

Political Instability and Governance Challenges in Pakistan: The Impact of Political Polarization and Corruption on Policy Continuity and Public Trust (2018-2023)



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Abstract: *Political instability and governance challenges in Pakistan are intricately linked to political polarization and corruption, which have profound implications for policy continuity and public trust. This study investigates the dynamics of these issues, focusing on the period from 2018 to the present. Political polarization, characterized by deep divisions among political parties and their supporters, has led to frequent changes in government policies, creating an environment of unpredictability and inconsistency. These abrupt policy shifts hinder long-term planning and sustainable development, exacerbating economic and social challenges. Furthermore, corruption remains a pervasive issue, undermining the efficiency and integrity of governmental institutions. The entrenchment of corrupt practices at various levels of governance erodes public trust, leading to widespread disillusionment and skepticism towards the political system. This distrust is further compounded by the lack of accountability and transparency in political processes, making it difficult for citizens to believe in the efficacy and fairness of their leaders. Through an analysis of recent political events, governance practices, and public opinion, this study aims to highlight the critical need for reforms that address these root causes of instability. The findings underscore the importance of fostering political cohesion, enhancing institutional integrity, and promoting transparent governance to restore public confidence and ensure policy continuity in Pakistan.*

Keywords: *Political instability, governance challenges, political polarization, corruption, policy continuity, public trust, Pakistan, sustainable development, institutional integrity.*

Introduction

Political instability and governance challenges have long plagued Pakistan, marked by a turbulent political landscape and frequent power shifts. Recent years have seen these issues exacerbated by heightened political polarization and pervasive corruption. Political polarization, characterized by increasing ideological distance and antagonism between political parties, undermines cooperative governance and leads to policy discontinuity. This fragmentation creates and unpredictable policy environment,

hampering sustainable development and long-term planning. Corruption, deeply embedded in Pakistan's political and bureaucratic systems, significantly impacts the effectiveness and integrity of governance. It undermines public institutions, reducing their capacity to deliver essential services and eroding public trust. Corruption perpetuates inefficiency and inequality, favoring a select few while marginalizing the majority, and diminishes the overall quality of life for citizens (Hussain, 2020 & Transparency International, 2021).

The interplay between political polarization and corruption creates a vicious cycle, where distrust in political leaders and institutions further fuels instability. Public trust is a crucial component of effective governance; its erosion leads to decreased civic engagement and compliance with state policies. The resultant governance challenges hinder the implementation of consistent and effective policies, affecting everything from economic performance to social welfare. Addressing these intertwined issues is critical for Pakistan's further stability and development. This study aims to explore the multifaceted impact of political polarization and corruption on policy continuity and public trust in Pakistan. By examining recent political events, governance practices, and public sentiments, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current political and governance landscape. The findings will underscore the urgent need for reforms to foster political cohesion, enhance institutional integrity, and promote transparent governance, ultimately restoring public confidence and ensuring sustainable development (Khan & Kha, 2019).

Pakistan's political instability and governance challenges date back to its inception in 1947. The country has experienced military coups, frequent changes in civilian governments, and contentious political dynamics that have hampered its development. Political polarization has intensified in recent years, with political parties engaging in adversarial politics that prioritize short-term gains over long-term national interests. This adversarial stance leads to frequent policy reversals whenever a new government takes power, disrupting continuity and undermining public and investor confidence in the government's ability to manage the economy and implement effective policies (Rizvi, 2018).

The divisive nature of political polarization also affects governance at multiple levels, fostering an environment where consensus-building is rare, and legislative processes are often stalled. This paralysis not only delays crucial reforms but also exacerbates socio-economic disparities, as policies aimed at addressing these issues are

either inadequately implemented or abandoned altogether. The lack of a unified political vision creates a fragmented policy landscape, making it difficult for Pakistan to achieve its developmental goals and improve the quality of life for its citizens. Corruption further compounds these challenges. Ranked consistently low on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Pakistan struggles with systemic corruption that affects all tiers of government. Corruption erodes institutional efficacy, leading to poor service delivery and increased public dissatisfaction. It also contributes to economic inefficiencies, as resources are misallocated and development projects are either delayed or left incomplete due to corrupt practices. This entrenched corruption diminishes the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures, creating a cycle of impunity that is difficult to break (Ahmad, 2021).

