

## Asymmetrical Customary-Based Local Elections: An Alternative Approach to Recruiting Regional Heads in North Maluku

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the relationship between customary legitimacy, the recruitment of regional head candidates by political parties, and the prospects for implementing asymmetric regional elections in North Maluku. It uses a qualitative literature review approach. Data were drawn from relevant journal articles, legislation, and official documents, and analyzed using content analysis and thematic synthesis. The findings show that the nomination of regional heads is still influenced by considerations of electability, financial resources, political networks, and elite interests. Customary practices, meanwhile, serve as a source of social legitimacy linked to the history and identity of North Maluku's communities. However, customary legitimacy cannot be assumed to represent the aspirations of all members of a diverse population. This study proposes a customary-based public consultation model to inform political parties' candidate selection processes, without replacing direct elections or granting customary institutions veto powers. The model should be implemented in accordance with the principles of transparency, inclusivity, accountability, and equal political rights. As this study is based on a literature review, the model still requires field testing and further legal analysis. Political parties, local government, customary institutions, and civil society should be involved in developing a mechanism suited to local conditions and the principles of constitutional democracy.

### Keywords

Asymmetric Local Elections; Customary Legitimacy; Political Recruitment; Local Democracy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 simultaneous regional elections once again highlighted the importance of the relationship between electoral democratic mechanisms, the strength of political parties, and the character of local communities in determining regional leadership. In North Maluku Province, the General Elections Commission (KPU) recorded 1,332,149 voters on the final voter list for the 2024 gubernatorial election, while 939,790 people, or approximately 69.82%, cast their votes (Umum, 2026b). These figures illustrate the high level of public participation in the gubernatorial election, but do not explain how the public's aspirations were translated into the process of nominating regional heads (Indonesia, 2025). The



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political dynamics in North Maluku during the 2024 regional elections also showed that public support was shaped by various considerations, including social identity, political networks, candidates' track records, and expectations for development (Indonesia, 2025; Umum, 2026a; Utara, 2026). Research by Deni et al. (2025) on the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election shows that voters' choices were shaped not only by religious identity but also by pragmatic considerations, political legacies, and social networks (Deni et al., 2025). These findings suggest that voting behavior in North Maluku needs to be understood within a broader social and political context. In this situation, it is important to examine whether the nationally applicable mechanisms for recruiting regional heads have provided sufficient scope to accommodate North Maluku's social characteristics, history, and customary institutions.

North Maluku has a political history closely linked to the Sultanates of Ternate, Tidore, Bacan, and Jailolo. Sultanate traditions have shaped the relationship among leadership, community identity, and social legitimacy and remain part of local political dynamics (Nika, 2021; Prianto & Yulsaini, 2024). Murid (2019) explains that ideas about the sultanate political system resurfaced in debates over the establishment of North Maluku Province after the Reformasi (Murid, 2019). However, the use of sultanate history in modern politics is also connected to elite interests and struggles for influence within government. The role of customary institutions in electoral politics is also evident in Bastiang's (2020) study of customary leaders in Ternate City during the 2018 regional elections (Bastiang, 2020). The study shows that support from customary leaders can influence voter participation and support, although its impact varies across different groups in society. This means that customary traditions still matter in political life, but their influence depends on social conditions and voters' choices. This is important because customary traditions can serve as a source of social legitimacy and a means of expressing the community's aspirations. Therefore, studies of regional head recruitment in North Maluku should treat customary traditions as part of the political context to be understood empirically, rather than as grounds for assuming that customary institutions always represent the interests of the entire community.

