

การก่อความไม่สงบในภาคใต้ของไทย: รากเหง้าของปัญหาและแนวทางสู่สันติภาพที่ยั่งยืน

The Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Root Causes and Pathways to Sustainable Peace

Che Mohd Aziz Yaacob¹ Abdulrohman Molo² Madpouzee Rubama^{3*} Phaison Da-oh⁴

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บทคัดย่อ

การก่อความไม่สงบในจังหวัดชายแดนภาคใต้ของประเทศไทยมีรากฐานมาจากความคับข้องใจทางประวัติศาสตร์ที่สั่งสมมาอย่างยาวนาน และได้รับอิทธิพลจากปัจจัยด้านชาติพันธุ์ ศาสนา ตลอดจนความเหลื่อมล้ำทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคม ส่งผลให้ความขัดแย้งดังกล่าวเป็นหนึ่งในปัญหาความมั่นคงที่ยืดเยื้อและซับซ้อนที่สุดในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ บทความนี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์เชิงวิพากษ์ถึงสาเหตุเชิงโครงสร้างของความไม่สงบในพื้นที่ที่ประชากรส่วนใหญ่เป็นชาวมุสลิม โดยติดตามพัฒนาการของขบวนการก่อความไม่สงบและวิเคราะห์ต้นทุนมนุษย์ ทั้งทางสังคมและเศรษฐกิจที่เกิดขึ้นต่อประชาชนในพื้นที่ นอกจากนี้ยังสำรวจพลวัตเชิงยุทธศาสตร์ระหว่างกลุ่มผู้ก่อความไม่สงบกับรัฐไทย โดยเน้นย้ำประเด็นเชิงสาเหตุ รากเหง้าของความขัดแย้งว่า มีความสำคัญไม่ยิ่งหย่อนไปกว่าการใช้มาตรการด้านความมั่นคงเพียงอย่างเดียว ตลอดจนวิเคราะห์ข้อจำกัดและความท้าทายของแนวทางที่ผ่านมาที่มุ่งเน้นการรักษาความสงบเป็นหลัก บทความนำเสนอข้อเสนอเชิงนโยบายแนวทางที่ครอบคลุมสำหรับรัฐบาลไทย ภาคประชาสังคม และประชาคมระหว่างประเทศ โดยสนับสนุนการเจรจาสันติภาพที่มีส่วนร่วมของทุกภาคส่วน การสร้างความโปร่งใส และความรับผิดชอบของสถาบันภาครัฐ รวมถึงการส่งเสริมการพัฒนาที่คำนึงถึงอัตลักษณ์และบริบททางวัฒนธรรมของประชาชนในพื้นที่ โดยโต้แย้งว่า สันติภาพที่ยั่งยืนจะสามารถบรรลุได้ผ่านความร่วมมือของผู้มีส่วนได้เสียหลายฝ่ายควบคู่ไปกับความมุ่งมั่นอย่างจริงจังต่อหลักสิทธิมนุษยชน ความยุติธรรมในสังคม การสร้างโอกาสทางเศรษฐกิจ และการปรองดองระหว่างชุมชน

คำสำคัญ : การก่อความไม่สงบ ภาคใต้ของไทย การเปลี่ยนผ่านความขัดแย้ง

¹ School of International Studies (SoIS), Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia.

² School of International Studies (SoIS), Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia.

³ Faculty of Political Science, Hatyai University, Songkhla, 90110 Thailand.

⁴ Faculty of Political Science, Prince of Songkla University, Songkhla, 90110 Thailand.

*Corresponding author's E-mail: madpouzeerubama@gmail.com

Abstract

The insurgency in southern Thailand is rooted in decades of historical grievances and fuelled by ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic marginalization, and remains one of Southeast Asia's most protracted and complex conflicts. This article aims to critically examines the underlying causes of the unrest in the predominantly Malay Muslim provinces, tracing the evolution of the insurgency and analyzing its profound human and societal costs. It explores the tactical dynamics between insurgent groups and the Thai government, emphasizing the importance of addressing root causes rather than relying on security-centric approaches. The article also outlines comprehensive recommendations for the Thai government, civil society, and the international community, advocating for inclusive peace negotiations, transparency, accountability, and culturally sensitive development. By fostering human rights, economic opportunity, and intercommunal dialogue, the article argues that sustainable peace is achievable through collaborative, multi-stakeholder engagement, and a genuine commitment to justice and reconciliation.

