

ISMAİL CEM'S VIEWS ON KEMALISM

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Summary

Ismail Cem (1940-2007) was a Turkish intellectual and social democrat politician who served as the Turkish Foreign Minister between 1997 and 2002. Cem spent his life investigating the characteristics and problems of Turkish modernization and social democratic solutions to these problems. Ismail Cem wrote on every aspects of Turkish history but especially Cem's critic of Kemalism (modernization paradigm of Turkish Republic which was identified with the founder of modern Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) is very interesting and valuable since he was an important part of Kemalist-leftist intellectuals of the country but also offered a different vision than classical Kemalist elite. This article aims to make an analysis of Cem's views on Kemalism and its peculiarities from other interpretations of Kemalism.

Keywords: Ismail Cem, Turkish Left, Social Democracy, Kemalism, Turkish Politics

Introduction

Ismail Cem (1940-2007) was a Turkish intellectual and social democratic politician who spent his life investigating the characteristics and problems of Turkish modernization and social democratic solutions to these problems. Cem started his career as a peculiar socialist journalist who had a special curiosity towards the Ottoman past in the late 1960s and early 1970s. With his books and articles he became an influential and prestigious figure in the leftist intellectual and political circles and served as the manager of Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). Unlike usual leftist-modernist intellectuals, he was very critical of "top to bottom" Turkish modernization and had propositions to solve Turkey's political problems within the limits of democracy. During these years, Cem's democratic socialism slowly evolved into social democracy. Starting from the 1980s, Cem appeared this time as a social democratic politician and tried to realize his projects and reduce his theories into practice. He was one of the leading figures of Turkish social democracy and was the creator of the "Anatolian Left" together with Deniz Baykal. In the mid-1990s he served for a short time as the Minister of Culture and starting from 1997 -with short interruptions- for five years he worked as the Foreign Minister of Turkey. He continued to write about Turkish politics and foreign policy and left behind an important collection of books and articles. Ismail Cem's critic of Kemalism is very interesting and valuable since he was an important part of Kemalist-leftist intellectuals of the country but also offered a different vision than classical Kemalist elite.

Kemalism

Although Kemalism is not accepted as a total ideology but only “a technique for discovering the truth and dissolving illusions”¹ like that of French ideologues and a final and radical interpretation of 150 years old Ottoman modernization² for many, we see that in the 1930s there were many attempts to formulate Kemalism as a concrete, substantial ideology. The most important ones among these “competing Kemalisms” were *Ülkü* and *Kadro* movements. *Kadro* and *Ülkü* movements appeared at a time when the statist economic development model and authoritarianism were very popular in the European world especially after the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. Clashes within the Republican People’s Party, especially between the liberal *İş Bank* group led by Celal Bayar and bureaucratic group led by İsmet İnönü, created a convenient environment for *Kadro* to make publication freely.³ Alongside with *Kadro* and *Ülkü* movements, there was Republican Conservatives group that tried to formulate a Kemalist ideology that was more compatible with Islam and conservatism.⁴ Kemalism continued to be reformulated and presented as an ideology especially after military interventions. These interpretations were different from each other and reflected Turkey’s foreign policy and economic preferences. In that sense, 27 May 1960s leftist Kemalism⁵ and 12 September 1980s nationalist-Islamist Atatürkism (Turkish-Islam synthesis) based on free-market economics⁶ differed highly from each other. Metin Heper thought that Atatürkism was based on a strategy of creating a transient moderate transcendental state but his followers were not able to distinguish his strategy from his tactics and in that sense, even opponents of Atatürk could have presented themselves as “genuine Atatürkists” by finding a quotation from him in accordance with their real ideology.⁷

For many including Suna Kili, Kemalism or Atatürkism was a paradigm of modernization that rejects Islamic perspectives or foreign ideologies. “Both pragmatic and functional, Atatürkism alone is what is needed to see to it that Turkey is successful in its use of its future-oriented paradigm of national modernization.”⁸ Kili claimed that Western positivism and solidarism had an impact on Kemalism

