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THE ROAD AHEAD OF ALGERIA'S ELECTIONS: A CHANGING STATUS QUO?

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Cover photo: ALGIERS, ALGERIA - March 28, 2017: Crowded street of Algiers old city (Casbah). (c) Sun_Shine - Shutterstock

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In December 2019, Abdelmadjid Tebboune was elected as President of Algeria to replace Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was forced by the February 2019 Hirak popular protest to resign in April of that year.¹ Tebboune was, therefore, inaugurated amidst a deep and turbulent political crisis characterized by an unprecedented protest movement known as the Hirak, a large-scale operation of “clean hands” that targeted hundreds of corrupt senior officials and a fractured ruling establishment. Since then, the Tebboune administration engaged in multiple reforms to rehabilitate the state's institutions, stabilize the country's political and social fronts, revive the ailing economy, and reclaim Algiers' place on the international stage. Four years after his election, the country is preparing for a consequential presidential race which will not be an easy task for any candidate, including the current leadership.

Throughout his presidency, Tebboune had to endure several setbacks that often placed his agenda at risk and imposed urgent domestic and foreign policies. In early 2020, the world faced the COVID-19 pandemic² which paralyzed international and local governance including in Algeria. President Tebboune himself was hospitalized in Germany³ following his infection and had to undergo a relatively long recovery. In addition, Algeria found itself at the heart of complex geopolitical equations when Russia launched a full-scale invasion against Ukraine in February 2022.⁴ As a historic military partner of Moscow, Algiers had to walk on thin lines between its principled non-alignment doctrine and Western pressures to condemn Russia. At the same time, Algiers had also to deal with regional crises including its escalatory cold war with Rabat,⁵ security turmoil in the Sahel's Mali⁶ and Niger,⁷ and risks of instability in neighboring Tunisia and Libya.

Furthermore, the 2019 protest movement left its mark on Algerian society as a new generation of Algerians emerged with unique demands and aspirations. While the 2019 elections were essentially focused on sociopolitical stability, candidates for the December 2024 presidential race are expected to provide concrete reforms on domestic affairs and foreign policy. In that sense, a set of priorities is already pressuring the ruling establishment as well as the opposition regarding political reforms, economic revival, and regional dossiers; and how these priorities are addressed is likely to weigh during the vote. Hence, an assessment of Algeria's challenges and the maneuvering of the Tebboune administration is critical ahead of December's elections to both identify the potential dossiers that will shape public debate and candidates' programs and draw realistic expectations about the opposition's options and chances.

A stagnated domestic scene

Attempting to reform institutions by fighting corruption

The 2019 protest movement was instigated by the deteriorating conditions of state institutions which impacted Algerians' daily lives. The absence of former president Bouteflika following his incapacitation in 2013⁸ allowed unofficial actors including oligarchs and members of his immediate family to control institutions without any accountability. These actors were later tried on corruption charges and sentenced to long prison terms and heavy fines.⁹ However, the damage that was inflicted upon institutions' reputations and modes of functioning was far too great for these high-level trials to repair. Bouteflika's long tenure (1999-2019) had also democratized corruption as the favored route for almost all political, social, and economic actors to attain their objectives. Despite the Tebboune administration's reassurances and policies to fight corruption, the trust deficit between authorities and citizens remains as deep as it was in 2019.

As Algeria reached a state of semi-stability on the institutional level, it is still suffering from the same bureaucratic malfunctions and corrupt schemes. The Tebboune administration initially tried to address these deep-rooted weaknesses by monopolizing power at the level of the presidency¹⁰ and empowering the judicial authorities¹¹ to fight corruption. While this is encouraging, structural institutional obstacles remain, which require specific reforms on judicial independence and a new vision for the dynamics between state different institutions.

