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What is This?

Sweet Home: A Preliminary Investigation into the Socio-Political Character of Recent Road Blockades by Protesting Shack Dwellers in South Africa*

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Abstract

For much of the winter of 2012, communities in shack settlements across Cape Town took to the streets in some of the most active civil disobedience protests since 1994. Knowing that the mainstream political terrain often seeks to obfuscate and mislead the public about the true nature of these protests, this paper investigates claims by politicians from the Democratic Alliance (DA) that these protests were being coordinated by the Youth League of the African National Congress (ANCYL). These big political players moralize the debate, shifting the focus from the perfectly legitimate issues of service delivery and demands for meaningful engagement. Speaking directly to community members of Sweet Home Farm, an informal settlement of 15,000 people in the Philippi area, revealed a yawning chasm between what official players are saying about Sweet Home and the actual realities on the ground.

Keywords

Cape Town, civil disobedience, development, shack dwellers, politics, protest

Community Profile

Sweet Home Farm is a shack settlement in Philippi, Cape Town, consisting of close to 4000 structures and approximately 17,000 people. The exact number of structures and residents remains unknown.

Approximately 16.5 hectares in size, the settlement it is bordered by Duinefontein Road to the west, the Nyanga railway line to the east, Lansdowne Road to the north and Vanguard Drive to the southwest. It lies adjacent to the suburbs of Samora Machel to the southeast, Gugulethu to the north, Brown's Farm to the east, Manenberg to the northwest and the agricultural part of Philippi to the west and southwest. Along with much of the Philippi area, Sweet Home falls under Ward 80,

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the current councillor of which is Thembinkosi Pupa of the African National Congress (ANC; Adelard, 2008; Sweet Home, 2012; The Warehouse, 2012).

Official History

The history of Sweet Home is interesting and offers significant explanations about the structure of the community and why its residents have been marginalized and mistreated for so long. Two-thirds of the land (erf number 2609 as well as 42/604, 43/604, 44/604 and 32/604) on which the settlement is situated has always been owned by the City of Cape Town or by Transnet. It was previously used as an illegal rubble and refuse dump for farmers, industries and builders in the area. The other one-third of Sweet Home (erf number 3/609) was previously owned by Sweet Home Investments CC. This farmland eventually was left empty and underused by this owner. It also became a dumping site for builder's rubble.

By 1992 a small group of shack dwellers began occupying the land. Each year, because of the land and housing crisis in the metropolitan area, more and more homeless families began to settle on both parcels of land. The land was first settled by people who earned their living by recycling dumped bricks and other material which they found on-site. Some of this was sold on the roadside by residents – an informal business practice that has continued until today.

According to research by the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences at the University of Cape Town (UCT), the land accommodated 373 dwellings by 1996 (although some residents say there were only 13 dwellings at this point in time). By 2003 a City of Cape Town survey (City of Cape Town, 2005) had estimated that the population had sky-rocketed to 2217 household dwellings. Nine years later, it is estimated that there are almost 4000 structures and 17,000 people living in Sweet Home Farm (Disaster Mitigation Programme, 2009).

According to provincial deed records, in December 2011 Sweet Home Investments CC sold their land to the City of Cape Town for R750,000; a bargain for the company whose land was essentially worthless because they were losing money paying rates each month despite the fact that thousands of people were squatting on the land.

In many ways, the land is ideally situated for residents who work on nearby farms and factories. Besides the informal rubble recycling business on which the settlement was founded, there are a number of important forms of economic activity in the area which have, over the years, made the settlement attractive to people coming from within Cape Town and from around the Eastern Cape.

Conditions in the Settlement and Issues Identified by the Community

The living conditions in the Sweet Home shack settlement are appalling – even by the grim standards of shack settlements in South Africa. While it is not as densely populated as some of the more well-known under-serviced shack settlements which have been sites of protests in previous years (such as QQ Section, RR Section and TR Section in Khayelitsha, Barcelona in Gugulethu, Joe Slovo in Langa, etc.) conditions in Sweet Home are so bad in other ways that it is surprising that community members have not taken to the streets sooner.

This may be a result of a few minor planning improvements within Sweet Home as well as the fact that the community had been historically considered an African National Congress (ANC) stronghold, thereby limiting community participation in development affairs.