Problems arise when the process of nominating regional heads depends heavily on decisions made by political party elites. At the same time, the aspirations of local communities are not necessarily a primary consideration in selecting candidates. Candidate recruitment in Indonesia's regional elections tends to be centralized and informal, guided by pragmatic considerations such as financial capacity and electability (Fitriyah, 2020). This pattern may give candidates with greater economic resources and stronger political networks a significant advantage. A similar issue is evident in Muksin et al.'s (2019) study of political dynasties in North Maluku (Muksin et al., 2019). They found that economic, social, political, and cultural capital, as well as influence over political parties, formed part of the practices through which political dynasties were established in the 2018 North Maluku regional elections. Wance and Djae (2019) also highlighted the role of social networks, economic capital, and political ties in the

gubernatorial contest in the province (Wance & Djae, 2019). These findings do not prove that customary traditions cause political dynasties to emerge. However, they do point to the need to distinguish between customary legitimacy rooted in the community and the use of cultural identity to advance candidates' interests. If the nomination process is not transparent and public participation is limited, the selection of regional heads risks being determined more by access to resources than by leadership qualities and citizens' aspirations. This may restrict opportunities for candidates outside elite networks, weaken party accountability, and erode public trust in the political process.

Debates on this issue concern the idea of asymmetric local elections, in which the mechanisms for electing or filling regional head-of-government positions are tailored to each region's characteristics and needs. They explain that the uniform local-election model in Indonesia faces several problems, including conflicts between candidates' supporters, the financial burden of elections, and strained relations between levels of government (Azzahro et al., 2023). Dewi and Hidayat also discuss the constitutional basis for asymmetric decentralization in filling regional head-of-government positions, particularly under Articles 18A(1) and 18B(1) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Dewi & Hidayat, 2023). Meanwhile, Widodo (2022) emphasizes that regional cultural diversity, characteristics, and history should be taken into account when determining an appropriate electoral system (Widodo, 2022). These studies provide a basis for assessing the possibility of adapting the recruitment mechanisms for regional heads in North Maluku. In this study, asymmetric local elections are not intended to replace direct elections with appointments by sultanates or customary institutions. The proposal under consideration is more limited: adapting the candidate selection and nomination process through transparent public consultation with customary institutions, civil society organizations, and community groups. The outcomes of these consultations could inform political parties, while nomination decisions would remain subject to legislation and the principle of equal political rights. This model needs to be tested to determine whether recognizing customary contexts can broaden public participation without creating privileges for particular groups.

Data on democracy and electoral experience in North Maluku should be interpreted carefully to avoid drawing overly broad conclusions. The voter turnout rate of 69.82% in the 2024 gubernatorial election indicates voter engagement but does not directly show the extent to which customary aspirations were represented in the candidate nomination process (Asrifai, 2020; Umum, 2026a, 2026b; Wardani & Subekti, 2021). Similarly, research on the influence of customary leaders in Ternate City shows that their support does not always translate into the same level of electoral support across all social groups (Bastiang, 2020). This is important because North Maluku is home to communities with diverse social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The study of the 2024 regional elections also shows that voters' considerations may extend beyond group identity to include political networks and

pragmatic concerns (Deni et al., 2025). At the policy level, Aminah (2020) argues that the relationship between regional autonomy and the conduct of regional elections still requires evaluation to ensure that democratic and welfare objectives are pursued in tandem (Aminah, 2020). Through studies in West Sumba and East Sumba, Teka (2020) shows that cultural practices in regional elections can serve as a means of political mobilization, while also raising questions of equality when they occur within strong patron–client relationships. Findings from other regions cannot be directly applied to conditions in North Maluku, but they are useful for comparison when formulating research indicators (Teka, 2020). Accordingly, the proposal for asymmetric recruitment in this study should be assessed against the criteria of an open process, group representation, equal access, accountability in decision-making, and protection of citizens' political rights.

Previous research on North Maluku's local politics has examined political dynasties, candidates' resources, the influence of customary leaders, and the use of sultanate history in power contests (Bastiang, 2020; Muksin et al., 2019; Murid, 2019; Wance & Djae, 2019). At the national level, research on political party recruitment points to a tendency towards centralization and pragmatism in selecting regional head candidates (Fitriyah, 2020; Rosanti, 2020). Meanwhile, studies on asymmetric regional elections have focused more on alternative electoral models, legal foundations, and evaluations of regional election governance (Azzahro et al., 2023; Dewi & Hidayat, 2023; Tukina, 2020; Widodo, 2022). Based on the scope of these sources, there is a research gap that warrants further investigation: an adequate explanation has yet to be developed of how recognition of customary practices can be operationally linked to the process by which political parties recruit candidates in North Maluku. More specifically, further research is needed into the forms of customary consultation that could be applied, the status of its outcomes in the candidate nomination process, the groups in society that should be involved, and the mechanisms needed to prevent elite dominance and discrimination. This gap is the focus to be examined in this research; it is not a claim that no other studies have addressed the relationship between customary practices and regional elections. Accordingly, this research will bring together studies of customary politics, party recruitment, and the institutional design of regional elections within a single analytical framework focused on the process of nominating regional heads in North Maluku.

