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The Politics of Democratic Decentralisation

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Kerala is once again drawing international attention. Many had been inspired by the earlier attempts at furthering democratisation towards pro-poor development by way of decentralisation. And many had also made note of the problems encountered. Now, many are eager to learn the ways in which improvements have been made by drawing on previous lessons.

On the one hand, this work may now be easier. You have gained a wealth of experience since the attempts that began in the mid-late 1980s to reform and revitalise the ‘Kerala Model’ of human development from below, which had been undermined from above and through the expansion of unregulated markets.

On the other hand, your task may now be more difficult. In the age of global neo-liberalism, decentralisation can mean everything from privatisation to popular rule at the local level. In fact, almost everyone is embracing decentralisation in one form or another. Of course one may oppose this increasingly common practice of giving new general meanings to concepts that have gained popular legitimacy. But in this case it is already a fact, both on the level of rhetoric and reality.

The initial point I want to make is, therefore, that since almost all the significant actors are now involved in this ‘actually existing decentralisation’, they will somehow have to make it work. The major strategies seem to consist of the resourcefulness of

actors who either colonise or bypass decentralised administrative and political institutions, of the elitist politicians and bureaucrats who allow for decentralisation within the framework of stateist control, as with China, and that of communitarian, liberal, and of populist but also ‘Paris-Commune-Oriented’ efforts at improvement and generation of pro-poor and rights based development through various forms of direct democratisation.

This is not special to Kerala. Similar processes and problems are found also in other parts of the world, most dramatically in the South and the former Eastern Block, though of course in different contexts. Since I cannot cover the full spectrum, let me reflect on the general tendencies with special focus on those trying to combine democracy and decentralisation. I shall do so on the basis of my attempts since the late-1980s to follow and compare the experiences of some of the pioneering and later also significant actors that have tried different democratic solutions within the framework of both old centralism and new neo-liberalism: here in Kerala, in the Philippines, and particularly in Indonesia – but also with reference to related experiments and discourses in Brazil, South Africa and in my own backyard, in Scandinavia.¹

My argument will be that the major challenges faced so far by these and other democratic efforts through decentralisation have *not* been the institutional and technical designs – no matter how important, but rather what I call the political deficit. I will discuss this deficit in the context of the three broad projects involved. The first includes mainstream efforts at rights based democratisation; the second includes improvements through more extensive decentralisation; and the third is that of additional progress through the institutionalisation of public spheres between citizens and government – of which the People’s Planning Campaign was one pioneering experiment.

¹ For summaries of the details and references, see Törnquist, O.: *Popular Development and Democracy: Case Studies with Rural Dimensions in the Philippines, Indonesia and Kerala*. Geneva and Oslo: UNRISD and SUM, 2002; Prasetyo Stanley, A., Priyono, A.E, and Törnquist, O. : *Indonesia’s Post-Soeharto Democracy Movement*, Jakarta: Demos, 2003; Harriss, J, Stokke, K. and Törnquist, O. (eds), *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratisation in Developing Countries*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004; Priyono, A.E , Subono, N.I., and Törnquist, O. *Making Democracy Meaningful. Problems and Options in Indonesia*, Jakarta: Demos, 2005.

The Mainstream Project

The first project comprises of mainstream efforts at rights based democracy that have mainly concerned the so-called new democracies in the South and the former Eastern Block, but which have also been referred to in attempts at making improvements in already established, though limited, democracies like India.

The model case is the Spanish transition from Fascism to democracy, followed by related attempts in Latin America. The basic rationale is to implement and benefit from limited but vital elements of democracy such as civil and political liberties and an end to outright repression in spite of an unfavourable balance of power. Thus, the proponents argue, it is necessary to stem popular action for more radical change from below. This also makes it possible to benefit from foreign support in exchange for liberal market conditionalities and to broker a political pact between reform-oriented incumbents and moderate dissidents. This in turn opens up opportunities for an enlightened elite to ‘get the institutions right’ – i.e. to craft rights and institutions such as free and fair elections, rule of law, and civil society. These ‘rules of the game’ will then discipline the various actors into becoming reasonable democrats.