On the land owned by the City of Cape Town, as well as land owned by Transnet, there has been an attempt to 'block' the settlement into smaller sections criss-crossed by a number of untarred service roads. Eskom has also installed electricity for many of the shacks on this

public land. The City has also attempted to install a basic open-air sewage system on this land – which, as I will show later, has actually made the environmental and health situation worse for residents.

At the same time, however, nearly half of the shacks in Sweet Home have been historically situated on private land whereby the owner, Sweet Home Investments CC, has categorically refused to allow the government to install basic services for residents and had, until last year, refused to sell the land. This has meant that the City has failed to build service roads, install electricity or even provide basic sanitary services in this section of the settlement.

Instead of taking the private owner to court to make sure legally required services are either provided by the owner, or that permission to provide services is given to the City, the government has ignored its constitutional obligations to protect the rights of residents. Even though such a failure to provide services is unconstitutional on the part of both the private land owner and the City, no one seems to have informed Sweet Home of this fact, nor the possibility of court action to enforce the provision of services.

The only service item that the City has been able to install on the private land is the provision of a few water taps to be shared by thousands of people. As a result, the residents themselves have built up their own system of governance to ensure that small walking paths remain open and accessible and to prevent the settlement from becoming too dense. Residents who have not been provided with legal electricity connections have also connected themselves to electricity informally – a well-known community-upliftment and anti-shack fire strategy some social movements affectionately call 'Operation Khanyisa' (Operation Let There Be Light) (Birkenshaw, 2008). Additionally, residents have organized to provide one another with a number of informal community services which are being assisted through outside sponsorship by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and church-affiliated organizations. These include the building and maintenance of a community hall as well as the running of a non-profit educare/crèche and community feeding scheme.

One of the primary complaints amongst residents, besides the lack of electricity, water, decent sanitation and formal housing, is the distance that one has to travel to access health and educational facilities. Children are forced to walk long distances, sometimes over busy railway lines and roads, to get to school in Samora Machel or Gugulethu. Similarly, the closest clinic or day hospital is quite a distance away from the settlement. This is also the case with various other services. One community member complained that they cannot even find newspapers anywhere in Sweet Home. They have to go to Gugulethu just to get *Vukani, City Vision* or even the *Daily Sun* so that they can peruse the classifieds for jobs.

Spotlight on Health and the Environment

The dire material conditions in Sweet Home can generally be regarded as a direct result of government policy and, in particular, attributed to the City's lack of meaningful engagement with the community. Besides the inconsistency of refuse removal and lack of water taps in Sweet Home, there are two significant health hazards for residents.

The first is the terrible condition of public toilets in the settlement. The types of toilets range from flush, to chemical, to bucket-system toilets. The small number of toilets (about 607 in total, according to the Disaster Mitigation Programme [2009]) being shared amongst so many residents has not only made them extremely dirty but has also resulted in most of them becoming blocked or otherwise broken. This issue could be resolved through *in-situ* upgrading of the settlement but could also be temporarily alleviated through proper consultation with

residents whereby each section of the community takes ownership of the maintenance of this service.

The second obvious health hazard in the settlement is, in fact, a hazard caused by the City of Cape Town's developmental intervention in Sweet Home itself. Around 2006 the City built a number of open-air sewage canals running through the length of the settlement (something Premier Helen Zille [2011] continues to claim does not exist in Cape Town when she campaigns in Limpopo and KwaZulu Natal). These open sewage canals are a health hazard for a number of reasons. They collect refuse, excrement, food and toxic substances from all over the settlement. They also become blocked very easily. Furthermore, from Sweet Home, the sewage canals leave the settlement and run through private property on which sits, among other businesses, a vehicle mechanic and panel-beating business. Residents complain that the sewage system is blocked on this private property and, with the water further contaminated by the businesses, it then gets pushed back into the Sweet Home community. In winter when it rains, this sewage water becomes a lake which overflows into people's homes. Children regularly play near and inside these canals.