¹ Professor Heper asserted that Atatürkism or Kemalism did not refer to a quality or type of thought, but rather as a technique for discovering truth and dissolving illusions similar to French Idéologues of the post-Enlightenment process. Heper points out that “For Atatürk too, the efforts to discover the direction in which society was moving entailed resorting to a scientific approach”. See; Metin, Heper, *The State Tradition In Turkey*, p. 63. Heper also pointed out that Atatürk never thought to establish a state based on personal rule and tried to arrange the new republic’s laws for making it as people’s state. Moreover, he thought that Atatürk always believed in scienticism in positivist manner and used rationalism in state affairs. In that sense, Heper claimed that Atatürk envisioned a transient transcendental state.

² Halil İnalcık, *Atatürk ve Demokratik Türkiye*, p. 65.

³ Ertan Aydın, “The Peculiarities Of Turkish Revolutionary Ideology In The 1930s: The *Ülkü* Version Of Kemalism, 1933-36”, p. 55.

⁴ For a detailed study see; Nazım İrem. 2002. “Turkish Conservative Modernism: Birth of a Nationalist Quest for Cultural Renewal” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, (1), February 2002, pp. 87-112.

⁵ For Mazıcı, 27 May was the restoration of Kemalism through military invention. See; Nurşen Mazıcı. 2004. “27 Mayıs, Kemalizmin Restorasyonu mu?” in *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasi Düşünce cilt 2 Kemalizm*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları. However, Heper claims “if the view is accepted that the 1960 revolution was really an attempt by the Kemalist centre to reimpose its hegemony, it is difficult to understand why the 1961 constitution turned out to be so liberal”. See; Metin Heper, *The State Tradition In Turkey*, p. 13.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of 12 September’s so-called Atatürkism, see; Yüksel Taşkın, “12 Eylül Atatürkçülüğü ya da Bir Kemalist Restorasyon Teşebbüsü Olarak 12 Eylül”, pp. 570-583.

⁷ Metin Heper, *The State Tradition In Turkey*, p. 11.

⁸ Suna Kili. 2003. *The Atatürk Revolution A Paradigm of Modernization*. İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, p. 193.

which aimed to modernize archaic social structure, value system and lifestyle in Anatolia. Six arrows of the Republican People's Party which symbolize six principles of Kemalism form the basis of Kemalist or Atatürkist ideology. These six principles namely: Republicanism, Nationalism, Populism, Etatism (Statism), Laicism (Secularism) and Revolutionism (Reformism) earned semi-ideology status with regard to Kemalism, though these principles did not evolve as static ideological obsessions.⁹

Ismail Cem on Kemalism

Ismail Cem analyzed Kemalism as a kind of radicalism.¹⁰ In his view, Kemalism was similar to the radicalist movement in France which rejected conservatism and depended on petty bourgeois segments including urban people, intellectuals, bureaucrats and local notables.¹¹ Cem thought that all radical movements including Kemalism were based on principles of republicanism, secularism and positivism and that they had a pragmatist character. Moreover, all radical movements had distrust towards macro ideologies, including widespread practice of technocracy and elitism, due to their enlightening mission in an unenlightened society.¹² Cem claimed that the leftist interpretation of radicalism was also possible but this would not mean a real social democratic or socialist movement. Ismail Cem wrote that this radicalism tradition began to affect Turkish intelligentsia starting from the 19th century and organizations like Young Turks and Committee of Union and Progress were radicalist movements that aimed to modernize the Ottoman state and enlighten Ottoman society.¹³ Due to Abdülhamid's despotism, many young intellectuals of the 19th century had to escape to Europe, especially France. Radicalism tradition in Turkey was strengthened after this period since young Ottoman intellectuals had the chance to closely observe French radicalism and positivism. That is why, Cem claimed the classical Turkish left was largely based on the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy instead of the proletariat and the Turkish left has had a petty bourgeois character from the beginning.¹⁴ In that sense, Cem considered classical pre-Ecevit RPP of the 1960s as a leftist version of radicalism known as Kemalism in Turkey.¹⁵ Except for a short period in the 1970s under Ecevit's leadership, Cem thought there had never been a real socialist or social democratic party in Turkey and RPP always kept its radical aspects. While Ismail Cem was making his criticism towards Kemalism, he was often referring to Leftist Kemalism and did not put other rightist versions of Kemalism on his agenda. Thus, it would be better to focus on Leftist Kemalism before passing to Cem's criticism of Kemalism.

