

The Role of Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya in Operation Seroja (1975-1976)

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Abstract

This study discusses the history of the integration process of East Timor into the territory of the Republic of Indonesia. This study aims to provide a discussion related to the process and role of one of the TNI Command units in Operation Seroja, namely the Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya. This study uses a qualitative approach with historical methods consisting of Heuristics, Criticism, Interpretation, and Historiography. The results of this study explain the background of the integration of East Timor into Indonesia caused by internal conflicts between East Timorese political parties, each of which wanted to establish a state based on their own ideals. In addition, this study also shows that the Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya played a role in the process of Operation Seroja by sending Yonif 507, Yonif 512, and Yonif 527 to carry out three stages of operations: the border entry stage, defensive operations and offensive operations and then territorial operations to rebuild infrastructure in East Timor after the conflict.

Keywords: Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya, Timor Timur, Operation Seroja

Introduction

East Timor, now known as the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, is a region that was once part of the territory of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). The island of Timor stretches between 123°25' and 127°19' East Longitude and 8°17' and 10°22' South Latitude, following a diagonal axis from the southwest to the northeast. The territory of East Timor encompasses the eastern part of the island of Timor, the Oecusse-Ambeno exclave, Atauro Island, and Jaco Island, bordering NTT (Indonesia) to the west and Australia to the east. Topographically, the territory of East Timor consists largely of mountainous regions stretching from east to west. These mountain ranges are sometimes interrupted, forming valleys as well as steep and deep gorges.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Indonesia with the aim of controlling the spice trade in Southeast Asia. In the early 16th century, the Portuguese occupation of Malacca served as a bridge for Portuguese expeditions to the island of East Timor, which began in 1512–1515. The expedition to East Timor was actually part of a voyage to the Moluccas aimed at controlling the region of Goa. East Timor was renowned for its high-quality commodities, including sandalwood, honey, and

wax. Relations between the Portuguese and Timor initially took the form of bilateral trade, as documented in a letter from the Portuguese captain in Malacca to King Manuel in Lisbon in 1514, which noted the need to send a large ship of 500 tons to Timor.¹ However, the island of Timor had not yet experienced direct contact until the period between 1564 and 1602, when the Portuguese established a settlement in Solor, NTT, by building a defensive fortress to repel attacks from the Javanese kingdom of Demak. However, in 1613, the defensive fortress in Solor was successfully captured by the VOC under the leadership of *Apollonius Scotte*. Competition raged for years over the control of Solor between local rulers, the Portuguese, and the Dutch. By 1681, the regions of Solor and East Timor officially became part of the *Estado da India*, making them part of the Portuguese empire in Asia with its capital in Goa.

During the governorship of the Portuguese governor *Celestino da Silva*, East Timor faced a series of uprisings by the local population. *Celestino da Silva* suppressed many local uprisings to consolidate Portuguese colonial authority and also focused on improving the region's infrastructure. The peak of local resistance occurred between 1911 and 1913 and was ultimately resolved through traditional means: after Portuguese military commanders made peace by taking a "blood oath" with local chieftains, as Governor *Filomeno da Camara* had done when ending the resistance in Same.² Thus, the rebellion was crushed (with reinforcements from Macao and Mozambique), as the Portuguese authorities were now considered to have forged a blood bond with the people's leaders in accordance with tradition.

With the end of the conflict between the local people and the Portuguese during the pacification process, the Portuguese government began to focus on the development and transformation of infrastructure, education, and the economy in East Timor. The status of local kings had changed; their aristocratic recognition, based on the acceptance of their letters of appointment (*carta patente*), was acknowledged by the colonial government as heads with specific authority, becoming officials of the Portuguese civil administration. In 1926, *António de Oliveira Salazar* emerged to establish the Estado Novo, under which the Salazar government reaffirmed the status of East Timor as a colony, and the indigenous population was divided into those who were "civilized" and those who were "uncivilized." In 1950, there were 1,541 indigenous people classified as civilized (*civilizado*), while the majority—numbering 434,907—were still referred to as *uncivilized (não-civilizado)*.³ Those considered 'civilized' were those who, according to the 'assimilation policy,' had attained the level of *Portuguese civilization*, and to reach such a level, they had to follow the Portuguese educational system that instilled Portuguese cultural values.

¹ A. B Lopian dan JR Chaniago, *Timor Timur dalam gerak pembangunan* (Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1988), 9.

² Ibid., 20.

³ Ibid., 21.