The health consequences of this are tremendous. According to the aforementioned UCT risk assessment report *(Disaster Mitigation Programme, 2009)*, there are high incidents of tuberculosis, asthma and stomach ailments as a result of these health risks. Furthermore, a chemical analysis of the sewage water found 'an alarmingly high E. coli count, which in some specimens was as high as 250 times the national guideline!' (Disaster Mitigation Programme, 2009: 13). This would explain residents' assertions that their children have a range of skin conditions and other serious developmental ailments not mentioned in the report.

It is difficult to quantify the impact that these environmental factors have on residents' ability to take care of themselves and their families. A committee member named Nobanzi explained that Sweet Home is:

> [a] sick, dirty place. There's no schools, there's no clinics. Children and people who are old become sick. It's not nice to stay in the shack with no electricity and sometimes they [the shacks] are burning, we are using the bucket system, that's why we are fighting. (Nobanzi, interview, 29 August 2012)

It is no wonder, then, that the community is furious with the conditions they are living under and how they are being treated at all levels of government. This is why they have banded together into a well-organized system of community governance in order to change things.

History of Community Governance

Before the 'split' in 2011, there was only one community committee in Sweet Home which was run by an un-elected ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) member named Stembela 'Forest' Ndathane. According to many community members, the division in the community took place because Forest, as chairperson, was not working for the community. He was 'focusing on politics' (specifically ANC electoral politics) rather than listening to the needs and grievances of the community. He was a corrupt strongman of the settlement who would control access to the community hall and sell 'space' in Sweet Home for newcomers to put up shacks. According to community member Nonkosi Makheba, he would give out Disaster Management blankets to ANC members only and steal food donated to the crèche to give to his friends.[1]

Around July 2011 a large section of the community became increasingly frustrated with Councillor Thembinkosi Pupa and with Forest, whom they saw as working against the community and hiding community development information from other sidelined committee members. On 16

August residents mobilized to demand that Forest hand over the keys to the community hall for which they claim he was charging residents to access and reserving the space for ANC members (Makoba, 2012). When Forest and Councillor Pupa refused to give up the keys, community members broke into the hall and installed a new lock. They withdrew support from Forest and demanded that any authentic community committee would speak about development issues raised by residents rather than party politics.

On 21 August 2011 Forest found a new committee which remained close to Councillor Pupa and is affiliated with the South African National Civic Organization (SANCO). Forest told me that it is an ANC and SACP only committee. It has very little popular support in Sweet Home and it is seen by many community members as existing only to carry out the wishes of the Councillor and Forest.

In September 2011 residents came together in a mass meeting and elected a new committee. Siyamboleka 'Siya' James was elected as chairperson. Siya works for a Christian church-linked NGO that does some community development work in Sweet Home as well as other townships in Cape Town. While he was active in party politics in the past, Siya is now critical of political parties. He says that development should be driven by issues rather than party affiliations.

The new committee, which is the focus of this report, is loosely affiliated with the United South African Civic Organization (USACO) and is not affiliated to any political party. Based on the wishes of the residents of the community, the committee resolved to remain disconnected from electoral politics and to focus on the development of the community.

Committee Structure and Affiliations

Sweet Home is divided into a total of nine different 'sections'. Each section of Sweet Home has elected its own sub-committee with a total of eight members. These sub-committees are responsible for section-specific issues such as crime, debts, inter-household disputes, numbering of shacks and electricity and water problems.

Each sub-committee is affiliated with the main committee that was formed in September 2011. This main committee consists of eight members in total. These constitute five elected executive members plus three additional non-elected members. When general meetings are held, each section sends at most three delegates to the main committee. They are required to report back to their section after the general meeting. All committee and sub-committee members are volunteers who are not receiving any remuneration for their time.

What I found quite telling is that most – if not all – of the eight committee members actively attend meetings both inside and outside of the community. Outside of a few well-organized communities, this is generally a rare occurrence in community struggles since 1994 as committee members tend to lose interest quickly or are pushed out by other combative or authoritarian community leaders.

USACO is an umbrella body of community committees and civic groups. They are new and extremely small in comparison with the ANC-affiliated SANCO. The body claims that it is not linked to any political party but is rather open to members and voters of all political parties. If this is the case, it has the ability to unite various factions in various communities under common development and socio-political goals – a hugely important asset in a city that is extremely politically divided and sectarian in so many ways. USACO seems to be most active in areas such as Philippi and parts of Khayelitsha, Nyanga and Gugulethu. A man named Matshoba is the chairperson of USACO in the province, but there are questions about how active and effective USACO actually is outside of Sweet Home.