Keywords: Insurgency, Southern Thailand, Conflict transformation

Introduction

For over seven decades, violence has loomed over the southernmost provinces of Thailand. Predominantly populated by Malay Muslims, this region has been embroiled in an insurgency marked by bombings, shootings, and a constant undercurrent of tension. This conflict, rooted in historical grievances and fueled by social and economic disparities, defies easy resolution. Understanding the complex factors that birthed and sustain this insurgency is crucial for navigating a path towards peace.

This essay examines the causes of the insurgency in Southern Thailand, focusing on historical injustices, ethnic and religious marginalization, and socioeconomic inequalities. Finally, it proposes solutions that address root causes and promote greater inclusion of the Malay Muslim population.

Objective of the Study

To analyze the root causes of the insurgency in Southern Thailand, focusing on historical injustices, ethno-religious marginalization, and socioeconomic inequality.

Background of the study

The southernmost provinces of Thailand, namely: Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts

of Songkhla, have a distinct history from the rest of the country. For centuries, this region flourished under Malay sultanates with their own vibrant culture, Islamic religion, and system of governance (Andaya, 2001). The Patani Sultanate, the most powerful among them, emerged in the 14th century and exercised influence over a large swathe of the Malay Peninsula. At the same time, they were also within the peripheral Thai orbit during the Ayutthaya period. In the early 20th century, Siam forcibly incorporated these sultanates into its centralized state through a series of military campaigns and administrative reforms. This annexation resulted in a loss of autonomy and cultural identity for the Malay Muslim population, laying the groundwork for future resentment and resistance (McCargo, 2008).

Ethnic and Religious Marginalization

The Malay Muslims in the south feel marginalized by the Thai government, which is dominated by the Buddhist majority. This marginalization manifests in several areas, including education and language. The Thai language is the primary medium of instruction in schools, despite the fact that many Malay Muslim students speak Malay at home. This can create a language barrier that hinders their educational attainment (Wheeler, 2014). Additionally, the Thai national curriculum often overlooks or downplays the history and culture of the Malay people, further marginalizing their identity.

In the realm of religion, Islam is not given the same official recognition as Buddhism in Thailand. Buddhist holidays are national holidays, while Islamic holidays are not. This disparity reinforces the feeling that Malay Muslims are not fully accepted members of Thai society. Promoting religious tolerance and celebrating the diversity of Thailand's religious landscape could go a long way in bridging this divide.

Economically, the southern region lags behind the rest of Thailand in terms of development. There are fewer opportunities for Malay Muslims in the civil service and private sector, and many Malays Muslims live in poverty. This perception of economic marginalization fuels feelings of resentment and contributes to the sense of grievance that underpins the insurgency. While the grievances of the Malay Muslim population are legitimate, it is important to note that the insurgency is not a monolithic entity. There are various factions with differing goals and motivations (Croissant, 2007). Devoting more resources to economic development projects in the south, and creating a more inclusive job market, could help to alleviate poverty and create a more hopeful future for the Malay Muslim population. This measure would contribute to addressing the root causes of the insurgency.

Socioeconomic Disparities

The southern region lags behind the rest of Thailand in terms of economic development. This disparity manifests in several ways, including high poverty rates, limited employment opportunities, and lack of access to quality education and healthcare. Poverty is especially acute in the rural areas, where many Malays Muslims live. A 2019 World Bank study found that the poverty rate in the southern provinces is nearly twice the national average (World Bank, 2019). This lack of economic opportunity creates a sense of hopelessness and fuels feelings of marginalization among the Malay Muslim population.

Furthermore, educational attainment levels in the south are significantly lower than in other parts of Thailand. This is due in part to the language barrier faced by Malay Muslim students in Thai-language schools (Davin, 2018). Limited educational opportunities restrict upward mobility and perpetuate the cycle of poverty (Keyes, 1989). Additionally, the lack of access to quality healthcare disproportionately affects the Malay Muslim population. This is due to factors such as the shortage of medical facilities in the south and cultural sensitivities that may prevent some Malay Muslims from seeking treatment in Thai hospitals.