Eroding individual and collective liberties

Throughout the past four years, much of the work of Algerian activists has focused on the condition of human rights. On the eve of the December 2019 elections, President Tebboune vouched to work with the Hirak movement.¹² However, some policies of his government did not reflect such statements as

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human rights defenders struggled to maintain the margin of freedom that the Bouteflika administration granted them. Authorities and senior officials endorsed a sovereigntist rhetoric that considered multiple forms of criticism as an “attempt to overthrow the system” and a “threat to public order”. The parliament passed the 2020 amendment of the penal code which further criminalized the right to freedom of association and expression¹³ and resulted in the pre-trial imprisonment of hundreds of activists who were later acquitted.¹⁴ These practices were criticized by international organizations such as Human Rights Watch¹⁵ as well as by UN bodies¹⁶ and representatives.¹⁷

Ahead of the upcoming presidential campaign, the question of individual and collective liberties will shadow public debate. Leading political actors such as the former head of the Islamist Movement for Peace and Society, Abderrazak Makri, underscored the erosion of human rights in Tebboune's era.¹⁸ While the presidential election could represent a window of opportunity for a reconciliation policy to bolster the current administration's popularity, the authorities' repressive strategies are not often set by the incumbent administration but are rather part of a long-standing authoritarian policy that defines the core of the Algerian regime.

Ultimately, the discussion on human rights in Algeria is not only political but also social and economic. It is true that the decision to undermine any actor who could question the establishment is a recurrent political strategy not only in Algeria but the entire Middle East and North Africa. Yet, the Algerian authorities capitalize on their socioeconomic status as the “provider” for the entire population who shows limited resistance in exchange for clientelist and rentier benefits. In that sense, a sustainable and meaningful change in the environment of human rights in Algeria is dependent on economic emancipation and social liberalization. The current administration and ruling establishment in general are hence incapable, at least for the foreseeable future, of embracing a more democratic tactic and will only make limited concessions depending on their short-term interests and electoral agendas. This means that change in the political elites and accountability will both remain difficult tasks in the absence of a powerful alternative that could offer the same benefits to the population without resorting to the same authoritarian policies.

An economy still too dependent on hydrocarbons

As part of his 2019 campaign objectives, President Tebboune vowed to revive the Algerian economy from the ruins of Bouteflika's era. A few years into Bouteflika's presidency,

Algeria fell victim to the 2013 oil plunge¹⁹ and suffered significant financial losses. In that sense, the public treasury assumed the cost of generous welfare policies that almost depleted the state's foreign exchange reserves which fell to an estimation of 79 billion dollars in 2019 from approximately 180 billion dollars in 2012.²⁰ Additionally, several corruption scandals marked Bouteflika's last years in power²¹ and discouraged foreign investors from establishing businesses as neighboring Tunisia and Morocco became popular hubs for joint ventures and nearshoring activities.²² Therefore, the current administration's main concern was to avoid financial bankruptcy and reform Algeria's economic model. However, the authorities' priorities became more focused on rehabilitating the energy sector and the broader industrial scene. For any upcoming administration, this approach must include the private sector and youth segment as integral parts of the economic cycle to address issues of the informal market and unemployment.

It is important to note that Algeria's economic model has long been based on the hydrocarbons sector. Sonatrach, the state-owned oil and gas company, is viewed as the backbone of the country's expenditures. The Tebboune administration, like its predecessors, understood this reality and focused its efforts on building a long-term strategy for the company to adapt to market developments and requirements. In 2019, amidst the protest movement, a new hydrocarbons law was promulgated²³ to incentivize foreign companies to invest in Algeria's energy sector and reinvigorate its outdated infrastructure. These policies gained momentum following the war in Ukraine and European interest in decoupling from Russian energy sources. Italy²⁴ and France²⁵ were swift to develop their energy cooperation with Algeria as the latter capitalized on this interest to commercialize itself as a key energy hub in the Mediterranean region.

While hydrocarbons were the main element of energy deals between Algeria and international partners, renewables were also often present on the talks' agenda. Authorities are today facing a major challenge of increasing gas production to satisfy both local electricity demands and export commitments to Europe. The rapidly growing local consumption²⁶ is pressuring Algiers to explore other tools to decrease the population's dependence on traditional energy sources. Accordingly, renewables are viewed as the only sustainable strategy that could prove viable in the long term and may also draw more foreign investments into the Algerian market. For instance, the recently designed Sonatrach 2030 plan has allocated 1 billion dollars to the energy transition, including solar plants and green hydrogen projects.²⁷ Regardless of which president will come to power in 2024, the energy sector, including plans for renewables, is seen as a strategic project not only for the establishment but for the stability of the very core of the Algerian state.

