



## UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE SAHEL: IMPLICATIONS ON THE CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

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### Abstract

*The unconstitutional change of power in the Sahel and West African countries has elicited justifiable discourse among researchers. The removal of democratically elected presidents through coups d'état has truncated democratic governments and disrupted good governance and democratic activities, and has deeply created fears in the democratic nations because of contagious effect. The objective of this study is to explore key issues affecting the unconstitutional change of power in the Sahel and its consequences on the democratic nations of Africa. The study adopted the secondary source of data collection, and Content Analysis was used as a research method to systematically analyze text, identify patterns and meanings. The result confirmed that unconstitutional change of governments in the Sahel had negative and significant effect on good governance and fundamental human rights and freedom. The study therefore recommended the intensification of efforts of government to promote good governance in order to discourage the military from attempting unconstitutional change of power.*

**Key words:** Coup D'état, Democracy, Good Governance, The Sahel

### Introduction

The primary reason for the establishment of the military world over is security. Due to the emphasis placed by all states on security, some argued that it is the primary reason for the existence of the state. The military which traditionally is the instrument for the provision of security, has always been used to overthrow or change constitutional governments. As an institution, the military is seen and organized largely as an instrument or machinery of war. Therefore, Ochoche (2002) described it as an institution organized around arms. It is evaluated on its capacity to organize and apply violence against an enemy in the protection of the state, but the military has used the arms in several cases to remove constitutional governments from power. Coup d'état has long been a defining feature of the post-independence African political landscape. The first successful coup in Africa took place in Egypt in July, 1952, followed by Sudan in 1958. In 1966, Ghana's coup overthrew a African Pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah. The forceful removal of Nkrumah from power marked a major turning point and heralded the coup that took the centre

stage for the next half-century (Khisa, 2024). Afterward, coups became a routine phenomenon across the African continent. Prior to the recent coups in the Sahel, 80 successful coups, 108 attempted coups and 139 reported coup plots were recorded in Africa (McGowam, 2003). Yet, in mapping Africa's coups d'état across the years, Aljazeera reported that out of at least 242 successful military coups that have occurred globally since 1950, Africa accounts for the largest number at 106. African Sahel region has witnessed a wave of coups d'état over the last five years. It is truism that five military coups succeeded in five Sahelian countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger and Gabon. During the same period, coup attempts were thwarted in Gambia, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, and Sao Tome and Principe. These obviously represent a pattern of change in Africa before the democratic system of government became dominant. Although the coup phenomenon declined considerably at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has seen resurgence in the past five years. There have been nine successful military coups on the continent since 2020, alongside at least the same number of

failed attempts, all centered on a group of francophone states that commentators have termed a Sahelian coup belt (Vines, 2024).

The reasons for toppling democratic governments were often hinged on corruption, fragile economy and insecurity. The four West African countries to experience a coup d'état between 2021 to 2023 shared common warning signs with the largest average declines in security. Mali had two coups within a space of a year, 2020 and 2021. The first coup ousted President Boubakar Keita, who was accused of failing to address shrinking security situation and widespread corruption in the country. Expectedly, pressure from the African Union and Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) forced the military junta to quickly form a transitional government for a maximum of 12 months, as part of a plan to hold general elections. But in 2021, another military coup was executed and the hope of holding an election was dashed.

Similarly, Burkina Faso had two coups. The first in 2022 in which Lieutenant Colonel Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba arrested and detained President-elect Roch Marc Christian Kabore. Damiba blamed Kabore for being responsible for the failure in confronting the Jihadist insurgent movements in the country. In a very quick succession, another coup d'état removed Damiba, and Captain Ibrahim Traore took over the mantle of leadership. The reasons given for taken over powers from democratically elected governments in Burkina Faso bothers on corruption and insecurity. Guinea was equally faced with the challenges of a coup in 2021, when Colonel Mamady Doumbouya ousted the government of Alpha Conde whom he accused of corruption, economic mismanagement and disregard for human rights.