Leftist Kemalism

Faruk Alpkaya in his research on Leftist Kemalism (*Sol Kemalizm*), concluded that Leftist Kemalism is an ideology of "Turkish exceptionism" that has become always very influential especially in the times of breaking up.¹⁶ Alpkaya thought that similar to Cem's thesis, Leftist Kemalism was nourished from

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 202-258.

¹⁰ Many other writers including Hakkı Uyar, Mete Tunçay and Zafer Toprak also pointed out similarities between RPP's programme European radical and democrat parties. RPP had also links with Entente Internationale des Partis Radicaux et des Partis Democratiques Similaires in the early years of the Republic. For details, see; Hakkı Uyar. "CHP'nin Avrupa'nın Radikal ve Demokrat Partileri ile İlişkileri (1926-1935)", retrieved on 15.10.2009 from <http://kisi.deu.edu.tr/hakki.uyar/yayinlar1.html>

¹¹ Ismail Cem, *Sosyal Demokrasi Ya Da Demokratik Sosyalizm Nedir, Ne Değildir*, p. 307.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 307.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 308.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 308.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 308-309.

¹⁶ Faruk Alpkaya, "Bir 20. Yüzyıl Akımı: Sol Kemalizm", p. 480.

the radical ideology of the French Revolution and created its own intellectuals in each period.¹⁷ However, Alpkaya noted that due to 12 September's official Atatürkism, which was based on the ideology of Turkish-Islamic synthesis, Leftist Kemalists were for a while driven out into different positions (social democracy, liberalism, socialism, Maoism) in the left.¹⁸ Alpkaya also pointed out that starting from the 2000s, due to Turkey's economic problems and foreign policy crisis, Leftist Kemalism again became influential in the country although he claimed that this never had a concrete economic and political programme except the aim of ruling Turkey from Turkey.¹⁹ Three important names of the Leftist Kemalism ideology that Ismail Cem was affected by and had personal intimacy with were Uğur Mumcu, Attila İlhan and İlhan Selçuk.

Uğur Mumcu (1942-1993) was a bold and famous Turkish journalist who wrote for the leading Kemalist daily *Cumhuriyet*.²⁰ Mumcu was killed by a bomb placed in his car, outside his home on 24 January 1993. There are numerous hypotheses over who was responsible for his murder but the dominant view is that this assassination was related to Iran and political Islamist groups in Turkey. Mumcu is a symbolic figure in the left especially for Leftist Kemalists. Mumcu was also a close friend of Ismail Cem although they did have some differences in their political stances. Mumcu similar to Yön movement thought that the primary conflict in international capitalism was between imperialism and exploited nations.²¹ Mumcu and other Leftist Kemalists never ignored class conflicts within Turkey but their primary focus was foreign policy and their basic motive was anti-imperialism. Starting from the 1960s Uğur Mumcu had always emphasized the anti-imperialist character of Kemalism and tried to unify different versions of the left in the line of Leftist Kemalism.²² Mumcu was also important because unlike Doğan Avcioğlu he never renounced parliamentary democracy and underlined the fact that even Turkish Independence War was ruled by a parliament.²³ His Leftist Kemalism took its roots from the *Kuvayi Milliye* movement and Turkish Independence War and was based on Western, modern, secular lifestyle and anti-imperialist independent foreign policy.²⁴ Mumcu was very sensitive about defending secularism against rising Islamism danger and also about Kemalist nationalism against growing Kurdish ethno-nationalism.²⁵ His approaches to these two issues (Kurdish question and political Islam) were also related to his perception of imperialism and he thought that foreign countries had supported PKK terrorism and tolerated religious fundamentalist movements in Turkey. Compared to Ismail Cem, Mumcu was closer to classical, more nationalist Kemalism, and he was less critical of single-party period. Cem and Mumcu shared the same views on democracy and freedom of opinion. Mumcu, especially after the 1980 coup, had always underlined the necessity of democratic parliamentary methods in politics and together with Cem they had a clean democratic record, unlike many leftist Kemalists who engaged in militarist solutions.