While the institutions should *perform* well, they should also be limited in *scope* in order to allow the dominant actors – foreign as well as domestic, to retain their own assets as well as to privatise what they had once controlled via the state. Otherwise, it was argued, they would not give up their absolute political and military powers and agree to even a limited form of democracy. In addition, many of the remaining elements of public politics and state should be decentralised. And at local level, parts of the public administration should be transformed into self-management – in co-operation with civic organisations and on the basis of trust (‘social capital’) among local citizens in general (rather than on common interests based on, for instance, class or gender and related ideologies).

Aside from the apparent overlap with regard to decentralisation between this elitist perspective and neo-liberal and communitarian ideas among NGOs and social

movements, there is also an interesting ‘grey zone’ in between their joint position on the one hand and that of many radical groups and movements on the other. The radical actors may well be in favour of much more social and collective solutions and a wide public sphere, but having been exposed to stateist arbitrariness and oppression, and having thus lost trust in ‘dirty’ politicians and the political system at large including centralistic leftist parties, a common alternative has rather been to favour ‘people’s own’ solutions on the local level.

The general result of this mainstream project is rather positive in terms of more civil and political rights and freedoms as well as technically free and fair elections – but poor with respect to the other intrinsic dimensions of democracy. The weak institutions are those that are meant to uphold legal and basic social justice, the rule of law, ‘good governance’, prevent corruption and promote representation. And it is the latter that is the worst – the poor representation of people’s basic interests and ideas, including through interest organisations and political parties. The top down crafted ‘correct institutions’ are simply not powerful enough to discipline the dominant actors who rather bypass or manipulate and abuse them. Thus, while the established elite continue to dominate from within the private sphere or by colonising the new and supposedly pro-democratic rules of the game, the pro-democrats are co-opted or marginalised from mainstream politics and confined to local level civil society. This marginalisation is both because it was (as we have already seen) an intentional part of the elitist path of democratisation *and* because the pro-democrats themselves were in search of a grounded civic alternative and avoided ‘dirty’ politics. The empirical evidence is very clear, most recently from a national survey in Indonesia among democracy oriented local experts.²

These problems have become increasingly widely recognised during recent years, especially when reflected in threatening and not always progressive plebeian protests such as Chavez populism in Venezuela, ‘autonomous’ anarchist youth on the streets of Seattle or Gothenburg, rioting unemployed-immigrant-youth in Paris, or rather widespread local understanding of some of the extreme Muslim protests and reactions to arrogant American hegemony.

² Priyono, A.E , Subono, N.I., and Törnquist, O., op.cit.

The most exciting response has been to acknowledge the need for more politicisation in addition to technocratic attempts at ‘getting the institutions right’. The concept of politicisation is of course not limited to narrow clientelism, party loyalties or religious or ethnic rule, although these are among some of the risks. Its general meaning includes instead the transformation of individualised and privatised common matters into public ones, and attempts to reduce widespread political marginalisation through better representation of people and their concerns.

There are two major attempts to promote politicisation in this general sense. One is that of the enlightened advocates of the elitist paradigm who say that certain vital institutions such as political parties and party systems have been neglected and call for urgent improvement. Several international organisations have already embraced the idea, typically focusing on education and institutional design.³ Another tendency is that of the critics of the elitist paradigm. They say that aside from the fact that there are huge risks involved in foreign support for political parties, one must realise that most of the existing parties are part of the problem and usually cannot simply be improved upon. Thus one must generate politicisation and representation from below by integrating rather than incorporating issues and people into politics.

Expanded Decentralisation

This takes us to the second project, which concerns improvements through more extensive democratic decentralisation rather than further top down crafting of ‘ideal’ institutions. The point of departure is that the actually existing decentralisation is firmly established and should be taken advantage of even though neo-liberal tendencies are involved. This can be done by both emphasising orderly decentralisation of existing democratic government and administration as against privatisation *and* by facilitating people’s own ability to build their own initiatives and keep politicians and bureaucrats accountable.

³ Interesting research on this process is carried out by Thomas Carothers at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a book is forthcoming.