Political life in East Timor only began to develop in the 1970s, as evidenced by the emergence of several political parties with ideologies ranging from nationalist, aristocratic, democratic, and communist, all seeking to establish an independent East Timorese government. Initially, Indonesia had no territorial ambitions regarding Portuguese Timor, and this was first announced following the meeting of the Council for Political and Security Stabilization held on October 8, 1974.⁴ Indonesia claimed that its territory included former Dutch colonies, including what is now Irian Jaya. Indonesia eventually became involved in the integration process and subsequently incorporated Portuguese Timor into the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia as its 27th province, named East Timor.

Indonesia's involvement in the decolonization efforts in Portuguese Timor was marked by military intervention and attempts to annex the Timor archipelago. The international community's unease regarding the establishment of a communist-aligned state in East Timor created tensions between East Timor and Indonesia. The emergence of some local political figures in East Timor who wished to join Indonesia triggered the Balibo Declaration, which led to the deployment of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) to East Timor. One of the TNI military commands dispatched from Malang was the Brawijaya Military Command, which was deployed in Operation Seroja in 1975. Consequently, this research article will examine the process and role of the Brawijaya Military Command in Operation Seroja during 1975–1976.

Research Method

The examination of issues related to this article employs the historical method as a research approach. The historical method is defined as a process of reconstructing past events based on critically examined data.⁵ Meanwhile, according to the historical method itself, it is an imaginative reconstruction of the past regarding historical events that is critical and analytical, based on evidence and data from the past presented in the form of historical writing.⁶ In this study, the author uses the historical research method guided by the following steps: heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and historiography.⁷

1. Information Collection

Data and information sources supporting this study were collected through literature reviews, searches for relevant sources, and online data searches. The data and information used consist of data from electronic media and several relevant

⁴ Syahbuddin Syahbuddin, "Proses Dekolonisasi Republik Demokratik Timor-Leste dan Keterlibatan Indonesia," *Jurnal Pendidikan IPS* 10, no. 2 (2020): 109.

⁵ Louis Gottschalk, *Mengerti Sejarah*. Jakarta, 2008, 39.

⁶ Ismaun dkk., *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Bandung: Asosiasi Pendidik dan Peneliti Sejarah, 2016), 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45–47.

books. The sources used consist of primary sources in the form of archives of the Seroja Operation (1975–1976) reports from the Brawijaya V Military Command and secondary sources, namely articles or books relevant to the discussion of the history of East Timor. The sources were collected from the Brawijaya Museum Library in Malang and relevant journals.

2. Verification/Critique

After gathering the sources to be used, the researcher must then verify the authenticity and credibility of the sources using internal and external criticism. Internal criticism is conducted to examine the accuracy of the content, whereby the researcher examines the context of the content from archives, articles, or books to determine whether the information presented by the source aligns with that of other sources. External criticism, on the other hand, involves examining the type of archival paper to determine whether it corresponds to the era in which the event was reported.

3. Interpretation

Some of the data and information obtained during the data collection phase were then analyzed using a historical analysis method to derive an interpretation and overview of the role of the Brawijaya V Command in Operation Seroja.

4. Historiography

A presentation of the research findings as historical events and a reconstruction of historical facts derived from the author's interpretation of written historical sources, systematically organized.

Results and Discussion

Background of East Timor's Integration into Indonesia

The decolonization process of East Timor began with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal on April 25, 1974, which saw President Salazar replaced by President Spínola. This event not only affected Portugal, but also on Portuguese colonies, including the colony in Timor, where Portugal began implementing decolonization efforts toward its colonies—one of which was Portuguese Timor—which would hold a referendum and allow the people of Timor to establish political parties. With this policy, various parties emerged in East Timor with different objectives. The first party established in East Timor was the União Democrática Timorese (UDT), founded on May 11, 1974, and led by Francisco Xavier Lopez da Cruz. The UDT sought the independence of East Timor to be achieved gradually, with independence to be attained after one year of joining a federation with Portugal.⁸

⁸ B Lopian dan Chaniago, *Timor Timur dalam gerak pembangunan*, 26; Syahbuddin, "Proses Dekolonisasi Republik Demokratik Timor-Leste dan Keterlibatan Indonesia," 113.