These socioeconomic disparities create fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment by insurgent groups. Youths who are struggling to find jobs or who feel they have no future prospects may be more susceptible to extremist ideologies. Additionally, the lack of trust in the Thai government and the feeling of being excluded from the national identity can make some Malay Muslims more receptive to the insurgents' message of separatism.

Theoretical framework

Grievance Theory

Grievance theory posits that insurgencies erupt when a population perceives itself to be subjected to sustained injustices or inequalities at the hands of a dominant group or state (Gurr, 1970). These grievances can be political, economic, social, or cultural in nature, and they create a sense of alienation and resentment that can fuel rebellion. In the context of Southern Thailand, the annexation of the Malay sultanates by Siam in the early 20th century is a pivotal event that continues to shape the narrative of marginalization among the Malay Muslim population. This historical event is a critical piece of the puzzle to understanding the insurgency. The resentment caused by this annexation has been simmering for generations, and it continues to be a powerful motivator for some Malay Muslims. In addition, other factors, such as language barriers in education, the limited recognition of Islam, and underrepresentation

in state institutions, contribute to a sense of marginalization. The region's economic underdevelopment, marked by higher poverty rates, fewer job opportunities, and limited access to quality education and healthcare reinforces feelings of exclusion and grievance.

Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative deprivation theory argues that insurgencies arise not necessarily from absolute poverty or hardship, but rather from a perception of being worse off than a reference group (Davies, 1971). This perception can be based on objective factors, such as economic inequality, or on subjective feelings of exclusion or discrimination. In Southern Thailand, the Malay Muslim population may feel relatively deprived compared to the Buddhist majority in terms of economic opportunities, political representation, and cultural recognition.

The lack of economic development in the south creates a situation where many Malays Muslims struggle to find decent jobs and improve their livelihoods. This disparity is particularly stark when compared to the economic prosperity of other regions in Thailand, like Bangkok or Chiang Mai. This economic marginalization is arguably a key driver of the insurgency. When young people see no hope for a better future, they are more likely to be lured into the insurgency by promises of financial gain or a sense of purpose.

Furthermore, the Malay Muslim population feels powerless and excluded from political decision-making processes. This lack of representation is a major frustration for many Malay Muslims, who feel that their voices are unheard and their needs are not being addressed by the Thai central government. Increasing political participation for Malay Muslims is crucial for achieving a lasting peace. If they feel they have a stake in the political system, they may be less likely to resort to violence.

In addition, the Thai government's emphasis on Buddhist culture and national identity can make Malay Muslims feel like their own cultural heritage is not valued or respected. This lack of recognition contributes to a sense of alienation and fuels separatism. finding a way to celebrate Thailand's cultural diversity and promote a more inclusive national identity could be a powerful step towards resolving the conflict.

These two theories offer complementary perspectives on the underlying causes of the insurgency. Grievance theory provides a historical grounding for the conflict, highlighting the long-standing sense of injustice felt by the Malay Muslim population. It helps us understand how historical events, such as the annexation of the Malay sultanates, continue to shape present-day realities. Relative deprivation theory, on the other hand, sheds light on the more contemporary dynamics at play. It emphasizes the role of economic and social disparities in

fuelling resentment and motivating some to take up arms. By examining the conflict through the lens of both theories, a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between historical grievances, perceived injustices, and relative deprivation that fuels the insurgency can be gained.

These theories are not mutually exclusive. Grievances stemming from historical events can interact with feelings of relative deprivation to create a potent mix of anger and frustration. For example, the sense of historical injustice felt by many Malay Muslims may be exacerbated by the perception that they are being left behind economically and socially. This combustible combination can make some individuals more receptive to the ideology of insurgent groups who promise to fight for a better future.

Sources of problems and conflict dynamics

This persistent insurgency, rooted in a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors, has resulted in thousands of casualties and left indelible scars on the region. To chart a path towards sustainable peace, it is critical to dissect the key sources that continue to fuel the insurgency.