Again however: the general results have been rather depressing. The dominant trend is *not* orderly decentralisation of existing government and public administration but ‘laissez faire decentralisation’ by way of privatisation, deregulation and the expansion of a fragmented, so-called third sector of small scale self-management and associational life; associations that are not just based on equal citizenship and democracy but quite often on exclusionary ethnicity, religion, and special interests of certain groups (from labourers to businessmen) or residents in certain areas. The worst cases (such as in several countries of the former Eastern Block and Africa and in Asian countries like Indonesia) include localised power struggles to capture public resources and capacities – at times by means organised crime, militia groups and instigation of ethnic and religious conflicts.

Because of this ‘laissez faire decentralisation’ only limited capacities and powers remain with orderly decentralised government and public administration. Consequently the potentially democratic public sector makes limited sense to many actors – and democracy as a means to handle conflicts as well as the distribution of power and resources is weakened.

Even fewer resources are available to participatory popular schemes. One risk therefore is that they turn into ‘private social work’ which at times deteriorate into clientelism and special benefits to special groups. Moreover, poor residents frequently have to attend numerous participatory meetings and carry out extensive participatory work to gain a minor share of basic services such as water – services that middle class residents can get delivered straight into their houses and on the spot for a modest sum of money without wasting their precious time. In other words, the vulnerable actors have to live with ‘shared public poverty’ while the stronger benefit from unregulated markets.

Meanwhile, localism, fragmentation and polycentrism flourish among NGOs and social movements. This generates additional problems of aggregating issues and interests, building common organisations and promoting accountable and responsive representation. At worst, organised politics is simply neglected and left wide open for the elite to dominate. In Indonesia for example, the national expert survey I mentioned above indicates that 55 percent of pro-democrats give priority to direct democracy in

civil society while only 7 percent opt for representative constitutional democracy on the basis of civil society organisations.

Popular Experiments

The third project is to not just build a public local sphere but also to institutionalise it. This is in order to generate non-clientelistic connections between citizens and government and to promote deliberation as a way of making priorities and aggregate issues and interests.

Let me expand on three pioneering experiences that I have some knowledge of. The first is the Philippine attempt to utilise the law on decentralisation by bringing together likeminded NGOs, people's organisations, and political blocks on the local level. The aim is to thus combine on the one hand the promotion of 'good governance' on the basis of constructive and realistic schemes and self-management projects, and on the other hand mass based demand-politics for what services should be provided and what priorities should be made by the local government and administration. (Separate demand-politics versus business and employers come of course in addition). Such joint efforts have required extensive preparation as well as follow up by *both* a supportive political party (The Citizen Action Party *Akbayan*) as well as a rather NGO-ish programme (known by the expressive acronym of BATMAN).⁴

The second experiment is of course the major showcase for participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil. As in the Philippines, one vital point of departure was the radical decentralisation that occurred in Brazil during the transition to democracy. Another was that the workers party P.T. (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) won the mayoral election. The mayor accepted demands to facilitate popular participation with significant influence (not just consultation) and appointed an efficient team of administrators and facilitators. These cadres made use of the mayor's extensive

⁴ For one analysis of these efforts, see Eastrella, M and Iszatt, N. (eds): *Beyond Good Governance. Participatory Democracy in The Philippines*. Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2004. For the best, more general and indepth related analysis, see Quimpo, N.G: *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos*. PhD thesis. Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2004.

powers to bypass the clientelisticly rooted but nevertheless elected councillors as well as local fixers, clientelistic community organisations and interest organisations with potential special interests⁵ – establishing and institutionalising instead direct relations between individual citizens in residential groups and public executives and administrators.⁶

The third experiment is the similarly pioneering People's Planning Campaign in Kerala, the basics of which were political will and agency to make a general decision about democratic decentralisation, to launch a big-bang devolution of about 35 percent of the investment budget to the local authorities – on the condition that they take an active part in the planning scheme, and to initiate a series of more or less tentative local institutions to facilitate popular self-management as well as citizens' direct influence on political decisions and political and administrative execution of planned investments.

As far as I can see, these impressive attempts have all been characterised by four major 'deficits', namely the deficit of attraction, the deficit of state capacity, the deficit of scale and the deficit of politics of democratisation.