In light of these issues, this study aims to analyze the relationship among customary legitimacy, political parties' candidate recruitment processes, and the feasibility of institutional adjustments suited to local conditions. It will examine a customary-based public consultation model as an input into candidate selection, without changing the principle of direct elections or granting customary institutions veto powers. This model can be assessed through an analysis of regulations and candidate-selection documents; interviews with political party officials, customary leaders, election

administrators, academics, and community groups; and a comparison of stakeholders' views on the openness and fairness of the nomination process. Academically, the study is expected to enrich research on local democracy by explaining the relationship between social legitimacy and the institutional arrangements for political recruitment. In practical terms, its findings could inform political parties, the General Elections Commission (KPU), local government, customary institutions, and civil society in developing a more transparent, participatory, and accountable nomination process. Any resulting policy proposals should also be assessed for their compatibility with the Constitution and regional election regulations, the principle of equal political rights, and the protection of people who are not represented by customary institutions. With this focus, the study is expected to produce recommendations that can be empirically tested and considered in the development of local democracy in North Maluku.

## **2. METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative literature review to examine the relationship among customary legitimacy, political parties' candidate recruitment, and the prospects for implementing asymmetric regional elections in North Maluku. A literature review was chosen because the study focuses on examining and synthesizing previous research findings, legal documents, and policies relating to local democracy (Snyder, 2019). A literature review can serve as a research methodology for integrating findings from various studies, identifying gaps in knowledge, and developing new understandings of an issue.

The research sources comprise primary sources, including the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, legislation on regional elections and local government, regulations issued by the General Elections Commission (KPU), official documents relating to the 2018 and 2024 North Maluku regional elections, and relevant court decisions; and secondary sources, comprising open-access journal articles on customary politics, party recruitment, political dynasties, local democracy and asymmetric decentralisation. The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, GARUDA, DOAJ, and open-access journal portals, with keywords including political recruitment, customary politics in North Maluku, asymmetric regional elections, political dynasties, and local democracy. The source selection criteria included relevance to the research question, clarity regarding the publisher's identity, availability of the full text, and relevance to the Indonesian and North Maluku contexts. To ensure the quality of the review, the literature search and selection process was conducted systematically and documented so that the sources used could be traced.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis. The selected documents and articles were read critically, after which relevant information was recorded, coded, grouped, and compared according to the research themes. The document analysis followed the READ approach of Dalglish et al. (2020), which comprises four steps: preparing materials, extracting information, analyzing data, and formulating findings. In practice, the analytical categories covered the legitimacy of customary practices in local leadership; the mechanisms used by political parties to identify and nominate candidates; public participation and representation; the risk of elite dominance; and the compatibility of the idea of asymmetric regional elections with the principles of democracy and law. (Dalglish et al., 2020)

Findings from scholarly articles were compared with legislation and official documents to identify areas of agreement, differences, and regulatory gaps. The results were then synthesized to explain how customary values and institutions might be taken into account in the candidate recruitment process without diminishing citizens' equal political rights. The emphasis is that a good literature synthesis does more than summarise previous research: it also connects research findings to build understanding and identify opportunities to advance knowledge (Snyder, 2019). Accordingly, the analysis aimed to formulate a possible model for customary-based public consultation as an input into candidate selection, rather than to replace direct regional elections or grant customary institutions veto powers.