Beyond the energy sector, Algeria's real economic potential

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is represented by the local actors including the young generation and the private sector. Before his term, president Tebboune had difficulties in managing his relations with business actors during his short-term tenure as Prime Minister in 2017.²⁸ His radical measures against Bouteflika's oligarchy cost him his post when he was sidelined by the former administration. Upon its arrival to power as president, Tebboune adopted a reconciliation policy with the private sector on the condition that the latter remains neutral on political dossiers and does not engage in behind-the-scenes electoral maneuvering. Ahead of the 2024 presidential race, it will be critical for President Tebboune, given his history with the business elites, and for his entourage to reassure business actors and include them in any upcoming economic policies and local development agendas.

Throughout 2023, President Tebboune made sure to portray himself as the supporter and defender of business owners and entrepreneurs against bureaucratic impediments. Several conferences were organized for local actors to showcase their commercial activities and expand their professional networks. The Algerian capital also hosted important events for African businesses and start-up innovators²⁹ to become a regional hub and counter the economic influence of neighboring competitors. Moreover, a series of pro-investment laws and regulations were promulgated to facilitate the integration of freelancers and e-business owners.³⁰ Despite these efforts, the road toward a genuine, solid, and sustainable economic revival is still long and will depend on the political leadership's capacity to protect the private sector, including young entrepreneurs, from the fallout of the electoral season and different political conflicts and clashes.

In September, authorities announced the suspension of an inter-ministerial committee that was tasked with scrutinizing private companies to avoid new corruption episodes.³¹ This bureaucratic body was reportedly accused of strongarming business owners and hindering their projects. Such practices are not new in Algeria and often highlight the questionable and harmful influence of bureaucratic elites who leverage their authority for personal aims and benefits. Regardless of the current administration's promises to protect the private sector, it is likely that the latter may serve as a potential scapegoat throughout the next few months for electoral purposes. Therefore, the challenge for any candidate including the current head of state will be to initiate a pragmatic and objective dialogue on economic policies without limiting the private sector's capacity to operate. Furthermore, limiting the damage of electoral instability and institutional shifts is necessary to reassure foreign investors and safeguard the endeavors of young Algerians who are working for their country's economic development.

Algiers' geopolitical dilemmas

Tebboune entered the presidential palace at a time of multiple crises for Algiers. Within its immediate neighborhood, Algeria assumed the role of the stable partner for Western countries as the entire region suffered the security fallout of the Arab uprisings. However, former president Bouteflika's absence from the local and international scenes because of his illness marginalized the country and prevented authorities from developing long-term plans to address regional challenges. A vital component of President Tebboune's electoral campaign in 2019 centered on reclaiming Algeria's prestige and diplomatic presence in the region and across Africa.³² The upcoming presidential election will, however, coincide with a major global responsibility for Algiers who will serve as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for a term of two years.³³ While Algeria's diplomatic principles, including support for anti-colonial movements and non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs, are unlikely to change in the short term, the global and regional shifts will trigger a bigger unofficial debate on the country's strategic direction.

Ahead of upcoming elections, Algeria's regional and international concerns could be divided into two key areas. First, the security upheaval and threats of political instability across the Middle East, North Africa, and Sahel regions will impose a discussion on a long-term strategy to protect Algeria's national security. Atop these threats, Algeria's government will have to consider ways to handle the coup d'état across the Sahel and the emerging anti-western, pro-Russian sentiments.³⁴ In addition to the explosive regional scene, any future Algerian leadership is likely to review the country's regional and international partnerships to defend Algiers' interests. This review will include relations with neighboring Morocco but also tools to navigate the great power competition and strategic shifts such as normalization with Israel across the MENA region.