The coup in Niger Republic attracted international attention because of the hardline position of her erstwhile colonial overlord, France. The Commander of the Presidential Guard, General Abdourahamane Tchiani took over the mantle of leadership after removing a democratically elected president, Mohamed Bazoum. The coup leader blamed President Bazoum for erosion of insecurity in Niger.

Although in 2023, coup took place in the West African sub-region, Gabon. The coup ended the hegemonic control of the Bongo's family that held sway for 50 years.

The Sahelian countries that had successful coups have common borders, and are in consensus in accusing democratically elected presidents of security, widespread corruption and economic failures. From the late 1999s to the

early 2000, several countries in Africa embraced the democratic system of government. The military juntas became a thing of the past until about five years ago when countries in Africa, particularly the countries in Sahel began to reintroduce the military dictatorship into the fabrics of the social system.

The questions however remain; why is democracy in crisis and military regime on the rise in the Sahel? What are the implications of the coup d'état in the Sahel for the democratic nations in Africa? Will the bandwagon or contagious effect of the coups in the Sahel result in military intervention in the democratic countries of Africa? This study is therefore motivated by the desire to interrogate the above questions. The study set out to explore some key issues affecting military coups in the Sahel and its consequences on the democratic nations of Africa. This study is collapse into six different but complimentary sections, with the introductory part as the first section. The second section consists of definition of key terms. The third dwells on the causes of military interventions in Africa, while the fourth section offers insight into implication of coups for democracy, and the fifth is on strengthening democratic core values in Africa, the sixth is on the theoretical framework, while the seventh section constitutes the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

## Conceptual Issues

### Coup d'état

Longley (2021) sees coup d'état as the sudden, violent overthrow of an existing government by a small group. The coup d'état, also known as coup, is typically an illegal, unconstitutional seizure of power conducted by a dictator, a guerrilla military force, or an opposing political faction. Coup is illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive. The chief prerequisite for a coup is control of all or part of the armed forces, the police and other military elements. In many forms of the coup d'état, the military of the nation has a degree of involvement. Coups with a large degree of overt military involvement are label as a military coup. In a military coup, the military seizes control of the government.

### Democracy:

Democracy is unarguably the most popular system practiced in the world today and Africa is no exception with regards to the global spaces that have popularized the practice.

Democracy is a system of government where the people hold the power and govern themselves, either directly or through elected representatives. Democracy is basically based on the principle of popular sovereignty, meaning the will of the people is the source of all political power. The system of democracy includes procedures, values and principles which are imperative to keeping power. Democracy equally strengthens state structure for greater transparency, rule of law and accountability in governance. The practice and promotion of democracy in different parts of the world have diverse forms of interpretations. In spite of the different interpretations, the concept of democracy is pervasive in modern political discourse. The fundamental goal of democracy is to govern the society in such a way power actually belongs to the people. This basically has to do with conducting free, fair and credible elections. Proper democracy, according to Collier (2010) has checks and balances that limit the power of a government once elected.

Demond (1989) views democracy as a system of government which meets three essential conditions: A meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups especially political parties, either directly or indirectly, for the major positions of government power, at regular intervals, and excluding the use of force ; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties: freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form organizations, sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation. Fundamentally, democracy is a system of government that allows individual's participation in the political process of their society.

### **Good Governance:**

Good Governance is seen as process of managing public affairs and resources in a fair, transparent and accountable manner to achieve sustainable development and guarantee human rights. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) describe good governance as formal government structure with 8 major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and the voices of the most vulnerable are taken in society are heard.

In the 1990s, the World Bank adopts the concept of good governance into lending arrangements for developing countries and introduced the idea to the general public. ASPAC (2021) buttressed the UNESCAP definition that good governance aims to minimize corruption, take into account the opinion of the minorities, listen to the voices of the oppressed people in the decision-making process, and respond actively to the needs of the community now and in the future.