The cumulative effect of political polarization and corruption is a significant erosion of public trust in government institutions. Citizen's disenchantment with the political system manifests in decreased electoral participation, social unrest, and a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement. Public trust is crucial for the legitimacy and stability of any political system; its absence can lead to increased political volatility and a weakened state apparatus. Addressing these intertwined issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes fostering political dialogue, strengthening institutional frameworks, and implementing robust anti-corruption measures (Yousaf, 2020).

Literature Review

From 2018 to 2023, Pakistan has faced significant political instability and governance challenges. This period has been marked by intense political polarization and pervasive corruption, which have severely impacted policy continuity and public trust. This literature review synthesizes recent studies and reports, offering insights into the dynamics of political instability, the role of political polarization, and the pervasive influence of corruption on governance in Pakistan. Political polarization in Pakistan has intensified over the last five years,

significantly impacting the country's governance. According to Khan, polarization has led to a fragmented political landscape where cooperative governance is almost impossible. Political parties are more focused on opposing each other than on policy-making, leading to frequent policy reversals and a lack of long-term planning. This adversarial political climate has resulted in an unpredictable policy environment, hampering sustainable development. (Khan, 2021)

Hussain elaborates on how political polarization has affected legislative process. Constant infighting and a lack of consensus-building have stalled crucial reforms, exacerbating socio-economic disparities. Polarization disrupts governance at the national level and trickles down to provincial and local government, leading to widespread administrative inefficiencies. Corruption remains a deeply entrenched issue in Pakistan, affecting all levels of governance. Ahmed notes that corruption is pervasive in both political and bureaucratic system, significantly undermining the effectiveness and integrity of public institutions. Corrupt practices favor a select few, perpetuating inequality and inefficiency while eroding public trust in the government. Transparency International underscores the systemic nature of corruption in Pakistan, consistently ranking the country low on the Corruption Perceptions Index. This systemic corruption undermines the capacity of public institutions to deliver essential services and creates a cycle of impunity that is difficult to break. (Ahmed, 2021).

The interplay between political polarization and corruption has significantly affected policy continuity in Pakistan. Rizvi discusses how frequent changes in government lead to policy reversals, disrupting long-term development projects. This lack of continuity undermines public and investor confidence in the government's ability to manage the economy effectively. Khan and Khan highlight the challenges posed by governance instability, indicating that the lack of policy continuity is a major barrier to addressing critical issues such as economic reform, social welfare, and

infrastructure development. Public trust in government is a crucial component of effective governance, and its erosion has been a significant issue in Pakistan. Yousaf examines in 2020 that how the combination of political polarization and corruption has led to decreased civic engagement and compliance with state policies. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that only 32% of Pakistanis trust their government, a significant drop from previous years, indicating widespread disenchantment with the political system. This loss of public trust manifests in decreased electoral participation and social unrest, further destabilizing the political environment. (Yousaf, 2020).

Political Polarization in Pakistan

Political polarization in Pakistan refers to the increasing ideological, partisan, and regional divides within the political landscape. Over recent years, these divides have intensified, contributing significantly to the country's political instability and governance challenges. Political polarization parties, which have become more pronounced since 2018. This polarization is driven by several factors, including historical grievances, ideological differences, and competition for power. Major political parties, such as the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), and Pakistan People's Party (PPP), have increasingly adopted antagonistic stances, leading to a fragmented political environment. This fragmentation has resulted in reduced cooperation between parties and frequent political confrontations (Hussain, 2020).

The impact of political polarization on governance is significant. The ideological divide often leads to legislative gridlock, where partisan disagreements prevent the passage of important legislation and policy reforms. This gridlock undermines the effectiveness of governance, as governments struggle to implement consistent and coherent policies. Additionally, political polarization contributes to frequent changes in government and policy, creating an environment of unpredictability that hampers long-term planning and development. The polarized political climate also affects the

functioning of key institutions, including the judiciary and civil services, as partisan interests infiltrate these bodies, reducing their ability to operate impartially (Ahmed, 2021).