The validity of the research findings is ensured through source triangulation and checks on the consistency of the arguments. This is done by comparing findings across journal articles, checking their alignment with legal documents and official sources, and ensuring that every conclusion is supported by clear references. Dalglish et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of reading documents critically, since documents not only convey information but also reflect the interests, perspectives, and institutional contexts of those who produce them (Dalglish et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Snyder (2019) explains that transparency in source selection, the review process, and the synthesis of findings is an important aspect of the quality of literature-based research (Snyder, 2019). This study does not use interviews or field observations, so its conclusions are limited to the evidence available in the literature and the documents analyzed. Within these limitations, the findings are expected to make an academic contribution by developing research on the relationship between customary practices and political recruitment, as well as a practical contribution in the form of preliminary recommendations for transparent, inclusive customary-based public consultation mechanisms that comply with legislation. These recommendations should nevertheless be understood as conceptual proposals that require further testing before being implemented in policy.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Characteristics of Political Recruitment and Customary Legitimacy in North Maluku

The literature review shows that the process of selecting regional head candidates in Indonesia continues to face problems of centralized decision-making, pragmatism in candidate selection, and strong elite influence. Fitriyah (2020) found that political parties' candidate selection tends to be centralized and informal, with candidates' financial capacity and electability taken into account (Fitriyah, 2020). These findings are consistent with those of Prianto and Yusraini (2024), who show that financial backing, acceptance by elites, and electability are important considerations in selecting regional head candidates (Prianto & Yusraini, 2024). In the context of North Maluku, Muksin et al. (2019) found that economic, social, political, and cultural capital help sustain political dynasties and influence candidates' relationships with political parties (Muksin et al., 2019). They examined the role of political capital in the 2018 North Maluku gubernatorial contest (Wance & Djae, 2019). Taken together, these studies show that access to candidacy is linked to power structures and the resources available to candidates.

Meanwhile, Murid's (2019) study shows that the history of the North Maluku Sultanate is invoked in modern political discourse and forms part of the struggle for legitimacy between customary elites and bureaucrat-politicians (Murid, 2019). Thus, customary traditions are an important context for understanding local politics. However, their role in the candidate selection process should be distinguished from the interests of elites who use cultural symbols to secure support.

The literature on North Maluku's regional elections shows that people's political behavior is shaped by the interplay among identity, social networks, political legacies, and welfare considerations. They found that the victory of Sherly Tjoanda and Sarbin Sehe in the 2024 North Maluku gubernatorial election highlighted the importance of pragmatic considerations and cross-group networks in voter behavior (Deni et al., 2025). Specifically examined the dynamics of Ternate's Indigenous community in that gubernatorial election. They complement this analysis by showing that discourse surrounding the sultanate carries political significance shaped by interests and social change (Murid, 2019; Rino et al., 2025). At the national level, Saputra and Setiawan (2023) discuss the relationship between money politics and identity politics in voter behavior, while Muhtar et al. (2025) examine the impact of political polarisation during the 2024 regional elections on local democracy (Muhtar et al., 2025; Saputra & Setiawan, 2023). Taken together, these studies show that Indigenous and social identities are one element of electoral politics, but their influence cannot be separated from other factors. This finding is important to the present study because Indigenous involvement in candidate recruitment should be designed as a forum for expressing aspirations, rather than on the assumption that a single figure or Indigenous institution can determine the entire community's choices.

Asymmetric local elections may be considered a framework for assessing whether the design of democracy is suited to local social and institutional conditions. Azzahro et al. (2023) discuss the need to evaluate patterns of local executive elections, while Tukina (2020) links asymmetric elections to popular sovereignty and welfare (Azzahro et al., 2023; Tukina, 2020). situate asymmetric decentralization within constitutional discussions of how local executive offices are filled (Dewi & Hidayat, 2023). Drawing on this literature, this study formulates a possible model for customary-based public consultation in the candidate selection process (Khairi, 2020; Mariana & Husin, 2017). The model involves customary institutions and diverse community groups, open consultation criteria, documentation of public input, and an obligation for political parties to explain their nomination considerations within the scope of their authority (Kusumaryati, 2024; Suryanto et al., 2022). This model is a conceptual synthesis and cannot yet be said to be effective until it has been tested through empirical research. Its focus is to broaden public participation in the nomination process without replacing direct elections or granting customary institutions veto power.