The deficit of attraction

Many impoverished people (such as fisher folk or indigenous peoples) as well as the middle classes do not try to solve their problems (for instance regarding jobs and social welfare) through the new experimental schemes in the public sphere, but rather tend to opt for private and possibly more enduring patronage as well as informal solutions provided by the expansion of unregulated markets. Thus there is no majority support behind the new measures and many people lose interest and willingness to contribute. This call for broader alliances and public institutionalisation of

⁵ The extensive powers of the mayor in relation to the elected councillors may be explained briefly in terms of a local presidential rather than parliamentary system, with direct election of the president and an American-like spoil system where many politically appointed executives in the administration, in contrast to permanently employed bureaucrats who are supposed to do their job in strict accordance with the rule of the laws that have been decided by the elected politicians.

⁶ The best studies include Abers, R.N. *Inventing Local Democracy: Grassroots Politics in Brazil*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003, Baiocchi, G. (ed) *Radicals in Power. The Workers' Party (PT) and Experiments in Urban Democracy in Brazil*, London and New York: Zed Books, 2003, and Baiocchi, G. *Militants and Citizens. The Politics of Participatory Democracy in Porto Alegre*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

programmes as part of demands for all citizens' right to basic education, health services, clean water, employment, social security etc.

The deficit of state capacity

This refers to the diminishing capacity of the organised public sphere. It has been well established by comparative studies that meaningful democracy calls for public resources and capacity that have usually been handled by the state at the central and local level. Similarly, it is quite clear that well functioning decentralisation calls for a resourceful, efficient and well co-ordinating state, not for a weak state.⁷ This calls for broad struggle against neo-liberalism – and for rethinking among civil society actors who primarily oppose the state rather than the lack of democratic control of the state.

The deficit of scale

This refers to the limits of local alternatives. The sources of power that are responsible for many of the problems at the local level are not present and possible to address. There are also limits in terms of scaling up and relating to supra levels. At worst, this paves the way for more or less well indented yet blatant top down interventions – as well as for local clientelism. More or less romantic localism must obviously be negated in favour of efforts at democratic division of labour, representation and federation.

The political deficit of democratisation

The essence of which includes insufficient linkages between citizens, and between state and citizens. In my view this is the key-problem, which I would therefore like to use the rest of the paper to expand upon.

The Political Deficit

The initial aspect of the political deficit is that *the vital role of politics in facilitating the popular participatory models is neglected* – unfortunately, I am afraid, because that aspect does not fit into the rosy picture of local, civic deliberation, joint work and

⁷ At least aside from the very undermining of authoritarian rule and beyond Tocqueville's communitarian dream of American settler democracy, later on replicated in Putnam's ideas of north Italian social capital based on civic virtues in old city-states

participation in contrast to ‘dirty politics’. In fact, all the experiments were made possible to implement by way of politics. In the Philippines a new citizen action party (*Akbayan*) played a vital role. In Porto Alegre the P.T party won the elections and the mayor used his extensive powers to launch participatory budgeting from top down. And in Kerala the Left Front won the elections and leading members used the Planning Board to introduce and direct the ‘People’s Campaign’. The participatory models did not grow directly out of neighbourhood organisations or civil society in general. Civic organisations did indeed suggest and demand such measures, but it took co-ordinated politics to really get them under way on a broader scale. It is quite possible, of course, to export the *concept* of participatory budgeting from Porto Alegre to Bandung in Indonesia, for instance. But money from Ford Foundation, for instance, to some NGOs involved is not really enough to substitute for the electoral victories in Porto Alegre, the power of a progressive mayor and widespread popular organisation.

Turning to the developing and practice of the experiments, another dilemma is that people and actions are not focused. This is partly due to structural obstacles. Workplaces have become less unified over time and service sectors have expanded. But there is also *insufficient co-ordination of potentially supportive groups and forces in the political terrain at large*. In brief, the new participatory and deliberative schemes are weak where the old interest-driven and state oriented efforts were strong, and vice versa. This may be quite alright. There is nothing wrong with people being active along different frontlines – as long as that differentiation is supplementary and not contradictory. But the problem is that divisive contradictions seem to dominate. For instance, ‘old’ demand-politics for state interventions are often in conflict with popular efforts at self-management and constructive policy proposals; residence and community organisers are often at loggerheads with workplace organisers; workers in informal sectors and traditional industries are rarely online with organised sector workers; and party activities are usually incompatible with independent movements and separate action groups. Setting aside previous attempt to rally scattered activities beyond The Party or The Leader, this problem of divisive fragmentation obviously calls for more emphasis on the development of political forums for negotiation and co-ordination.