### **The Sahel:**

The Sahel is semiarid region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal eastward to Sudan. It forms a transitional zone between the arid sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south. The Sahel stretches from the Atlantic Ocean eastward through northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, the great bend of the Niger River in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, northeastern Nigeria, south-central Chad and into Sudan (Britannica, 2025). According to Helmer (2025) the Sahel is located between the expanding Sahara Desert to the North and Central African rain forests to the south. It is categorized as a steppe, an area of grasslands, hot temperature, high winds and low humidity. The region is home to diverse plant and wildlife, including a large variety of grazing mammals and apex predators such as big cats, although rapidly becoming extinct. The Sahel is a vast area crossing 6,000 kilometres from East to West Africa. It covers many geographical and agro-ecological systems, 12 countries and is home to 400 million people. Sahel, as defined by the United Nations Strategy (UNISS), covers 10 countries (Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria).

The Sahel region suffers political instability which has weakened the livelihoods of households, threatens the sovereignty and stability of states. The central Sahel states of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, all of which are now ruled by military junta are engulfed in a decade long regional jihadist insurgency (ACLED, 2024). The military juntas that rule Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are likely to continue to shape the region's security policies in years to come. Their rise across the Sahara ushered in a new era, leading to the withdrawal of French troops, United Nations peacekeeping mission to Mali, and the entrenchment of Russian mercenaries.

The challenges mentioned above in the Sahel are numerous, but its strength lies in the youth population. According to

Deng (2022), 64.5% of Sahel's 150 million people were young people under the age of 25 years. What it implies is that this massive young population is an abundant human resource for development within the region and the global market. Effective investment in the education and potential of the Sahelian youth will serve to ensure steady economic development in the region.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The frustration-aggression theory, suggests that frustration leads to aggression, and can be applied to understand some conflicts in the Sahel, particularly, the violent and unconstitutional change of government. The theory posits that when individuals or groups are blocked from achieving their goals, they may become frustrated and resort to aggression. The theory originally stated that frustration is a necessary and sufficient condition for aggression, meaning that any frustration inevitably leads to aggression, and any act of aggression is due to frustration (Dollard et al (1939). One of the oldest scientific theories of human aggression is the frustration-aggression theory. In the Sahel, factors of resource scarcity, economic inequality, and political instability can create frustration, potentially leading to violent conflict. The Frustration-aggression hypothesis states that aggression is a result of frustration. Frustration is any event or stimulus that prevents an individual from attaining a goal and its accompanying reinforcement quality (Dollard and Miller, 1939) cited in McLeod (2023).

When our drive to reach a goal is blocked by external factors, we experience frustration, which, in turn, creates an aggressive drive, this can lead aggressive behaviour. The frustration-aggressive theory was first formulated by Yale University researchers, John Dollard, Leonard Doob, Neal Miller, Mowrer, and Robert Sears (1939). They attempted to account for virtually all of human aggression with a few basic ideas in their book, *Frustration and Aggression*. The Yale University researchers see frustration as an event instead of an effective state. Dollard et al thought about frustration as an unexpected blockage of a goal that someone anticipated. Amsel (1962) predicts that frustration occurs when the anticipated reward is reduced, and Hanratty et al (1972) described frustration as the withdrawal of an anticipated.

The notion that aggression is an inevitable response to frustration was criticized by some researchers. As cited in Krugiansky et al (2023), Buss (1963, 1966) argued and

empirically demonstrated that aggression can occur without frustration and that aggression can only occur without frustration and that, in fact, frustration "is at best a weak determiner of aggression. However, Buss studies repeatedly demonstrated a lack of significant relation between frustration and aggression. Instead, Buss focused on attack as the primary cause of aggression.

The frustration-aggression theory is relevant to this study as it explains the trajectories of the unconstitutional change of power in the Sahel. The Coups d'état in the Sahel are often consequences of frustration from the citizenry, and consequently aggression of the armed forces. The military often capitalizes on the people's frustration and aggression to overthrow democratically elected governments. The theory therefore predicated on and only interested on people's aggression when they are frustrated. The frustration-aggression theory is adopted for this study because it presents a comprehensive approach in addressing the challenge of unconstitutional change of power in the Sahel. The strength of the theory is that its approach is most effective for this work.