Attila İlhan (1925-2005) was also another important and unique figure in the Leftist Kemalism tradition, and was an acquaintance of Cem. In fact, İlhan, in the 1970s when Cem was heading TRT, praised Cem for "transforming TRT into people's television".²⁶ Similar to Ismail Cem, Attila İlhan had

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 481.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 498.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 498-499.

²⁰ For a research on Cumhuriyet newspaper's Leftist Kemalism, see; Erten, Bağış and Doğan, M. Görkem. 2004. "Cumhuriyet'in Cumhuriyet'i: Cumhuriyet Gazetesi" in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce cilt 2 Kemalizm*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

²¹ Asena Günel. 2004. "Uğur Mumcu" in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce cilt 2 Kemalizm*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, p. 482.

²² *ibid.*, p. 483.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 484.

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 485-486.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 486.

²⁶ Can Dündar, *Ben Böyle Veda Etmeliyim*, p. 126.

great sympathy and curiosity towards the Seljuk-Ottoman past of the Turks and in that sense he was a unique figure in Leftist Kemalism. Moreover, unlike other Leftist Kemalists, İlhan posed a harsh criticism towards single-party period, especially towards İsmet İnönü.²⁷ However, while criticizing İnönü harshly and blaming him for starting the counter-revolution, Attila İlhan had always exalted Atatürk as the heroic leader of Turkey's anti-imperialist Independence War.²⁸ Similar to Uğur Mumcu and other Leftist Kemalists, anti-imperialism was the main motive in İlhan's novels and ideology. İlhan's anti-imperialism seemed to have turned into anti-globalism in the 1990s with the new world order.²⁹ For İlhan, İsmet İnönü was responsible for the degeneration of Kemalism and its transformation into imitation of the West.³⁰ Another aspect of İlhan's ideology was the role of Sultan Galiev³¹ and Galievism. Galiev's theory about oppressed nations was visible in İlhan's thinking and İlhan claimed that Atatürk must have shown more interest to Galiev during the National Struggle.³² Cem and İlhan had both unique figures in the left for their curiosity and admiration of Ottoman past but İlhan especially starting from the 1990s adopted a more nationalist and statist ideology (*ulusalcılık*) that gave a small place to democracy and questioned Turkey's place in the Western world. Here he differed compared to Cem, who had become more sensitive on democracy and transformed into a pro-European social democrat.

İlhan Selçuk (1925-2010) was the other symbol figure and leading theoretician of Leftist Kemalism. Although Mehmet Soydaş and Atilla Lök analyzed İlhan Selçuk from an extremely critical perspective, in Turkey Selçuk has been seen as the "Wise Man of Turkish Enlightenment (*Aydınlanma Bilgesi*)" by many leftists.³³ Together with Uğur Mumcu, he worked in *Yön* magazine and became the right wing of Yön movement's leader Doğan Avcıoğlu. Together with Avcıoğlu, İlhan Selçuk tried to formulate a socialist version of Kemalism that would be reached by a leftist military take-over. Selçuk was imprisoned and tortured after 12 March. After being released, he began to write in *Cumhuriyet* newspaper and later became the respected editor-in-chief of the paper.³⁴ Selçuk throughout his life defended Kemalism and saw it as the basis of Turkish Enlightenment which meant the emancipation of reason from faith and science from religion.³⁵ Secularism, unitary nation state and state led rapid industrialization were his three main themes.³⁶ He thought that both Turkish Alevis and Turkish Sunnis are different from Arabs and have a tendency to adopt secularism and modernity.³⁷ Selçuk, similar to other Leftist Kemalists, never rejected class conflicts but he also never thought that a socialist revolution could be made in Turkey under the existing conditions. Selçuk has always underlined that without passing from or rather terminating the Enlightenment process, a real social democratic or liberal political ideology could not be established in Turkey. In that sense, he asserted that the aim of the Kemalist Republic was to create the free individual instead of subjects.³⁸ Selçuk starting from the 1960s was also the leading writer and ideologue of *Cumhuriyet* newspaper which