After interviewing committee and sub-committee members, the most interesting revelation was just how legitimate is their claim of being non-party political. In order to get accurate information and to prevent any backlash against the individuals, I promised that party voting preferences would remain anonymous. Committee and sub-committee members vote for the following parties:

- One member of the committee and many members of the sub-committee vote ANC. One of these committee members is now considering voting for the Democratic Alliance (DA);
- At least three members vote for the United Democratic Movement (UDM). One member had previously stood for councillor under the UDM banner but is no longer an active member of the party;
- At least three members vote for the DA (the one DA member was the only committee member arrested during protests on 31 July);
- At least two members vote for the Congress of the People (COPE);
- Some committee members told me that they either do not vote, are not going to vote in the next election or would not disclose their voter preference;
- No committee member claimed affiliation to the ANC Youth League and, when this was probed further, all committee members stated categorically that Youth League members were not involved in either the USACO committee or the SANCO-ANC committee.

When I spoke to Forest about this matter, he implied that that he did not work with this new committee because he viewed it as against the ANC. But the committee doesn't seem affiliated to the DA or UDM. When asked in more detail about the affiliation of this committee to various political parties, Siya, the committee's chairperson, explained that he feels so angry and misled by all political parties that he does not think he will vote in the next elections.

Disillusionment with political parties was a recurring theme of committee members, even if they had voted in previous elections. As Nobanzi stated, 'people are voting every time, but there's nothing [to show for it]. We don't know why we are voting now, because there's no use of this voting' (interview, 29 August 2012).

Engagement with Government and Protests

The community of Sweet Home has, for years, attempted to engage with government officials to improve and speed up service delivery and the upgrading of their settlement. For the most part, as Siya (who was a sub-committee member at the time) recalls, the officials just kept on making promises but there is very little to show for it. The primary exceptions were the 1998 relocation of some residents to houses in Better Life and the 1999 relocation of some other residents' shacks to their own plots in Mfuleni. In 2006 the City installed electricity, made space for emergency access roads and dug out open-air sewers in some parts of the settlement.

During 2011 and early 2012 the community committee tried to engage with Councillor Pupa. They were ignored. On 5 March 2012 the community decided to take to the streets. They took their chemical toilets to the corner of Duinefontein and Lansdowne Roads and burned them. According to community members, they did this because they wanted functional flushing toilets. To make their point, they also destroyed the traffic light at that corner.

After these protests, Councillor Pupa was forced to engage with the new committee. He took them to meetings at the Civic Centre where they met Mayor Patricia de Lille and Mayco member for Human Settlements Ernest Sonnenberg. The committee was handed a document showing that the City had recently bought the remaining private land on which Sweet Home is situated (this

information came five months late since the land was actually purchased in December 2011). They promised that by 1 July 2012, tar-access roads, a drainage system and electricity would be constructed and implemented throughout the settlement.

Disheartened by the lack of progress seen while working through Councillor Pupa, the new committee attempted to meet directly with City of Cape Town officials. They have corresponded in writing with the Mayor, the Speaker, Councillor Sonnenberg and others. They have also approached the sub-council. However, 1 July came and went without engagement from the government, following which City officials and Councillor Pupa began to ignore phone calls from committee members seeking their engagement on when the development process will begin.

The community members argue that the government has taken away their dignity as human beings; officials see residents as people who 'don't have value'. The frustration of being treated with contempt and ignored by the City has led the residents back to the streets.

31 July: Another Blockade and Police Response

Community and committee members recount a mass meeting of several hundred or a thousand furious residents in which they 'decided everyone together', not just 'one person' should block Lansdowne, Duinefontein and Vanguard Roads. Lindiwe, for example, explained to me why she went to the streets that day. From Section F, she is the principal of a crèche in Sweet Home and is on the committee. There are over 50 children at the crèche which is funded by a church and is run out of a shack next to the community hall. She decided to protest because 'the children come to school with rashes, they are sick all the time [from the pollution]'. Recounting the day she helped blockade the nearby thoroughfares, she told me 'I was protesting for the children at my crèche' (Lindiwe, interview, 29 August 2012).