Public perception of political polarization is also critical aspect of its impact. The heightened polarization has led to increased public dissatisfaction and distrust in the political system. Citizens often perceive political leaders as more interested in partisan battles than in addressing national issues, leading to a decline in public confidence and engagement. This erosion of trust further exacerbates political instability, as disenfranchised citizens become less likely to participate in democratic processes or support government initiatives. Regional and ethnic dimensions also play a role in political polarization in Pakistan. Regional parties and movements often amplify existing divides, focusing on regional grievance and aspirations that further complicate national politics. For example, political tensions between Punjab and Sindh, as well as among different ethnic groups, contribute to the overall polarization and affect national unity and governance (Yousaf, 2020, & Khan, 2019).

Corruption and Governance Challenges in Pakistan

Corruption is a pervasive issue in Pakistan, deeply embedded within its political and administrative systems. It manifests in various forms, including bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, and influence peddling, significantly impacting governance and public administration. Corruption undermines institutional integrity, hampers economic development, and erodes public trust in government institutions. The pervasive nature of corruption in Pakistan has created a challenging environment for effective governance and policy implementation. The extent of corruption in Pakistan is evident from its consistent low rankings on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The CPI report indicated that corruption remains widespread and systemic, affecting all levels of government and public sector institutions. Corruption in Pakistan not only involves petty bribery but also large-scale embezzlement and

fraud, often linked to high-level political figures billions of dollars annually, as resources are diverted from public services and developmental projects (Transparency International, 2011).

The impact of corruption on governance is profound. It undermines the effectiveness of public administration by diverting resources meant for essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Corruption leads to inefficiencies and delays in service delivery, as officials prioritize personal gain over public welfare. For instance, the mismanagement of funds in various sectors, including health and education, has been widely reported, resulting in poor service quality and compromised outcomes. Additionally, corruption distorts market mechanisms, discourages investment, and inhibits economic growth by creating an uneven playing field where only those with connections can thrive. (Rizve, 2018).

Corruption poses significant governance challenges in Pakistan, affecting the functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law. The intertwining of political and economic interests leads to a lack of accountability and transparency in governance. Political leaders often engage in corrupt practices to consolidate power and influence, undermining democratic processes and eroding the legitimacy of governmental institutions. The lack of effective checks and balances allows corrupt practices to proliferate, as regulatory and enforcement agencies are often compromised or ineffectual. One of the major governance challenges related to corruption is the weakening of institutional frameworks. The judiciary, which is supposed to act as a guardian of justice, frequently suffers from allegations of bias and corruption, reducing its effectiveness in upholding the rule of law. Law enforcement agencies, including the police and anti-corruption bodies, are often plagued by corruption, which impedes their ability to investigate and prosecute corrupt activities effectively. This systemic corruption creates an environment where impunity prevails, and those engaged in corrupt practices are seldom held accountable. (Ahmed, 2021).

Corruption significantly affects policy implementation in Pakistan. Policies intended to

address socio-economic issues are often undermined by corrupt practices, resulting in suboptimal outcomes. For example, development projects are frequently marred by corruption, leading to cost overruns, delays, and incomplete or poor-quality infrastructure. In sectors like public procurement, corruption leads to inflated contract costs and substandard goods and services, impacting the overall effectiveness of public sector projects. Furthermore, corruption distorts public priorities and resource allocation. Policymaking becomes skewed towards benefiting influential groups rather than addressing the need of the broader population. This misalignment between policy objectives and actual outcomes perpetuates inequality and hampers efforts to achieve sustainable development goals. The lack of transparency and accountability in policy process erodes public confidence in government institutions and undermines the legitimacy of democratic governance. (Rizvei, 2018)

Efforts to Combat Corruption in Pakistan

Corruption has long plagued Pakistan, undermining governance and development. To address this challenge, various initiatives and reforms have been undertaken, such as the establishment of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) in 1999 to combat corruption among public officials and other entities. However, NAB has faced criticism for its effectiveness and accusations of political bias, impacting its credibility. Additionally, the Right to Information Act, introduced in 2017, aims to enhance transparency and accountability by providing public access to government information. While this act has improved government transparency, its impact has been limited by bureaucratic resistance and a lack of public awareness (Ahmed, 2020).