The third dimension of the political deficit is the *unsuccessful re-politicisation of issues and interests*. In Kerala for instance, mainstream politicisation is fragmented and centralised at the same time. The major logic is *not* that people with many different ideas and interests elect politicians who represent their general interests and perspectives and who produce universal regulations that apply to all. The main tendency is rather that people are coming together on the basis of special interests and values who then look around for politicians who can cater best to these narrow interests – and that such politicians must cater to these divisive interests, protect them and then also centralise these fragmented clientelistic networks to make a difference and get elected. Whether it is the chicken or the egg that comes first is difficult to say, but the pattern applies to both the Right and the Left (in different fashions and with different degree of individualisation and organisation). And neither the civil society part nor the political part of the equation has proved able to break the vicious circle. Thus it is quite understandable that many civic and political activists in Kerala and elsewhere have tried to break out of the circle by way of de-party-and-interest-group-politicisation.

The problem is that the alternatives have not been very successful. In Kerala, the ultimate test is that no broad social movement in favour of democratic decentralisation has emerged. To simply avoid politics and leave the matter to ‘people themselves and civil society’ in various village meetings, workshops, beneficiary committees or neighbourhood groups obviously neglects the fact that people of the same wards or members of the same civic organisation are not necessarily ‘clean’ and unified on the one hand, with politics being dirty and divisive on the other. People and civil society are quite fragmented and factionalised, not just because of clientelistic politics but also because the increasingly atomising dynamics of the unregulated markets.

Moreover, the charming idea of substituting deliberative democracy (based on the primacy of the argument) for contentious democracy (based on different interests and ideas) as a way of making priorities and aggregating interests and ideas is difficult enough to apply by the advocates in their seminars. Thus it is even more problematic among highly unequal citizens in terms of class, caste, gender, age etc. who may not even agree on the principles of human rights and democracy.

In fact, there is historical evidence to suggest that fragmentation is best avoided where decentralisation has been related to broad and unifying instrumental interest in promoting and making use of local democratic institutions. One example from a century and half ago is the role of the independent peasantry in Scandinavia; another and more recent case is land reform in West Bengal. Kerala missed the possible link in the 1960s and 1970s between local development and land reform. Here as in many other cases there is a need therefore to re-politicise broad instrumental interests and issues that should bring many people together in favour of meaningful democratic decentralisation. There is no reason (aside from narrow factional interests) why it would not be possible to combine demands for better public policies at both central and local levels – for instance for public education for all and firm regulations against unproductive or environmentally destructive use of land, with constructive participation and local initiatives among people themselves.

This brings us to *the problem of democratic mediation and responsive and accountable representation*. A basic rationale of the progressive experiments is to do away with not only narrow politicisation of special interests but also the political and bureaucratic middle-men and their organisations that monopolise the linkages between people and government. The aim is, in other words, to establish a wider public sphere *and* craft institutions that would enable individual citizens to come into direct contact with government (direct democracy) without having to rely on patrons, fixers, and even various interest organisations. This would put pressure on actually existing organisations, neighbourhood groups and political parties to adjust to the new pattern, do away with their clientelism and help distribute wide powers to the citizens themselves. As far as I understand the argument, parties and interest based organisations should confine themselves to general politics, organising at the workplace level and stay away from community and residence based participatory democracy.

There are two problems involved here. The first is that one neglects what we pointed out at the outset: that political parties (with strong trade union components) were absolutely necessary to put participatory practices in place and therefore might also be important in sustaining them. Second, efforts at ‘getting the institutions right’ by

design is often as insufficient and out of context when carried out by campaigners within radical programmes as by elitist experts within the mainstream top down project that we discussed earlier. Many established organisations, not only rightist or communal ones, do not adjust and reform themselves but rather manipulate and abuse the new political sphere and institutions. I do not have to tell you that this is what happened to the Peoples' Planning Campaign in the early 1990's. Thus, there is an obvious need to counter this by way of forceful alternative politics, not just introducing the 'right' institutions.