Residents burned tyres on the street (rather than burning toilets because there were few chemical toilets remaining after the previous protest) and again destroyed the traffic lights at the Lansdowne and Duinefontein intersection. The police arrived and began shooting rubber bullets at protesters. In defence, some responded by throwing rocks at the police while the rest dispersed back into the settlement.

Despite the protest ending, community members recount how police invaded the community, shooting rubber bullets at both protesters and innocent bystanders. People were even shot in their own homes. Subsequently, the police seem to have randomly arrested 12 people. A resident of Mannenberg who was visiting his girlfriend in Sweet Home was among those arrested. Interestingly, the only committee member that was arrested was also an ardent DA supporter.

In front of his home police shot Thandikhaya Shweni with live ammunition. Thandikhaya recounts what happened to him:

> I just returned to my house after the protest and I took off my jacket because it was hot and went outside to see what was the commotion with the police. When I went outside, I saw the police shoot people by their houses. Some innocent people were shot … I see the rubber bullets coming. I went running to my house but turned back just to look at where the police were and was shot in the eye. The bleeding wouldn't stop and my sister took me to the hospital. When the doctors at Groote Schuur did their operation, they realized that it was a real bullet, not a rubber bullet. (Thandikhaya Shweni, interview, 29 August 2012).

Later, Siya tried to lay a charge against the police on behalf of Thandikhaya. But police at Samora Machel police station refused to accept his charge or to go and take a statement at the hospital. The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) in Bellville also refused. When Thandikhaya

got out of hospital, he went to Samora Machel police station and received the J88 medical forensics form for the doctor. The doctor at Groote Schuur Hospital, however, gave him the run around, sending him to the wrong person where the form was received and promptly lost.

This was not proper procedure. The police at Samora Machel should have informed Thandikhaya that the J88 needed to go to the first doctor who saw him. In this case, the first doctor he visited after being shot was at the emergency trauma unit at GF Jooste Hospital. Thandikhaya is now making plans to get a new form so that he can once again attempt to lay a charge of attempted murder for the police's actions on 31 July.

Response by Committee Members and City Officials

The committee was at pains to show that they did not support the destruction of the traffic lights or the defensive violence of throwing rocks at the police after the police had fired on residents with rubber bullets. According to them, it was the justified anger of some community members that resulted in the property destruction and the rock throwing. But they did not see it as the right thing to do and expressed hope that any future protests would be more peaceful.

Still, they were also quite clear that City officials only take them seriously when they take to the streets. They recognize that sustained protests and controversial forms of civil disobedience are the only way they are able to force the City to engage with them. Their experience is that 'following the proper channels' simply results in them being lied to or ignored.

The committee's views on the relative efficacy of disruptive forms of protest were borne out by the state's response to their road blockade. Immediately following the protest, Lwandiso Stofile from the City of Cape Town came to the community, told them to stop protesting and promised that Mayor de Lille would take things seriously. The following day, a whole range of City officials descended on Sweet Home. They 'promised everything', including the immediate electrification of the settlement, the construction of access roads, and the installation of a sewage system. They also promised to address the community's grievances regarding public toilets and the unsanitary open-air sewers. Finally, they promised that arrested community members would be released from police custody immediately.

However, according to committee members, the next day only three workers arrived and then left when the committee could not get hold of Mr Stofile. Once again Mr Stofile and other City officials resumed ignoring calls from the committee. Community members are furious once again. It is clear that sustained engagement from the state will require sustained protest. Yet they do not know what action they will next take to make sure the City addresses their demands. The committee is thinking about pooling together funds for a march to the Civic Centre.

Politics: The Official Response

The political response of the DA and of the ANC Youth League regarding the protest at Sweet Home is quite different to the City's response on the ground. Patricia de Lille, Helen Zille and other DA representatives seem to have attempted to, and succeeded, in turning the media representation of the protests and legitimate grievances of communities such as Sweet Home into a political and electoral fight between the DA and ANC (Jooste and Knoetze, 2012; Nkomo, 2012). On 3 August de Lille was quoted as saying that video footage showed that Sweet Home farm protesters were 'carefully marshalled by identifiable individuals', which she said indicated that the protest was not organized solely by the community (Mtyala, 2012). This

statement is, of course, predicated on the widely held prejudiced belief that shack dwellers are not capable of organizing their own protests. Yet such statements insinuating that this is primarily a political party fight have become the primary headline throughout the mainstream media.