### **3.2. Custom as a Source of Legitimacy in Political Recruitment**

The literature on political recruitment can be explained through the concepts of legitimacy and socio-cultural capital. In local politics, a candidate's legitimacy may be established through their track record, social networks, ties to political parties, and acceptance by the community. Bourdieu (1986) explains that social and cultural capital can give individuals an advantage within a social field (Bourdieu, 1986). This framework helps explain the findings of Muksin et al. (2019) and Wance and Djae (2019) on the importance of various forms of capital in political contests in North Maluku (Muksin et al., 2019; Wance & Djae, 2019). However, cultural capital does not automatically indicate that a candidate enjoys legitimacy accepted by the whole community. Shows that discourse surrounding the sultanate in North Maluku politics is also linked to the interests and struggles for influence among elites (Murid, 2019). Therefore, recognition of customary traditions in candidate recruitment should be directed towards conveying the community's aspirations, rather than granting individuals privileges based on lineage or traditional status. This approach extends previous research by treating customary legitimacy as an aspect that must be assessed in terms of representation, transparency, and community acceptance.

Findings on the centralization and pragmatism of candidate selection indicate that party recruitment mechanisms should be assessed in terms of openness and equality of access. found that financial considerations and electability can improve the prospects of candidates with substantial resources (Fitriyah, 2020). Likewise, it showed that financial support, acceptance by party elites, and electability play a role in the selection of regional head candidates, particularly when competition leads

to a single candidate (Prianto & Yusraini, 2024). These findings are consistent with studies of dynastic politics, which highlight the advantages conferred by family networks and control over political resources (Muksin et al., 2019; Wardani & Subekti, 2021). What these studies have in common is their explanation that access to candidacy can be shaped by established power structures. This study differs in that it examines not only how elite dominance emerges, but also whether customary-based public consultation could help broaden channels for expressing aspirations. This mechanism must be designed so that it does not create a new form of dominance through customary institutions. Accordingly, its success should be measured not by the number of customary leaders attending the forum, but by the openness of the process, the diversity of participants, the recording of contributions, and the clarity of how the party takes those aspirations into account.

A comparison with recent studies shows that research on North Maluku politics has examined political dynasties, candidate resources, voter identity, and the dynamics of Indigenous communities. Muksin et al. (2019) and Wance and Djae (2019) focus on political resources and networks in the 2018 regional elections, while Deni et al. (2025) and Rino et al. (2025) consider the dynamics of the 2024 regional elections and Ternate's Indigenous communities. At the national level, Fitriyah (2020), Yusra et al. (2022), and Prianto and Yusraini (2024) discuss candidate recruitment and parties' tendency towards pragmatism. Meanwhile, Azzahro et al. (2023), Dewi and Hidayat (2023), and Tukina (2020) examine the idea of asymmetric regional elections from the perspectives of institutional design and decentralization. These studies share an interest in the quality of democracy, political access, and institutional suitability. They differ in their focus: studies of North Maluku largely examine political actors and the dynamics of electoral contests, whereas research on asymmetric elections discusses alternative electoral designs in more general terms (Aminah, 2020; Asrifai, 2020; Kusumaryati, 2024; Suryanto et al., 2022). Based on the literature reviewed, the area of inquiry developed in this article concerns the operational relationship between customary legitimacy, party candidate-selection mechanisms, and public consultation in the nomination of regional heads. This novelty lies in the synthesis offered here; it is not a claim that no previous research has linked customary institutions with regional elections.

Based on this synthesis, a customary-law-based public consultation model should be built on four principles. First, transparency: information about the consultation's purpose, participants, and outcomes should be publicly available. Second, inclusivity: consultations should involve customary representatives, women's groups, young people, civil society, and residents with no ties to the elite. Third, accountability: political parties should document the input received and explain how it was considered in accordance with candidate-nomination procedures. Fourth, equality: consultation must not become an exclusive requirement that prevents people from standing as candidates or exercising

their political rights. These principles are consistent with discussions of political participation and the importance of the relationship between direct elections, popular sovereignty, and government accountability (Sutrisno, 2017; Tukina, 2020). The discussion of primordialist politics also reminds us that cultural practices need to be analyzed alongside patron–client relationships and power structures (Teka, 2020). Therefore, customary consultations should be treated as a source of public input, rather than the sole determinant of a candidate's suitability. In practice, political parties could hold consultation forums before selecting candidates, publish a summary of the findings, and explain how public input was taken into account. This proposal remains conceptual and requires assessment of its legal feasibility, social acceptance, and potential implementation within party structures.