The role of civil society and media has been significant in exposing corruption and advocating for reform. Investigative journalism and civil society organizations have played a pivotal role in highlighting corruption scandals and demanding accountability. Media outlets like Dawn and The Express Tribune have published in-depth reports on corruption, leading to public outcry. However, these efforts

are often hindered by threats, harassment, and limited resources. International cooperation has also been crucial, with organizations like Transparency International and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) assisting in developing anti-corruption strategies and capacity-building programs. Despite these efforts, challenges in implementation and political will have affected outcomes (Raza, 2021& Javed, 2019).

Despite some progress in anti-corruption efforts, the challenge remains substantial in Pakistan. Strengthening institutions, improving legal frameworks, supporting civil society, and enhancing international cooperation are critical for achieving more effective outcomes. Comprehensive and sustained efforts at multiple levels are necessary, including enhancing transparency, strengthening institutional frameworks, and promoting accountability. Initiatives such as improving public sector governance, implementing stringent anti-corruption laws, and strengthening the judiciary and law enforcement agencies are essential. Public awareness and civic engagement also play a critical role in combating corruption by promoting transparency and encouraging citizen participation. By implementing effective anti-corruption measures and fostering public engagement, Pakistan can work towards creating a more equitable and effective governance system that serves its citizens' needs (Yousaf, 2020).

Policy Continuity and Implementation in Pakistan

Policy continuity and implementation are critical aspects of effective governance and development. In Pakistan, the challenge of ensuring consistent policy implementation is significant due to political instability, institutional weaknesses, and socio-economic factors. This comprehensive note explores these challenges, highlighting key areas of concern and evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies. Political instability in Pakistan has often disrupted policy continuity. Frequent changes in government, coupled with shifting political priorities, have led to inconsistencies in policy implementation. For instance, the

frequent transition of governments between civilian and military administrations has created a lack of continuity in policies. Each new government tends to revise or abandon the policies of its predecessor, which can undermine long-term development goals. This instability affects key areas such as economic planning, social welfare, and infrastructure development. (Shah, 2017).

Institutional weaknesses are another major barrier to policy continuity and effective implementation in Pakistan. Many government institutions suffer from inefficiencies, lack of coordination, and inadequate resources. The bureaucratic structure is often criticized for its slow response times and resistance to change, which hampers the implementation of policies. For example, the slow pace of administrative reform has been a persistent issue, affecting the execution of development programs and public sector reforms. These institutional challenges are exacerbated by corruption and lack of accountability within the system. Socio-economic factors also play a crucial role in influencing policy continuity and implementation. Pakistan faces significant socio-economic disparities, including poverty, inequality, and a lack of access to education and healthcare. These factors affect the ability of the government to implement policies effectively and achieve desired outcomes. For instance, the implementation of social welfare programs such as the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) has been challenged by logistical issues, inadequate targeting, and resource constraints. Socio-economic challenges often require tailored approaches that consider local contexts and needs, which can complicate the implementation of nationwide policies. (Ali, 2019 & Khan, 2020).

Effective policy implementation also depends on a supportive policy framework and legislative environment. In Pakistan, legislative support for policy initiatives varies, with some policies receiving strong backing while others face resistance. The success of policies often hinges on the ability to enact supportive legislation and secure resources for implementation. For example, the National

Action Plan for Counter-Terrorism (NAP) required substantial legislative support and coordination across various government agencies. While the plan achieved some success, its implementation faced challenges due to inconsistent legislative backing and coordination issues. Ensuring legislative support and a clear policy framework is essential for sustained policy implementation. (Hussain, 2018).