Ethnic and religious fault lines

The southernmost provinces of Thailand, bordering Malaysia, have a predominantly Malay Muslim population. This distinct ethnicity and religious identity set them apart from the Buddhist majority in the north. This historical difference has fuelled feelings of marginalization and a desire for greater autonomy among the Malay population. A 2019 survey by Deep South Watch, a Thai NGO, found that 62% of respondents in the southern provinces identified as Malay first and Thai second (Deep South Watch, 2019). This sense of distinct identity, coupled with a long history of annexation by Siam in the early 20th century, contributes to separatist sentiments that underpin the insurgency. The region has also faced historical neglect from the central government, further deepening the sense of grievance and alienation. It is understandable why the Malay population in southern Thailand feels marginalized. Their cultural and religious identity is distinct from the majority, and they have a long history of being under central Thai rule. This situation has created a breeding ground for resentment and a desire for self-determination.

Security abuses and lack of trust

The Thai government's response to the insurgency has often been heavy-handed, with allegations of human rights abuses by security forces. A 2009 and 2024 investigative report by

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented numerous instances of torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings (Amnesty International, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2024). These abuses are not only morally reprehensible, but they are also short-sighted. They erode trust between the Malay population and the government, creating conditions for extremist narratives to take root.

Moreover, the security forces in the region are dominated by ethnic Thais, further widening the gap between the state and the local Malay population. This lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of the security forces can inflame tensions and make it difficult to gather intelligence or cooperation from the local community. It is essential to have security forces that reflect the demographics of the region they are policing to build trust and improve communication between the state and the Malay population.

The culture of impunity surrounding these alleged human rights abuses deepens the sense of injustice among the Malay population. Perpetrators are rarely held accountable, which sends a message that the government condones or even encourages violence against its own citizens. This lack of accountability weakens the rule of law and undermines the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the Malay population.

Socioeconomic disparity and lack of opportunity

The southern provinces lag behind the rest of Thailand in terms of economic development. A 2022 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that unemployment rates in the southern provinces are consistently higher than the national average, with youth unemployment being a particularly pressing issue (ILO, 2022). This lack of economic opportunity creates a sense of hopelessness and fuels resentment towards the central government. The underlying causes of this economic disparity are complex, but they include factors such as limited investment in infrastructure, education, and job training in the region. Additionally, the ongoing violence discourages investment and deters new businesses. This situation creates a vicious cycle of poverty and unrest.

The economic disparity in southern Thailand is a major driver of the insurgency. When young people have few opportunities for a decent livelihood, they are more likely to be drawn into the insurgency. The Thai government needs to do more to invest in the southern provinces and create jobs for the local population. This would help to address the root causes of the insurgency and create a more stable and peaceful region.

Political instability and fragile peace processes

Thailand's political landscape has been characterized by instability for decades. The

country has seen numerous military coups, with the latest one taking place in 2014. This chronic political turmoil has hampered the development and implementation of long-term peace initiatives in the southern provinces. The frequent changes in government make it difficult to establish a sense of continuity and trust with the local population. Additionally, the military-dominated governments have often prioritized security measures over addressing the root causes of the insurgency, such as ethnic grievances and economic disparity. However, this approach has proven ineffective.

A 2021 article in the Australian Army Research Centre's *Irregular Warfare Observations* journal notes that Thailand's volatile political architecture creates an environment where the insurgency can persist without posing a significant national threat. The authors argue that the Thai government's focus on maintaining control overshadows genuine efforts to resolve the conflict. They point to the lack of political will on the part of the Thai government as a major obstacle to peace.

Thailand needs a strong and stable government with the political will to address the underlying grievances that are fuelling the insurgency. This means addressing issues such as ethnic marginalization, economic disparity, and human rights abuses. The government also needs to be willing to engage in genuine peace talks with all stakeholders involved in the conflict, including insurgent groups and civil society organizations.

Past actions

The persistent insurgency in southern Thailand has prompted various initiatives by the Thai government in attempts to quell the violence. However, the effectiveness of these actions remains a subject of debate.