On the other hand, the ANC Youth League and other ANC affiliated structures have responded by refusing responsibility for the protests but at the same time kicking up antagonistic political rhetoric with statements about making the city 'ungovernable'. This has led to the assumption by many that they may in fact bear responsibility for coordinating recent protests – such as those at Sweet Home. The Youth League is more than willing to nurture this impression which provides them with the aura of having popular legitimacy in Cape Town.

However, the Youth League is clearly not involved in Sweet Home at all. Even Forest is willing to admit that the Youth League has no members in the settlement. Their call to make Cape Town 'ungovernable' is not part of the agenda of residents and their elected committee which is focused primarily on struggling for the right to engage the City around questions of service delivery. There is no evidence that any outside actors are involved in any way in the protests by Sweet Home. Furthermore, those main actors representing Sweet Home are not even affiliated with the ANC and many of those involved in the community's actions are actually DA supporters protesting against both DA and ANC politicians.

It is also likely, and there have been reports by alternative media and activists that corroborate this, that subsequent protests in the Cape Flats by Barcelona, Europe, Site B, Siyahlala, and SST, to name a few, have little or nothing to do with the ANC Youth League. At most, the Youth League is a side actor with regards to the majority of the protests and are merely piggy-backing off the legitimate grievances and anger of shack dwellers.

Nobanzi's 'Living Politics' (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2009)

Committee member Nobanzi came from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town as a single mother so that she could find a job to support her three children. Even though she could not find formal employment, she remains the only breadwinner for her children, making ends meet through odd jobs and informal businesses. She says she volunteers in her community because this is one of the ways she is able to improve the lives of her children. She explained why she took to the streets on 31 July: 'We don't want to mess things, we are fighting because we are struggling. Inside our hearts there is no peace' (interview, 29 August 2012).

In the context of the debate about the use of violence by protesters here in Cape Town, in shack settlements all over the country and in the mines in communities such as Marikana, this tells us a great deal. Nobanzi is no 'hooligan'. She is no 'anarchist'. She does not see herself as a revolutionary or a political actor. She also does not condone the destruction of property – especially the burning of the community's disgusting but needed chemical toilets. And yet, she participated in the road blockade because she is struggling and this is the only way that she and others have been able to get the attention of the government.

Yet she is clear that she is merely responding to the violence of the state. Inside Nobanzi's heart there is no peace simply because every minute of every day she is a victim of unconscionable forms of structural violence that is defended with physical violence of a police force unwilling to recognize her human dignity.

Authentic community development can only start by first acknowledging the legitimate anger of the poor. Nobanzi's heart can only begin to find a semblance of peace when she and her fellow neighbours assert their right to be the primary decision-makers in their own lives.

Conclusion

For all of August and September 2012, police vans surrounded Sweet Home as a deterrent to future protests. Siya has remarked that they feel 'imprisoned' in their own community. The government has plenty of money to maintain the busy roads surrounding the settlement (economically important channels bringing people to work), and yet they still have no money to fix the appalling and inhumane conditions under which Sweet Home residents live.

A state that treats the most oppressed people in society as if they were some sort of internal enemy funded by a mysterious *third force* (Zikode, 2009) is a state that is completely failing to address the gross inequalities in South African society.

The conspiracy theories that NGOs and politicians peddle to try to explain away the rising tide of protest in Cape Town and throughout South Africa have little to do with reality and are a further affront to the dignity of the city's poorest residents. Police cannot surround every shack settlement in Cape Town – there are hundreds of them. Another community will rise up and blockade a different but just as vital thoroughfare. And de Lille (and those Mayors who will follow her) will continue to send the police from one settlement to the next, playing musical chairs with the anger of the poor.

But no game, especially one as oppressive and violent as this one, can last forever.

Note

1. A researcher from UCT who has previously worked with Forest warned me that he would engage in 'verbal fights' with community members and at one point even 'had a murder rap against him'.

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