The role of civil society and the private sector is increasingly recognized in supporting policy continuity and implementation. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and private sector actors can provide valuable input, resources, and oversight. For example, CSOs have played a crucial role in monitoring and advocating for better implementation of policies related to education and health. Their involvement can enhance transparency, accountability, and effectiveness. The private sector's role in policy implementation includes partnering with the government on development projects and contributing to economic growth. However, the effectiveness of these partnerships can be inconsistent, depending on the level of engagement and coordination between stakeholders. To ensuring the policy continuity and effective implementation in Pakistan involves addressing a range of challenges, including political instability, institutional weaknesses, socio-economic disparities, and the need for supportive legislation. While there have been efforts to overcome these challenges, significant work remains to be done. Strengthening institutions, improving coordination, and engaging with civil society and the private sector are crucial steps toward achieving more consistent and effective policy implementation. Continued efforts in these areas will be essential for fostering stable governance and promoting sustainable development in Pakistan. (Yousaf, 2021).

Public Trust and Political Legitimacy in Pakistan

Public trust and political legitimacy are foundational elements of effective governance. In Pakistan, these concepts are intricately linked to the country's political dynamics, institutional

performance, and socio-economic conditions. This comprehensive note explores the factors influencing public trust and political legitimacy in Pakistan, examining their implications for governance and development. Political legitimacy in Pakistan has been shaped by its complex history of military and civilian rule. The legitimacy of political institutions has often been questioned due to frequent changes in government and military interventions. Historically, military coups have disrupted democratic process, impacting public trust in political institutions. The periods of military rule, such as those under General Ayub Khan, General Zia-Ul-Haq, and General Pervez Musharraf, have left lasting legacies on the political landscape, affecting public perceptions of legitimacy. These interruptions have led to a cyclical pattern of political instability, which undermines the development of stable democratic institutions. (Qazi, 2019).

The performance of political institutions significantly affects public trust. In Pakistan, institutional performance is often criticized for inefficiency, corruption, and lack of transparency. The judicial system, for example, faces challenges related to delays, corruption, and a lack of public confidence. Research indicates that the judiciary's perceived inefficiency and partiality undermine public trust in its ability to deliver justice. Similarly, issues within the executive branch, such as bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, contribute to a lack of public confidence in government institutions. Socio-economic factors play a crucial role in shaping public trust and political legitimacy. In Pakistan, socio-economic disparities, including poverty, unemployment, and inequality, impact public receptions of political legitimacy. The government's ability to address these issues is often seen as a measure of its legitimacy. For example, the effectiveness of social welfare programs and economic policies influences public trust in the government. When policies fail to address pressing socio-economic issues, public disillusionment and mistrust can grow. Addressing socio-economic challenges and improving living standards are critical for

enhancing public trust. (Ali, 2020).

The media plays a significant role in shaping public perception of political legitimacy. In Pakistan, media coverage of political events, corruption scandals, and governance issues can influence public trust. Investigative journalism and media reports often highlight issues of corruption and inefficiency, which can either bolster or undermine public confidence in political institutions. For instance, media exposure of scandals like the Panama Papers has had a profound impact on public trust in political leaders and institutions. While media can serve as a watchdog, it can also contribute to polarization and misinformation, affecting the overall perception of legitimacy. Electoral processes are central to political legitimacy. In Pakistan, elections are critical events that influence public trust in the political system. The credibility of electoral processes is essential for ensuring that political leaders are seen as legitimate representatives of the people. However, Pakistan has faced challenges related to electoral transparency, fairness, and allegations of fraud. The implementation of electoral reforms and the strengthening of electoral process, such as electronic voting machines, has been proposed to address concerns about electoral integrity (Javed, 2020).

Public trust and political legitimacy in Pakistan are influenced by a range of factors, including historical contexts, institutional performance, socio-economic conditions, media influence, and electoral processes. Addressing these factors requires comprehensive reforms aimed at improving institutional performance, enhancing transparency, and addressing socio-economic disparities. Strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring fair and transparent electoral process are crucial for building public trust and reinforcing political legitimacy. Continued efforts in these areas will be essential for fostering stable and effective governance in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The period from 2018 to 2023 in Pakistan has been marked by significant political instability and governance challenges, largely driven by