A role to play in stabilizing regional upheaval

Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, Algeria's neighborhood has been a scene of political volatility and security upheavals. These developments have had a direct impact on Algerian institutions and policies. For example, the annual budget for Algeria's military has doubled from 5 billion dollars in the early 2000 to 10 billion dollars after the 2011 regional events.³⁵ To be sure, such expenditures are also related to the

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authorities' need to rehabilitate the armed forces following the 1990s war on terrorism. However, Algiers is increasingly worried about its environment and has continuously offered its mediation services to end the crises in Libya and across the Sahel. In that context, Algeria's ministry of foreign affairs was the main actor behind the 2015 reconciliation agreement in Mali³⁶ and has been one of the few actors who engaged in shuttle diplomacy to address the coup in Niger.³⁷

Nonetheless, Algiers' endeavor of favoring a political settlement has not been a full and lasting success. Both in Mali and Niger, the return to constitutional order does not look like a priority to the ruling juntas. The Malian military government has postponed the presidential elections initially scheduled in February 2024³⁸ while the putschists in Niger are facing increasing pressure to define a clear and short timeframe for the transition.³⁹ To make matters worse, both countries' leaderships have renounced the treaties signed with the European Union⁴⁰ and opted for a closer defense rapprochement with Moscow.⁴¹ In Mali, the Russian Wagner mercenary group has already deployed its troops⁴² and is reportedly engaged in war crimes against the local population.⁴³ All these developments will push any upcoming administration to think about long-term solutions to the Sahel crises and face the intense battle of geopolitical influence in the region.

In their various discussions with international partners, Algerian authorities have been clear about their rejection of military solutions in the Sahel in general and most recently in Niger.⁴⁴ Algiers' perspectives have diverged from European militarization policies as the Tebboune administration deeply believes the roots of the Sahel's crises are inherently economic. Therefore, authorities have been engaged with their European counterparts to organize a development conference for the region and have allocated special funds for infrastructure projects.⁴⁵ Still, regardless of the potential success and impact of such programs, Algiers will have to navigate its relations between European partners and ruling juntas in Mali and Niger. More importantly, a crucial element of Algeria's foreign policy agenda ahead of upcoming elections will focus on achieving a new status quo in the Sahel that would appease the local populations' socioeconomic grievances, be in line with Algiers' principles, and safeguard its interests and those of its international partners.

The future of partnerships

More broadly, the need for Algiers' engagement in the region highlights a bigger question about its future role and influence. The Tebboune administration's primary objective in 2019 was to recover from Algeria's long diplomatic absence. It is safe to say that several international partners, given the explosive regional situation, understand now that Algiers matters. More importantly, these partners are more willing considering the 2019 protest movement and regional and global shifts to

expand their cooperation with Algeria. However, this political desire cannot translate into concrete policies and roadmaps without the active involvement of Algerian authorities. In that context, any upcoming leadership in Algeria must provide a clear vision not only for its cooperation goals but also for the type of relationships it expects and works towards with regional and international partners.

Algeria's interests and partnerships both regionally and globally are likely to undergo an evaluation process in the next few years. This includes the relationship with neighboring countries especially Morocco but also mechanisms to protect Algiers' global standing amid intense geopolitical competition. Today, it is established that any return to normal ties between Algiers and Rabat, which have been severed since August 2021,⁴⁶ will depend on both capitals' ability to engage in confidence-building measures that would translate into a holistic dialogue on the regional security order. For that, Algiers and Rabat will have some difficult questions to consider about the regional security order and the limits of their military strategies and alliances. It is also true that both countries understand the consequences of any military escalation but achieving a durable reconciliation will depend on Algiers' and Rabat's readiness to look at the future and its opportunities instead of dwelling on the past and its bitter details.

Navigating this unstable neighborhood cannot be separated from the need to find Algiers' balance in a complicated world. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Algerian authorities struggled to defend their position in the face of Western pressures to condemn the Russian invasion. Moreover, the failed bid to join the BRICS economic group⁴⁷ has brought more questions than answers for Algiers' international posture and strategic direction. Most recently, authorities have shifted their interest to Western capitals including Washington and Paris. In fact, a defense cooperation agreement is set to be signed between Algeria and the United States in early 2024⁴⁸ as talks with Western countries are likely to intensify throughout Algiers' UNSC mandate.