Of greater concern, even if the new institutions for direct contact, influence and participation between citizens and government are reasonably intact and functional there are vital problems of democracy. The linkages between 'good' administration and citizens on the ground are often left unspecified. The frequently mentioned councils, beneficiary groups, and taskforces are just as rudimentary as the institutions mentioned in more conventional lists of intrinsic elements of democracy like elections or parties. In other words, the critical output depends more on the actors' will as well as their capacity to promote, use and abuse or bypass the institutions than on the institutions themselves.

These *actual* linkages are much of what politics is all about, including the aggregation of different interests and issues from the private to the public sphere and from the local to the centre. And beyond the very local level, this is of course the major field for representative democracy – based on a reasonably clearly defined demos (people, citizens), participation, authorisation, responsiveness, specific responsibilities, transparency, accountability and solidarity.

If we focus on building direct participatory democracy and thus set aside representation, who is then responsible for what and accountable to whom? What of all the citizens who cannot (or simply do not) participate? Are all the active leading figures, residential groups, NGOs and social movements equally good or how does one differ from the other, and who makes the selection? What issues and sectors are covered by what group? Who do they represent and who are they responsible and accountable to? How can corruption be fought in a democratic way if we do not elect and keep track of those who are supposed to decide about better rules and supervise

those who implement them? Or should various groups and civic activists with good connections and networks lobby bureaucrats and lawyers who then decide the actual rules and what should be done? There may well be systems for internal (or so-called horizontal) accountability within administration, but what of the vertical accountability to the people? And who makes the policy decisions in the first place? What is left of popular control of public affairs on the basis of political equality if networks and good contacts are what matter?

It may well be that existing parties, interest organisations, elections, parliaments and public administration are not good enough even to be reformed. But if these institutions and what they are supposed to do are merely avoided or bypassed, they will continue to be dominated by the established elite. And if those institutions such as for the allocation of interests, mediation, representation and accountability are replaced by populism in terms of imaginary direct relations between government and citizens and their local organisations, there is indeed a problem of meaningful rights based democracy.

The obvious option is that participation and self-management is oriented towards efforts at reforming and developing linkages with representation and public administration. But that is easier said than done. The only comfort is that pro-democrats in Kerala, the Philippines and Brazil are both at the frontline of necessary advancements *and* share many of these challenges with old democracies like Norway and Sweden, or for that matter with the democratic deficit in the European Union.⁸

Finally, and perhaps most challenging in the contest of Kerala: *the lack of a strong public sphere for autonomous dispute and discussion among independent citizens.* This is strange, given all the speeches and papers about 'public action' in the 'Kerala model' and about the transparency and public space that would be generated by the Peoples' Planning Campaign. Yet media and other forums for public discourse seem to be based on the primacy of narrow interests rather than the argument.

⁸ For relevant summaries in English of major results from the recent extensive project on power and democracy in Norway, for instance, see the thematic issue on Norway: The Transformation of a Political System. (Editor: Øyvind Østerud) of West European Politics, Volume 28, Number 4 September 2005.

To begin with – and just like in relation to many other experiments with participatory democracy – the importance of power and politics seem to be avoided. Listen to any speech or read any paper on the problems of democratic decentralisation and associated pro-poor development, and you will find that they tend to be technocratic in character, focusing on what the ideal laws or institutional arrangements would be – as if these could be decided and implemented without considering existing conditions in terms of conflicting interests, perspectives and groups. In Kerala this occurs to the extent that significantly politically engaged activists avoid the problems of politics of democratic decentralisation.

“You can’t talk about everything publicly” is the standing answer I am given. But why should politics in general and political parties in particular not be at least as transparent and public as the bureaucrats in the administration who are subject to our harsh criticism? Hidden politics, leftist included, with no way of keeping people accountable for the importance and substance of ‘news worthy’ allegations, is what nourishes, for instance, absurd public allegations in Kerala of ‘sleeping with the enemy’ made against activists with intellectual integrity. Worse: hidden politics obviously obstructs the rise of the new political engagement that is necessary to propel and improve impressive experiments like the People’s Planning Campaign.

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