppressing separatism, and now against Muslim activists in the name of suppressing fundamentalism, it is clear that the military will not allow any deviance from its own rigid definition of Turkish identity.

But Turks are surely being sold short by the assumption that the military knows best. The results of elections in recent years suggest that they use their votes wisely and know how to punish politicians for their failings and reward them for their successes. It is highly improbable that Refah could have turned Turkey into a "fundamentalist" republic, even if that had been its goal. It won its way into government fairly. And as Turkish social scientist Metin Heper noted in the winter 1997 issue of *Middle East Journal,* "even when the Turkish economy was in a shambles, when there were claims of widespread corruption within the secular political class and when both the moderate center-left and center-right political parties had failed to come up with meaningful programs, four-fifths of the electorate still did not opt for [Refah]." Much of the support Refah did receive undoubtedly came from people who were less interested in its religious values and more interested in seeing whether the party could provide efficient government. Even its critics concede that at the level of local government Refah performed better than most of its predecessors.

In terms of Refah's "hidden agenda," Heper argues that radical secularists not only do not understand the significance of Islam for the people but have "exaggerated the Islamist threat to the Turkish secular democratic state." Paradoxically, the military moved against Refah at a time when there were signs of reconciliation within a democratic context between the secular and religious streams in Turkish society. In this case, why did the military move when it did? Because it did not agree with this assessment? Or because the real issue was never "fundamentalism" but the determination of the secular elites, especially the military, to maintain control of the state?

Internally, Turkey's political and social development is now stalled. There is no long-term solution to the Kurdish question in sight, no reduction of the inflation that blights the lives of the people, and party politics remains dominated by the wishes of the military. By the end of 1998 the government had been brought down by accusations of corruption against Prime Minister Yilmaz, returning the country to the political stalemate that existed before Erbakan was appointed prime minister in 1996. Again President Demirel had to avoid the Islamists—the largest bloc in parliament—in the search for a new government ahead of early elections scheduled for April.

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Nor can it be said, looking at Turkey's foreign policy, that the destruction of the Refah-dominated government has had any positive results in a Europe that once feared the coming to power of such a government in Turkey. The Europeans have been critical of the military's actions. Turkey has not been brought closer to membership in the European Union but pushed further away, with the EU deciding late in 1997 not to include Turkey in its expansion conference. In view of Turkey's Western orientation since the foundation of the republic, and its attempts to join the EU over the past 30 years, this has to be considered a very serious setback. The very cornerstone on which the republic was built has been shaken.

In terms of its relations with the Arab and Islamic worlds, the military has backed Turkey into a cul-de-sac because of the close relationship it has forged with Israel. To the Arabs and Iran, what seems to have been set in motion is an "Ankara Pact," linking Israel, Turkey, and the United States against potential Middle Eastern "troublemakers." The new orientation represents a significant break with Turkey's past policy of playing the honest broker, recognizing Israel but also upholding the rights of the Palestinians and joining in UN General Assembly condemnations of provocative decisions made by the Israeli government. Whether intended or not, Turkey is now regarded in the Arab world as having abandoned this relative neutrality in favor of a de facto military alliance with Israel. Turkey's efforts to allay Arab and Muslim fears have not worked. At the meeting of the Islamic Conference Organization late in 1997, Turkey faced severe censure over the nature of its relationship with Israel; the distrust remains, despite improved relations with Syria after the Syrian government withdrew its protection of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in October 1998.

Turkey cannot be both a democracy and a military state; a "military democracy," as the *New York Times* described it in November 1997, is a contradiction in terms. In intervening in the name of safeguarding secularism, the military has undermined Turkey's fragile democratic evolution, and the threat that the Refah Party was supposed to represent must be weighed against this very significant cost.

It would perhaps be more accurate to describe the attitudes of the Kemalist elites as antireligious rather than secular, in accordance with the anticlericalism of the radical Jacobins who shaped Kemalist thinking. The paradox is that a contemporary state, a social state along European lines, is the very opposite of the fossilized model the secularists seem determined to preserve. A contemporary state evolves from the people upward and not from the top downward. Parliament is the voice of the people, not the offices of the general staff, and not until politicians, bureaucrats, and the military itself are truly made accountable to the people through the ballot box can Turkey evolve into the state the secularists say they want it to become. ■

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