In the end, though, Algerian authorities must determine the type of partnerships they will be seeking with different partners. This entails the necessity of an inclusive dialogue on Algeria's economic and security needs and the prioritization of national interests above the "principles' rhetoric". The current international context has given Algiers more regional relevance which could open doors to profitable opportunities both in terms of financial benefits and strategic influence. However, the presidential team will need to carefully analyze contemporary shifts and capitalize on Algeria's assets to secure its role in the long term. The great power competition is destined to become the "new normal" for international relations and Algerian authorities will continue to face hard questions that require pragmatic concessions.

Diversifying trade as a vital component

Besides security issues and bigger geopolitical concerns that weigh on Algiers' agenda, its international trade is also a vital question. The global oil and gas market's fluctuations have become increasingly risky for Algeria's public finances and social stability that it is crucial for authorities to reform their economic approach. International trade is seen, by most local actors, as a fundamental step into reviving the country's industrial potential and capitalizing on the current momentum to move beyond energy cooperation. Therefore, three main international priorities will be key for the future of Algeria's trade relations: renegotiating the association agreement with the EU, diversifying economic partners, and bolstering commercial ties with Western capitals such as Washington.

Since the first months of his term, the Tebboune administration was clear about its willingness to revise economic deals with several countries. First, it is a tradition for every Algerian president to want to leave his mark on the country's international treaties and agreements. Still, there is a general feeling amongst the ruling establishment that trade deals negotiated during Bouteflika's era were disadvantageous for the country and need to be reviewed. Hence, the Association Agreement with the EU, which entered into force in 2005, has been on the government's agenda for months as informal talks have already begun with European officials.⁴⁹ Algiers' objective will be centered on achieving privileged treatment for Algerian products in EU markets and attracting more investments to boost the country's industry. In that sense, the recent automobile projects with Italy⁵⁰ will likely serve as a model for the new cooperation scheme with Europe.

At the same time, the current context of international intense geopolitical competition forces Algeria to diversify its partners. As a pioneer of the non-alignment movement, the recent war in Ukraine posed serious threats to Algeria's self-perceived credibility and reputation as a neutral actor. To prove the independence of its foreign policy choices, Algiers had multiple trade initiatives with different actors. In that context, authorities applied to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization⁵¹ and explored investment opportunities during President Tebboune's trips to Moscow and Beijing all while hosting successive Western delegations from European capitals and Washington to launch joint industrial ventures. This strategy will continue in 2024 regardless of who wins the elections later this year since it is mainly a collective decision by the political establishment to avoid international pressures and respond to local socioeconomic grievances. Algerians' needs cannot be solely managed by the government which is itself hostage to bureaucratic limitations and will endure some instability before the upcoming elections.

A test for the opposition?

Despite the current administration's promises to detach itself from the heritage of the Bouteflika era, the political scene is still dominated by the old ruling elite.⁵² Similarly, the first cabinets of the Tebboune administration were marked by the return of figures who previously served during Bouteflika's time.⁵³ To be sure, the 2019 wave of change should not necessarily mean abandoning all former officials who proved their competency and who still have valuable experience to offer. Yet, the lack of fundamental changes also highlights the inability of the establishment to renew its own political elites and adapt to new realities, including the technological revolution and the rise of a new, entrepreneurial generation. As the old generation of leaders nears its retirement age, it will be crucial to work on incorporating young Algerians into the decision-making process and introducing new blood into the establishment across all sectors.

The renewal of political elites is, however, not only the system's mission but also the role of political opposition which should build on the right context and circumstances. In 2019, the Hirak protest movement mobilized all classes of Algeria's society as well as the political elite. The February uprising was a unifying moment for the country and constituted hope to build an alternative that would replace the ruling establishment. However, Algerians' unity was quickly undermined by the emerging ideological and political divergences. In the end, the movement was weakened, and the system was able to regenerate itself both domestically and internationally. Therefore, the Algerian opposition will also face a critical test in 2024 to demonstrate whether it has developed new platforms and bypassed its differences to propose a viable and serious alternative in the upcoming elections.