²⁷ Duygu Köksal. 2004. "Attila İlhan" in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce cilt 2 Kemalizm*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, p. 488.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 489.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 490.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 491.

³¹ Mirza Sultan Galiev (1892-1940) was a Tatar Bolshevik who rose to prominence in the Russian Communist Party in the early 1920s. He was later executed for being an independent Muslim leader as part of the purges of former Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. Galiev deeply affected Muslim Communists around the world and laid the foundation of a unique Eastern Socialism theory called Galievism.

³² Duygu Köksal, "Attila İlhan", p. 493.

³³ Mehmet Soydaş and Atilla Lök. 2004. "İlhan Selçuk" in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce cilt 2 Kemalizm*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, p. 512.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 513.

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 514-515.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 514.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 515.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 515.

can be described as the castle of Leftist Kemalism.³⁹ Although Ismail Cem and İlhan Selçuk were good friends and they shared the same ideal of establishing a modern democratic and industrialized Turkey, their understanding of democracy and secularism highly differed from each other starting from the 1960s. Cem had always sympathized with democratic parliamentary methods (TLP and Ecevit's RPP) whereas Selçuk did not hide his sympathy for military coups that will restore Republican ideals (Yön movement). Cem was also much more libertarian compared to Selçuk especially concerning state's attitude towards religious people. Selçuk was very critical and suspicious of Islamic groups' aims and he was in favor of state interventionism in order to suppress religious fundamentalism, whereas Cem was an unusual figure in the Turkish left who defended freedom for all segments of the society including pious people and religious groups.

Ismail Cem's critic of Kemalism

Ismail Cem's criticism towards Kemalism was mostly caused by the solidarity aspect of the Republic. Cem claimed that with a naïve belief, Kemalists thought that being able to defeat imperialism would end exploitation and all segments could develop themselves in brotherhood with a national economy under the objective arbitration of the Kemalist state.⁴⁰ Cem accepted that this view was good-intentioned but it was also naïve and unrealistic since the interest of the bourgeoisie, land owners and local notables naturally contradicted with the interest of peasants.⁴¹ In that sense, Kemalists' naïve objective stance for Cem was nothing but supporting the stronger side and naturally leads to the exploitation of lower segments. As a leftist thinker coming from Marxist tradition, Cem rejected the solidarist view of Kemalism and criticized the single-party period and Kemalist ideology in general from this class-based perspective. For Cem, this was caused by the lack of intellectual accumulation that Ottoman officers had concerning economics.⁴² Moreover, due to its weak class-based position as a small bureaucratic group, founders of the Republic had to form a coalition with bourgeoisie and local notables at the expense of suppressing proletariat and peasants.⁴³ In that sense, Cem claimed that while the founders of the Republic, the military-bureaucratic intelligentsia, supported Westernization in order to catch up with the contemporary civilization by making mainly superstructural reforms, they could not realize their aims of infrastructural reforms (land reform) due to the weak social positioning and thus, they had to engage in a coalition with higher social classes.⁴⁴ Another aspect of Cem's criticism towards Kemalism was its superstructural character that had realized modernization only on the superstructural level and could not realize the infrastructural economic modernization. This argument was also frequently used by RPP leader Bülent Ecevit in the 1970s.⁴⁵ In that sense, Ecevit and Cem both advocated an economic leap forward by a statist-socialist economic model.