Security measures

The Thai government's primary approach has been to deploy a significant military presence in the region. This militarization has resulted in a decrease in overall violence in recent years, according to the Deep South Watch, a Thai NGO (Deep South Watch, 2019). However, Critics argue that a security-centric approach fails to address the underlying political grievances driving the insurgency, often exacerbating rather than resolving the conflict (Jenne & Chang, 2019; McCargo, 2008). Heavy-handed measures by security forces can alienate local communities and undermine the legitimacy of the state. Reports by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have documented allegations of egregious human rights violations in the southern provinces, further eroding public trust and, in some cases, pushing affected populations toward sympathy for insurgent groups (Amnesty International, 2021; U.S.

Department of State, 2024).

Peace talks

Peace talks between the Thai government and insurgent groups have been ongoing since 2014. Several rounds of talks have been held in Malaysia, facilitated by the Malaysian government. However, these talks have been plagued by challenges. One key challenge is the lack of trust between the two sides. The Thai government has been accused of using the talks as a stalling tactic, while insurgent groups have been divided and fragmented, making it difficult to establish a unified negotiating body (The Jakarta Post, 2020). The current peace talks between the Thai government and insurgent groups have also been fragile and plagued by mistrust. Both sides have accused each other of violating ceasefires and engaging in violence. Additionally, the talks have often excluded local civil society groups, who play a vital role in peacebuilding efforts. These exclusions have led to accusations that the peace process is not inclusive enough and does not address the root causes of the conflict.

Socioeconomic development programs

The Thai government has implemented various programs aimed at improving living standards and promoting economic opportunities in the southern provinces. These programs include vocational training initiatives, infrastructure development, and microfinance schemes. However, the effectiveness of these programs has been limited. Critics argue that such initiatives often lack transparency, are poorly coordinated, and fail to adequately address the structural drivers of poverty and unemployment, including political marginalization and weak local participation (Jenne & Chang, 2019; McCargo, 2008). Moreover, Top-down development strategies in Thailand's Far South have been criticized for failing to adequately address local grievances and horizontal inequalities, while development interventions have often been insufficiently sensitive to the political, cultural, and socioeconomic dynamics underlying the conflict (Burke, 2012). A 2022 report by the ILO found that unemployment rates in the southern provinces remain consistently higher than the national average, with youth unemployment being particularly severe (ILO, 2022). The report highlights the need for more targeted and context-sensitive interventions, such as skills training aligned with labour market demands and greater investment in sustainable, locally grounded employment opportunities.

Recommendations for possible future actions

Prioritizing inclusive peace talks

The Thai government needs to engage in genuine peace talks with all relevant

stakeholders, moving beyond a purely security-focused approach. This adjustment means demonstrably addressing the historical grievances, political marginalization, and socioeconomic issues that fuel the insurgency. Genuine engagement also requires transparency in the peace process, allowing for public scrutiny and fostering trust among the population in the south. A key indicator of genuine engagement would be a willingness on the part of the Thai government to make concessions on issues such as power-sharing and autonomy for the Malay Muslim community. Additionally, the government should be transparent about the progress of the talks and allow for independent monitoring.

In addition, peace talks that exclude local voices are unlikely to succeed. Including representatives from the Malay Muslim community and civil society organizations from the region will ensure that the concerns and needs of the most affected populations are heard and addressed. These local actors can provide valuable insights into the root causes of the conflict and help to develop solutions that are sustainable and culturally appropriate. Local women's groups and youth organizations are particularly important, as these groups are often disproportionately affected by the conflict and have valuable perspectives to contribute to the peace process.

Consideration should also be given to involving a neutral third-party mediator to facilitate dialogue and bridge the trust gap between the Thai government and insurgent groups. A respected international organization, such as The role of global organizations such as the United Nations (UN), with Malaysia as the main facilitator, and an international team serving as monitors of the peace dialogue process known as the International Monitoring Team (IMT) or regional body could play this role, providing a neutral platform for negotiations and helping to ensure that all sides feel heard and respected. Additionally, a third-party mediator can assist in developing a roadmap for peace that addresses all aspects of the conflict, from security concerns to political power-sharing and economic development. An ideal third-party mediator would be an organization with a proven track record of successful conflict resolution in similar contexts, and one that is trusted by all parties involved.