Algeria's opposition has long been a marginal actor in the political scene. Reasons vary and include its own miscalculations in addition to the regime's repressive policies that prevent any serious inter-communal political dialogue.⁵⁴ Still, it is the opposition's responsibility to navigate this environment, gain popularity, and advance its agenda. A quick look at the 2021 parliamentary and local elections' results⁵⁵ gives little hope about the opposition's capacity to form a common, cohesive front and replace the system. In fact, it is likely that different sides of Algeria's opposition will advance their own candidate, further dividing the political scene and leaving the establishment as the only united, at least in public, political actor.

Even if the opposition's chances seem very slim at scoring a significant win in 2024, the overall electoral environment

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will force this opposition's actors into the discussion table. It is important to remember that the current constitution, amended in 2020, limits presidential terms to a maximum of two.⁵⁶ Hence, the current Tebboune administration will be leaving power and Algeria will inevitably have a new elite within a few years. For the local opposition, this poses a serious question not only about its aptitude to represent a serious competitor to the current administration but more importantly about its willingness to capitalize on the electoral campaign to initiate a serious conversation about the post-Tebboune era and its options. Given the turbulent domestic, regional, and international context, this conversation must extend beyond the traditional political crises to Algiers' economic strategy and foreign policy.

Realistically though, Algeria's opposition continues to grapple with its own ideological and organizational crises and face systemic repression.⁵⁷ For now, the Algerian establishment has managed to impose its own agenda of national priorities and challenges as almost all political actors embrace the official narrative. Nonetheless, opposition parties, such as the Islamist MSP, that are represented in the Algerian parliament may have a limited opportunity to oppose and criticize certain public policies, especially on the economy.⁵⁸ In the short term, the clearest and safest strategy for Algeria's local opposition could be to engage in these same efforts within institutions even though such maneuvers would admittedly only yield small results. Still, any deep and fundamental changes would require a solid popular support, something that the opposition has no capacity to mobilize anytime soon.

Conclusion

Since the inception of Algeria's protest movement in 2019, the country has been in an unofficial state of transition. The current administration led by President Tebboune was endorsed by the establishment's actors, including the military leadership, to reach stability following a dangerous political crisis. It could be argued that the international context, coupled with this administration's social welfare and repressive policies, have

allowed Algiers to regain its status quo that characterized the early days of former President Bouteflika's tenure. At the same time, the compiling challenges on the political, socioeconomic, and security levels impose new standards of accountability and responsibilities on Algerian policymakers and the overall population ahead of the upcoming 2024 presidential elections. President Tebboune, and any potential competing candidate, will have to provide sustainable and efficient solutions to Algerians' basic and daily struggles and re-imagine Algiers' place and role regionally and globally. Algeria will still have many of its issues on the day following the elections, but only a roadmap with concrete objectives will calm the anxiety of the establishment and population about stability. Also, today's reality may not necessarily be what the Hirak actors had envisioned at first but change in Algeria will be a long process with gradual reforms that consider the local and international limitations.

Essentially, Algeria's road to the 2024 elections is also one towards a bigger debate about the country's future beyond the next term. Considering the development of local politics in a post-Hirak setting, regional and international contexts, and the emergence of new actors both at home and abroad, Algeria's political leadership sits on a big potential for development but will also face difficult questions on its trajectory. Local actors, especially across the establishment and economic scene, will be looking for a clearer timeline for political and economic reforms. On the other hand, Algeria's international partners are also expecting a more detailed foreign policy vision beyond Algiers' principles and historical diplomatic achievements given the explosive situation across the Sahel and the intense geopolitical competition. Finally, the next election will certainly serve as a referendum on the current administration, but it will also set the tone and aspirations for the long-term future of Algeria regardless of President Tebboune's ability to win a second term. Failure to engage on essential dossiers that have been continuously postponed since the Bouteflika era will not only worsen Algerians' daily lives but weaken any hopes for the new generation and undermine Algiers' foreign policy agenda and regional security.

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The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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