### **Causative Factors of Coup D'état in the Sahel**

It is an absolute truism that the African Sahel regions witnessed waves of coups d'état in the past five years, and are currently being led by military regimes. Five military coups were successful in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger and Gabon. During the same period, coup attempts were thwarted in Gambia, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone and Sao Tome and Principe Island. In all the countries that the coups were successful, citizens in these countries were elated and celebrated the removal of democratically elected governments and continue to demonstrate support for the military junta. Africa is the region with the most coups in the world, with 200 attempted and failed coups between 1950 and 2023, accounting for 44 percent of the world's attempted coups. The majority (58 percent) of Africa's coups occurred in the West Africa and the Sahel (Maianhi, 2023).

Most researchers are in consensus that corruption and insecurity are major causal variables of coup d'état in the Sahel and other African countries, Maianhi (2023) clearly pointed out that coups often occur as a result of government corruption that affects both the economic and military activities. He equally observed that such causes not only public dissidence and nationwide protests, but also left the army ill-equipped to defend its borders against the jihadists.

In a similar vein, Mahmoud (2023) noted that corruption, economic mismanagement, and failure to confront armed separatist and jihad movements are circumstances and motives cited for coups in the Sahel. He sees the complexities of the intense regional and international competition between interested major powers as a cause of military interventions. It is observed that France and the United States to a lesser degree adhere to supporting elected governments in countries that experienced coups for reasons that do not necessarily have anything to do with supporting democracy, but rather with the isolated authorities. On the other hand, other international players led by Russia, have found an easy outlet and opportunities to enhance their influence by supporting the emergent regimes. The succession of coups shows that the Sahel region has become the focus of international competition between the world's major powers. In addition to the old camp led by Washington and Paris, and newer one headed by Moscow and Beijing, there is an emergent third one (India, Turkey, Iran) that is seeking a foothold in the region (Mahmoud and Taifouri 2023). The spate of coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Guinea and Chad, according to Opalo (2023) are symptoms of state building failures, elite complacency, perceived failures of democratic government, and the shaky sovereignty of these state.

African Union and external influences have been blamed for the waves of coups in the Sahel and the West African sub region. Twinomujuni (2023) argued that inadequacies of the African Union and internal and external forces impede united African action. Foreign interference includes financing of coups, and the mobilization of mercenary forces to African states. Thirteen foreign countries have military bases on the continent of Africa alone. The African Union has a mandate to maintain peace and security in the region. Therefore, the increasing number of military coups in the Sahel and West African countries is a testament to the union's shortcomings.

Electoral malpractices are often fertile grounds of excuse to topple democratic governments in the Africa Sahel region. Electoral malpractice is widespread in Africa. The continent's elections are marred by fraud, discrimination, violence and vote buying and selling. Elections in this clime are often merely a tool for elites to acquire political powers through intimidation, fraud and manipulation of tribal and religious allegiance. The main triggers of coups in the Sahel are corruption, security crisis, electoral malpractices, constitutional crises, internal and external influences, and

even nepotism. In all these, corruption is a cankerworm that has eating deep into the fabrics of the African. Maianha (2023) succinctly captured it thus:

Government corruption is common all over the world, but in Africa and especially in the Sahel region, corruption in the government has deeply affected many aspects of life. Government officials are often accused of embezzling public funds and of nepotism. In Niger, more than 100 million dollars of public money was reported to be lost in series of potentially corrupt international arms deals.