Next was the Amiciacao Social Democratica Timorese (ASDT) party, which later changed its name to the Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste Independente (Fretilin), founded on May 20, 1974, by Jose Manuel Ramos Horta.⁹ This party was committed to socialism and democracy, with the goal of achieving independence as soon as possible. When it was first established, the party was led by Francisco Xavier de Amaral.¹⁰

The third party, founded on May 27, 1974, was the Associacao Populer Democratica de Timor (Apodeti), led by Arnaldo dos Reis Araujo. Unlike the two previous parties, which sought independence, Apodeti stated its goal of joining Indonesia, as declared by its chairman on August 31, 1974.¹¹ The reason Apodeti wanted East Timor to join Indonesia was that the people of Portuguese Timor shared cultural, ethnic, historical, and geographical similarities and ties with Indonesia.¹²

Another party is the Trabalhista Party, founded in October 1974, which originated from the labor movement and is led by A. Abrao and Domingos Pereira. The main goal of this party was to liberate East Timor and then make East Timor a member of the Commonwealth. The last party was Klibur Oan Timor Aswain (KOTA), led by Jose Martins and founded on November 10, 1974.¹³

Subsequently, in July 1974, Portugal offered three options for the Portuguese colony of Timor, aligned with the objectives of the three major parties: 1. Integration with Portugal (UDT); 2. Independence, proposed by Fretilin; 3. Integration with Indonesia (Apodeti). This Portuguese proposal deepened divisions within Portuguese society and served as a source of conflict among the three major parties.¹⁴

However, UDT and Fretilin eventually formed a coalition on January 20, 1975. The formation of this coalition was signed by the respective leaders of the two parties: Fretilin leader Francisco Xavier do Amaral and UDT leader Francisco Lopez La Cruz. The purpose of forming this coalition was to demand that the Portuguese government establish a provisional government and grant full

⁹ Dwi Surya Arifian, "Peran Komando Pasukan Sandhi Yudha (Kopassandha) Dalam Operasi Seroja Di Timor-Timur Pada Tahun 1976-1979," *Avatara: Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah* 6, No. 3 (2018).

¹⁰ B Lopian dan Chaniago, *Timor Timur dalam gerak pembangunan*, 28.

¹¹ Tentara Nasional Indonesia. Pusat Sejarah dan Tradisi TNI, *Sejarah TNI Jilid IV (1966-1983)* (Jakarta: Markas Besar Tentara Nasional Indonesia, Pusat Sejarah dan Tradisi TNI, 2000), 141.

¹² Dinas Sejarah Angkatan Darat, *Sejarah Timor Timur 1975-1999* (Bandung: Dinas Sejarah Angkatan Darat, 2018).

¹³ Syahbuddin, "Proses Dekolonisasi Republik Demokratik Timor-Leste dan Keterlibatan Indonesia," 113.

¹⁴ M. Rizky Pratama dkk., "Integrasi Timor Timur Dalam Perspektif Pemerintah Indonesia (1976-1999)," *Palapa: Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa Pendidikan Sejarah* 4, no. 1 (2022): 3; Dinas Sejarah Angkatan Darat, *Sejarah Timor Timur 1975-1999*.

independence to Portuguese Timor, with Portuguese as the official language. Additionally, the coalition was formed to oppose Apodeti's plan to join Indonesia.¹⁵

But, the coalition between the two parties collapsed because the UDT accused Fretilin of wanting to establish a communist state. The UDT's approach was more moderate, seeking independence through first joining Portugal, while Fretilin's movement was more radical, demanding full and immediate independence. These differences led to the dissolution of the coalition on August 11, 1975, and plunged the country into armed conflict.¹⁶

Following the collapse of the coalition between UDT and Fretilin, the Portuguese held negotiations between the UDT, Fretilin, and Apodeti parties in Macau on June, 1975, with the hope that these talks would serve as an alternative to a referendum. The meeting discussed plans for East Timor's independence. However, Fretilin refused to participate in the negotiations because Apodeti, which sought integration with Indonesia, was included. Therefore, Fretilin refused to negotiate with Apodeti.¹⁷

The conflict escalated when the UDT began attacking Fretilin members, Apodeti members, and Portuguese officials in Timor who were suspected of holding left-wing ideological views during an event known as the *Movimento Revolucionário Anti-Comunista*, or Anti-Communist Revolutionary Movement. This operation took place while the Governor of East Timor, Lemos Pires, was away from Dili, having traveled to Viqueque. Fretilin leader Xavier do Amaral was not captured during this UDT operation because he was in the city of Aileu. With weapons obtained from the police and a power vacuum in Dili, the UDT succeeded in occupying vital locations in the city, such as the Dili airport, the post office, the radio station, and a number of military and police posts.¹⁸