Addressing historical grievances and promoting reconciliation

The Thai government needs to acknowledge historical injustices faced by the Malay Muslim population in southern Thailand. This could involve the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate past abuses and promote healing. A truth commission can provide a platform for victims to share their stories and for the government to take responsibility for its actions. This commission's findings can then be used to develop a plan

for reparations and reconciliation.

Furthermore, exploring power-sharing arrangements that grant the Malay Muslim community greater autonomy over their local affairs could help address feelings of marginalization. This could involve decentralization measures, such as devolving greater decision-making authority to local governments in the southern provinces. Alternatively, the creation of special administrative zones with a degree of autonomy over education, language, and cultural practices could be explored. A combination of these approaches might be most effective. Decentralization could address issues of local governance, while special administrative zones could provide a degree of cultural autonomy.

Lastly, investing in programs that promote reconciliation between different ethnic and religious communities can help heal old wounds and build a more cohesive society. Cultural exchange programs, where students and young people from different communities can live and learn together, can be particularly effective in promoting reconciliation. These initiatives would also help integrate Malay Muslims in the south into wider Thai society, which would widen their economic opportunities.

Investing in sustainable development and economic opportunity

The Thai government needs to invest in targeted economic development programs for the southern provinces. This measure should focus on creating jobs, improving infrastructure, and promoting education, particularly for youths. A key factor in the success of these programs will be ensuring they are culturally sensitive and address the specific needs of the Malay Muslim community. Four specific programs that could be implemented include: skills training that provide job training aligned with the needs of the local and national economy. Second, entrepreneurship support that provide financial assistance, mentorship, and business training can foster a culture of entrepreneurship and create new job opportunities. Third is infrastructure development through infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, and irrigation systems can improve connectivity, facilitate the movement of goods and services, and create jobs during construction. Lastly, education reforms to ensure culturally relevance and the provision of skills needed for success in the modern workforce is crucial. These reforms could involve increased investment in vocational training programs and language education.

Furthermore, policies that address the economic disparity between the south and the rest of Thailand are crucial. These policies could involve increased investment in education and skills training, as well as targeted programs to attract businesses and regional job creation. The government could offer tax breaks or other incentives to businesses with locations and

activities in the south and invest in creating special economic zones that attract foreign investment and create export opportunities.

In addition, empowering local communities to participate in the planning and implementation of development projects can ensure these programs are responsive to their specific needs and priorities. This could involve establishing community development councils that allow residents to have a say in how resources are allocated and projects are implemented. Community-driven development is arguably essential for ensuring that these programs are sustainable and have a lasting impact.

Promoting human rights and building trust

The Thai government needs to end impunity for human rights abuses perpetrated by security forces. Thorough and independent investigations into past allegations should be conducted to hold perpetrators accountable through a fair and transparent judicial process and provide reparations to victims.

In addition, security sector reforms to ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law is essential for rebuilding trust with the local population. This measure may involve revising military doctrine and training practices to emphasize human rights principles and de-escalation tactics. Security forces should be held accountable for violations of human rights and there should be clear mechanisms for complaints to be investigated and addressed. Additionally, increasing civilian oversight of security operations can help to ensure that they are conducted in a way that is respectful of human rights.

Moreover, promoting freedom of expression and access to information, particularly in the southern provinces, can help to foster transparency and accountability. This measure includes lifting media restrictions and allowing journalists to operate freely in the region. The government should also work to create an environment where civil society organizations can operate without fear of intimidation or harassment. Additionally, promoting media literacy can help people to critically evaluate information and make informed decisions.

Conclusions

The insurgency in Southern Thailand is a complex and enduring conflict, fuelled by a confluence of historical, political, social, and economic factors. However, the path towards a peaceful future is not out of reach. By prioritizing inclusive peace talks that address the core grievances of the Malay Muslim community, the Thai government can begin to dismantle the foundation of the insurgency. Further measures to sustain peace include acknowledging historical injustices and the

exploration of autonomy, supporting local economic development, upholding human rights, security sector reforms, and support for the freedom of expression, including civil society.

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