### **3.3. Legal Basis and Limits of Asymmetric Regional Elections**

The implementation of customary-law-based public consultations should be situated within the framework of the Constitution and the regulations governing regional head elections. Article 18(4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia provides that governors, regents, and mayors are each elected democratically, while Article 18B(1) recognizes and respects regional government units that have special or distinctive status, in accordance with the Constitution (Wetboek, n.d.). These two provisions should be read together with the applicable regulations on the nomination of regional heads. Dewi and Hidayat (2023) examine the constitutional basis for asymmetric decentralization in the appointment of regional heads, while Fatoni (2020) considers the need to adapt the design of regional elections to local characteristics (Fatoni, 2020). However, recognizing regional diversity does not in itself empower customary institutions to determine or invalidate candidate nominations. Accordingly, this study treats customary consultation as a mechanism for participation and the expression of aspirations, which must be aligned with positive law. If the proposal requires changes to formal nomination procedures, its implementation must first be assessed in terms of political parties' powers, KPU regulations, and the need for regulatory amendments. This limitation is important to ensure that the idea of asymmetric regional elections remains within the framework of constitutional democracy and does not diminish the equality of citizens' political rights.

Theoretically, this study brings together scholarship on socio-cultural capital, political recruitment, and asymmetric decentralization to explain how customary legitimacy might be taken into account in the process of nominating regional heads. In practical terms, the synthesis may provide an initial basis for political parties, local governments, customary institutions, and civil society to develop more transparent and inclusive consultation mechanisms. This proposal is relevant to Fitriyah's (2020) findings on the pragmatism of recruitment and Muksin et al.'s (2019) findings on the relationship between elite capital and political dominance in North Maluku (Fitriyah, 2020; Muksin et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the study is limited by its reliance on available literature and documents. It cannot establish how political parties, customary leaders, and communities would receive or implement the proposed model. In addition, findings from other regions are used only for analytical comparison and cannot be directly generalized to North Maluku. Further research should therefore test the model through interviews with a range of stakeholders, analysis of lawfully accessible nomination documents, and comparison of consultation practices across several regions. Given these limitations, the study's main contribution lies in developing a conceptual framework for further testing, rather than claiming that customary consultation has been proven to improve the quality of regional elections.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study shows that the recruitment of candidates for regional head positions in North Maluku continues to face problems in the candidate selection process conducted by political parties. The choice of candidates tends to be influenced by considerations of electability, financial backing, political networks, and elite interests. In this context, customary traditions can serve as a source of social legitimacy for candidates, given their links to local history, identity, and community life. However, customary legitimacy cannot be the sole basis for selecting leadership candidates, since the people of North Maluku have diverse backgrounds and political preferences.

The findings of this study also show that the uniformity of the regional election process does not fully accommodate local social and cultural conditions. Involving customary institutions in the candidate nomination process could therefore be considered as one way to strengthen the relationship between local democracy and community life. This involvement could take the form of open, accountable public consultations that include a diverse range of community groups. The consultation findings would serve as input for political parties when assessing candidates, rather than as a binding decision or a veto for customary institutions. In this way, customary values can be taken into account without diminishing citizens' right to vote or shifting the powers established under the regional election system.

Accordingly, the idea of asymmetric regional elections based on customary public consultation should be treated as a policy alternative requiring further study. Its implementation must comply with the Constitution, legislation, the principle of equality among citizens, and the protection of underrepresented groups. Political parties must also improve their recruitment processes to make them more open and ensure they do not rely solely on financial resources or proximity to political elites. This study is based on a literature review and therefore cannot yet establish how the public would receive the consultation model or how it would be implemented in practice. Future research should therefore test this idea through fieldwork involving Indigenous communities, political parties, regional election

organizers, and other community groups. Such testing is important for assessing the model's feasibility and ensuring that customary involvement genuinely broadens participation and strengthens local democracy in North Maluku.

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