While defining RPP largely as a leftist-radical party, Cem never hesitated to praise the positive aspects of Kemalism. In his view, radical movements including Kemalism had some similarities with leftist movements and helped their country and society to get modernized and create the necessary conditions for transition to a democratic regime.⁴⁶ In that sense, Cem's views resembled Ergun Özbudun's ideas about the nature of Kemalist political regime. Özbudun also underlined that RPP had always allowed opposition in itself (*İş Bank group* led by Bayar, Republican Conservatives, *Kadro*

³⁹ Bağış Erten and Görkem Doğan, "Cumhuriyet'in Cumhuriyet'i: Cumhuriyet Gazetesi", p. 509

⁴⁰ Ismail Cem, *Türkiye'de Geri Kalışlığın Tarihi*, p. 302.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 304.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 306.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 306.

⁴⁵ Necmi Erdoğan, "Demokratik Soldan Devrimci Yol'a 1970'lerde Sol Popülizm Üzerine Notlar", p. 267.

⁴⁶ Ismail Cem, *Sosyal Demokrasi Ya Da Demokratik Sosyalizm Nedir, Ne Değildir*, p. 309.

Movement) which made transition to multi-party democracy easier for Turkey unlike in communist regimes. Özbudun, by applying Clement Moore's classification of single-party regime ideologies into four categories as totalitarian, chiliastic, tutelary and administrative, placed RPP as a tutelage party, or a party acting like a tutor and a guardian for its people which not show characteristics of a totalitarian regime.⁴⁷ While Cem criticized the lack of democratic aspects shown by the single-party rule, he also praised the modernist aspects that opened a way for democracy in the coming decades. In one of his latest publications *Sosyal Demokrasinin Geleceği (The Future of Social Democracy)*, Cem defined Kemalism as the source of social democracy's progressive and innovative principles in Turkey and expressed that Turkey's social democracy takes its roots from the Republican Revolution.⁴⁸ In that sense, he labeled his party -NTP- as the "continuation of Republican Revolution in democracy".⁴⁹ Many other social democratic writers including pro-European Aydın Cıngı also agreed with Cem and thought that Turkish social democracy evolved and was nourished by Kemalism and Turkish Enlightenment (modernization movements that started in the 19th century) in addition to universal social democratic values.⁵⁰ Kemalism's modernistic-progressive features were also praised by many observers including Bernard Lewis⁵¹, Arnold J. Toynbee, Maurice Duverger and Suna Kili⁵².

Starting from 1980s and 1990s, Cem tried to formulate a moderate social democratic ideology or a kind of moderate Kemalism by erasing the radicalist aspects of classical Kemalism in order to embrace pious segments of the society, as well as Kurds in Turkey. Thus, although for many Cem could be labeled as an anti-Kemalist especially in his youth and until the 1980s because of his positive look towards Ottomans and harsh criticism of single-party period, in fact he was trying to transform Kemalism into social democracy by softening its radicalist aspects and revising it in order to weaken and prevent anti-democratic acts (military coups) and tendencies (gauchism) made in the name of Kemalism. Cem's criticism towards Kemalism was also noticeably softened after his engagement in active politics since considering their party grassroots RPP and DLP could not afford to censure Kemalism and Atatürk legacy.

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⁴⁷ For a detailed analysis, see; Ergun Özbudun. 1981. "The Nature of Kemalist Political Regime" in *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State*, London: C. Hurst & Company.

⁴⁸ İsmail Cem, *Sosyal Demokrasinin Geleceği*, p. 15.

⁴⁹ İsmail Cem, *Yeni Bir Türkiye İçin...*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Aydın Cıngı, *Sora Sora Sosyal Demokrasi*, p. 13.

⁵¹ See; Bernard Lewis. 2009. *Modern Türkiye'nin Doğuşu*, Ankara: Arkadaş Yayınevi.

⁵² See; Suna Kili. 2003. *Atatürk Revolution A Paradigm of Modernization*, İstanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, pp. 39-44, 102-108.

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