In a nutshell, there is a strong connection between France neo-colonial influence and re-emergence of coups d'état in its former colonies. Adams et al (2025) noted that persistent leadership failures largely due to external manipulation, have hindered socio-economic progress. It was equally observed that widespread poverty, poor infrastructure, mass unemployment, and the failure to conduct free and fair elections have fueled public discontent, creating fertile grounds for military interventions. Unlike in the past when citizens greeted attacks on democratically elected governments with discontent and disapproval, the recent coups, according to Akabueze (2024) have for so many reasons been met with support and acceptance by the citizens through celebrations on the streets and supportive message on the social media. The acceptance and support for democracy especially during the third wave of democracy in the 1990s stems from the awareness and desire of the people to ensure accountability, equity, and justice. Furthermore, democracy embodies virtuous principles necessary for an inclusive, progressive, and stable society. These attributes of democracy make it provide the greatest happiness to a greater number of people in society (Odigbo, Ezekwelu, & Okeke, 2023) Therefore, when expectations of the populace are not met, the waves and popular support from citizens decline. It is a sign of citizen's dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy and its inability to incorporate these democratic principles to provide happiness to the people. The military in such cases see citizen's disenchantment as an avenue to overthrow democratically elected governments. Mugabi (2020) highlighted the Malian coup where the public and opposition parties supported the coup as they had previously staged massive protests demanding the resignation of their president. Similarly, the Guinean coup was welcomed with public celebrations. The recent popular support for coup plotters can be attributed to citizens' discontent with democracy caused by years of poor governance and pitiful

democratic performance which have made them receptive to other alternatives.

### **Implication of Coups on the Consolidation of Democracy in Africa**

The recurring coup d'état in West Africa, particularly the Sahelian region has profound implication for democracy in Africa. According to Badus (2023), coup disrupts the democratic process, undermines the rule of law, and erodes citizens' trust in political institutions. Coup also result in the suspension of constitutional rights, restrictions on civil liberties, and increased human rights abuses. Overthrow of democratic governments often results to political instability which fuels ethnic and religious tensions, heightening the potential for violence and exacerbating inter communal conflicts. An excellent example was the Nigerian civil war that lasted for over two years. The January 1966 coup d'état led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu that overthrew the democratic government of Sir Tafawa Balewa triggered the civil war. The January 1966 coup in Nigeria fueled ethnic and religious acrimony in the country.

The implication of coups is the fact that it poses a significant threat to peace, stability, and democratic stability in the African continent. The fear is that coup resurgence in the Sahel could come with the contagion effect problem whereby it could spiral out of control and spread across other parts of Africa. Falola (2022) corroborated that military coup in one area of a region could possibly influenced other regions to stage a coup. Military coups in the Sahel bring about a sense of legitimacy and encouragement in other regions in Africa, especially other African countries that share similar problems with their Sahelian counterparts, on seeing those in Africa resort to coup and authoritarian alternatives as a solution to their problem. An excellent example is the case of the coup in Burkina Faso. After the coup in Burkina Faso, citizens, instead of condemning it, celebrated it. A similar development occurred in Niger and other African countries in terms of citizens celebration of military coups. Osariyekemwem (2021) highlighted the Algerian and Sudanese coups of 2019 and the Malian coup of 2020, where the juntas encouraged by the coup in one country, replicated the same in their own country. What these imply is that popular support of the military coups in the affected countries prepares a fertile ground for the dislocation of democratic governments in other parts or regions of Africa. The celebration that greeted the military takeover of power in Libreville, the capital of Gabon was enough to send fears

to heads of democratic governments in other African countries. People went out to cheer the soldiers and celebrate the overthrow of the government. Coups also provide opportunities for non-state actors, such as rebel groups and terrorists organizations, to exploit the power vacuum and disrupt regional security. The frequent unconstitutional change of powers creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, hindering sustainable socio-economic development and foreign investment.