political polarization and pervasive corruption. Intense rivalry and lack of cooperation among major political parties have led to frequent disruptions in governance, resulting in a fragmented policy landscape where long-term initiatives are often abandoned or reversed with each change in administration. Despite various anti-corruption campaigns and institutional reforms, corruption continues to permeate multiple levels of government, eroding public resources and trust. Persistent allegations of corruption against political leaders and public officials have exacerbated public cynicism and distrust in the state apparatus, hindering economic growth and development while fueling political instability. The interplay between political polarization and corruption creates a vicious cycle that stymies effective governance. Polarized political environments foster an atmosphere where partisan interests supersede national priorities, making it difficult to achieve consensus on critical policy issues. In such a milieu, corruption flourishes as political actors engage in rent-seeking behaviors to secure their positions of power, further destabilizing the political landscape and impairing policy continuity. The continuous political turmoil and corruption scandals have significantly undermined public trust in the government, hampering public cooperation in policy implementation and weakening the social contract between the state and its citizens. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms aimed at reducing political polarization and combating corruption. Such measures are crucial for restoring public trust, ensuring effective governance, and achieving sustainable development in Pakistan.

Findings

1. Political polarization in Pakistan has created a fractured policy landscape, with intense party rivalries causing frequent reversal and disruptions. This instability hampers long-term development, undermining effective governance and economic growth.
2. Partisan interests often overshadow national priorities, deepening political instability. The absence of cooperation

among political actors hampers progress on essential issues like economic reforms, social development, and security.

3. Corruption remains deeply entrenched in Pakistan, eroding public resources and trust despite various anti-corruption efforts. This pervasive issue undermines effective governance and weakens faith in state institutions.
4. Rent-seeking behaviors among political actors exacerbate corruption, destabilizing the political landscape and disrupting policy continuity. This instability hinders the implementation and sustainability of development initiatives.
5. Political turmoil and corruption scandals have severely damaged public trust in the government, weakening the social contract and reducing public cooperation in governance efforts.
6. The cycle of political polarization and corruption creates ongoing instability, undermining governance effectiveness and leading to poor socio-economic outcomes due to frequent policy changes.
7. Political instability and corruption have stunted Pakistan's economic growth, deterring both domestic and foreign investment and contributing to economic stagnation and high unemployment.
8. Governance challenges have led to increased public dissatisfaction and social unrest, exacerbating issues like poverty, education, and healthcare, and worsening socio-economic problems.
9. Comprehensive anti-corruption measures are essential for restoring public trust and ensuring effective governance. This includes strengthening institutions, enhancing transparency, and promoting ethical practices among political actors.

10. To achieve policy continuity and stability, addressing political polarization is crucial. This involves fostering a culture of dialogue and cooperation, prioritizing national interests, and implementing electoral and governance reforms.

Recommendations

1. Fostering a culture of political dialogue and consensus-building is key to reducing polarization. Regular inter-party consultations and bipartisan committees can bridge divides and facilitate cooperation on national issues.
2. Electoral reforms, such as proportional representation and transparent vote counting, are essential for reducing political tensions. These measures enhance electoral legitimacy and promote political inclusivity.
3. Strengthening democratic institutions like the judiciary and election commission is crucial for ensuring their independence and accountability. This will build public confidence and reduce partisan influence on governance.
4. Enhancing transparency and accountability within government institutions requires strict anti-corruption laws and independent oversight bodies. Effective penalties for corrupt practices are vital for enforcing these measures.
5. A code of ethics for public officials can foster a culture of integrity and responsibility. Mandatory training on ethical governance and anti-corruption for all public servants is essential.
6. Civil society and media play a crucial role in combating corruption. Supporting investigative journalism, protecting whistleblowers, and promoting transparency are key to effective oversight.
7. Citizen participation in governance, including involvement in decision-making and public project monitoring, can restore trust. Ensuring policies reflect community needs enhances public satisfaction and engagement.
8. Efficient public service delivery is critical for rebuilding trust. Performance-based accountability and technology integration can improve service quality and reduce corruption opportunities.
9. Strengthening legal frameworks to protect human rights and uphold the rule of law builds confidence in justice system. Consistent application of laws ensures accessibility and fairness.
10. Long-term national development plans, crafted with broad political consensus and protected from short-term pressures, ensure policy stability. Regular reviews and adjustments keep these plans effective and relevant.
11. Independent policy advisory bodies, composed of diverse experts, provide objective recommendations. Operating free from political influence ensures consistent and well-informed policy formulation.

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