### **Strengthening Democratic Core Values in Africa**

Africa's democratic sojourn has been marked by progress, setbacks, and lessons. The continent has witnessed an evolution in governance models, with democracy gradually becoming a central aspiration for many nations. Smith (2023) views democracy in the light of economic growth, increased access to safe water and electricity, and decreased levels of infant mortality. Democracy increases levels of education, improves gender equality, and reduces conflict. Also, democracy commits to and delivers more policies to respond to climate change. Democracy is a problem-solving system. Strong democracies solve real-world problems. These tangible benefits are reason alone to strengthen democracy not only in the Sahel, but the African region. Strengthening democratic core values in Africa involves fostering inclusive participation, ensuring accountability, and promoting civic engagements. This can be achieved through investing in strong institutions, empowering citizens with knowledge, and encouraging regional cooperation, as well as leveraging technology and promoting economic inclusivity. Unfortunately, Smith (2023) observed that most of the world population lives under a form of autocratic regime, unable to access benefits democracy brings both tangible and intangible. Therefore, according to Cheeseman, et al (2024) democracy support has shifted its focus. The efforts aimed at supporting democratization were based on the idea that it was a linear and stable process. However, the belief has increasingly been challenged by growing concerns about democratic erosion in supposedly established democracies. Democracy in Africa is not uniform. While some countries have achieved relative stability and established functional democratic systems, others continue to grapple with electoral fraud, weak institutions, governance crises, conflict and wars. While challenges persist, Mbewe (2024) suggested the need to strengthen democratic systems, enhance accountability and ensure governance that serves the people.

Some African nations have practiced democracy, and offer valuable lessons in democratic governance. Botswana stands out as a model of democratic stability and good governance. According to Mbewe (2024), the country, since independence in 1966, has maintained uninterrupted democratic elections. The reasons for Botswana political success are the country's commitment to rule of law, an independent judiciary, and a professional civil service. Botswana also demonstrates the importance of strong institutions that transcend political cycles. South Africa is a testament of good governance. Since the country's transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, it has maintained a consistent democratic transition and this is a testament to the power of inclusive governance. Truth Reconciliation Commission played a significant role in addressing past injustices, fostering national healing, and laying a foundation for democratic governance. The South African experience underscores the importance of addressing historical grievances to build trust in the democratic system. South Africa has enjoyed uninterrupted peaceful elections since 1994.

By implication, when the basic or core democratic values are strengthened and entrenched in governance, it is often difficult to witness unconstitutional change of governments. Most African leaders, in their quest for absolute powers and primitive accumulation of wealth, undermine the constitution that regulates the activities of a democratic nation. Oftentimes, the judiciary compromise to favour the leaders in power. These negative propensities have culminated in unconstitutional change of government in African nations.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations.**

The Sahel region remains a volatile region in political and security discourse. This is more so that its future democratic transition is uncertain in the light of the escalation of international competition that has become the primary driver in shaping the region's future. The Sahel region no doubt has faced persistence political instability and numerous military coups. Therefore, haven -rayed the extent to which the persistence and recurring coups d'état in the Sahel contribute to engendering democracy in African

continent. It is very instructive that the African Union (AU) map out effective strategies to ensure that good governance and democratic principles are entrenched in the leadership architecture of African nations.

African Union (AU) should prioritize and design effective strategies to discourage unconstitutional takeover of political power in any member state. The support for democracy by AU would help to stem the tide of coups d'état any unconstitutional change of power in the Sahel and other member states.

The Sahel region and other AU member states should embrace democracy and its principles. The principles of democracy include, participation of citizens, equality, accountability, transparency, political tolerance, multi-party system, control over the abuse of power, freedom of economy, bills of rights, human rights, free and fair elections, free courts (independent judiciary) accepting election results and rule of law.

It is truism that corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the African social system. Therefore, the fight against corruption is key in discouraging the unconstitutional change of power in the Sahel and other parts of Africa. Primitive accumulation of wealth by the African leaders gives an easy outlet to the military to penetrate into powers.

The dominant influence of the international community is equally a major reason for the unconstitutional change of power in the Sahel. African leaders or heads of government should divorce from the unequal marriage of convenience with the fortune seeking imperialists, and focus on Africa and the needs of the citizenry. The erstwhile colonial overlords have influenced several coups in the Sahel to usher in government that dance to their whims and caprices.

Above all, African political leaders should administer or lead their respective countries according to the constitutional provisions of the nation. Outright disrespect for the constitution and abuse of political powers are clear opportunities for the military to topple democratic governments.

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