The movement was a demand by the UDT that the Portuguese immediately take decisive action to purge all communists from within Fretilin, retain Lemos Pires as governor of Portuguese Timor, and to establish a united front between the UDT and those elements of Fretilin considered to hold traditional ideologies and to be of good character, in order to discuss plans for the independence of Timor involving government, military, and UDT elements. Furthermore, the UDT demanded that Indonesia, through Apodeti, not interfere in matters concerning the independence of Portuguese Timor.¹⁹

However, after regrouping and securing assistance from certain elements of the Portuguese military, Fretilin launched a counterattack on August 20, 1975.

¹⁵ B Lopian dan Chaniago, *Timor Timur dalam gerak pembangunan*, 39.

¹⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁷ Ibid., 48; Dinas Sejarah Angkatan Darat, *Sejarah Timor Timur 1975-1999*.

¹⁸ B Lopian dan Chaniago, *Timor Timur dalam gerak pembangunan*, 50-51.

¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

Fretilin's counterattack successfully drove UDT forces out of Dili, followed by UDT strongholds such as Batugede, Liquica, Maliana, and Suai. Now, it was Fretilin's turn to commit atrocities against UDT members and even Apodeti. The conflict caused many members of the UDT, Apodeti, and the people of East Timor to flee to Indonesian territory, numbering 40,000 people. This became a problem for Indonesia, as it had to spend six million rupiah a day to support these refugees, and faced security issues due to the large number of refugees arriving as well as Fretilin forces pursuing the refugees across the Indonesian border.²⁰ The Portuguese government in Timor also evacuated to Atauro Island on August 26, 1975, and requested Indonesia's assistance in evacuating Portuguese citizens and foreign nationals from the city of Dili.²¹

On September 11, 1975, UDT leaders held a press conference in Batugede. During this press conference, it was explained that the Apodeti, UDT, Kota, and Trabalista parties had drafted a petition and a declaration calling for the integration of East Timor with Indonesia.²² On November 28, 1975, Fretilin finally declared the independence of Portuguese Timor and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Timor with Xavier do Amaral as its president. Fretilin's declaration of independence for Portuguese Timor was not recognized by countries such as the United States, Australia, and Indonesia, which regretted the unilateral declaration made by Fretilin.²³ Not to be outdone, four other Timorese parties—UDT, Apodeti, KOTA, and Tralabista—issued a rival proclamation in the city of Balibo on November 29, 1975, known as the Balibo Proclamation, in which the four parties essentially expressed their desire to join the Republic of Indonesia.²⁴

Indonesia did not immediately accept this request; instead, it remained cautious in making a decision because if Indonesia accepted the Balibo Proclamation, the world would perceive Indonesia as having territorial ambitions. However, if it did not accept the demands of Apodeti, UDT, Kota, and Tralabista, it would effectively allow them to be annexed by Fretilin a communist-leaning organization—despite Indonesia's anti-communist policy.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., 62.

²¹ Ibid., 54.

²² Ibid., 58.

²³ Syahbuddin, "Proses Dekolonisasi Republik Demokratik Timor-Leste dan Keterlibatan Indonesia," 115.

²⁴ Tentara Nasional Indonesia. Pusat Sejarah dan Tradisi TNI, *Sejarah TNI Jilid IV (1966-1983)*, 143.

²⁵ B Lopian dan Chaniago, *Timor Timur dalam gerak pembangunan*, 31; Dinas Sejarah Angkatan Darat, *Sejarah Timor Timur 1975-1999*.

The Role of Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya in Operation Seroja

After careful consideration, the Indonesian government issued a Decree of the Minister of Defense and Security and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces No. Skep/1063/VIII/1975 dated August 31, 1975, establishing the Komando Tugas Gabungan (Kogasgab) under the code name “Operation Seroja”, with a force of 10,000 troops, landed in Dili on December 7, 1975, and was supported by a coalition of four political parties.²⁶

In accordance with this order, Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya played the same role as other military regional commands, namely deploying troops to East Timor such as the 507th, 512th, and 527th Infantry Battalions to carry out three phases of operations: the border entry phase, defensive operations, and offensive operations. The first phase involved an order from the Panglima Komando Tugas Gabungan (Pangkogasgab) to cross the border with the objective of capturing Maliana, Bobonaro, and Lebos, with the Maliana area successfully secured. Just as they were about to advance to Bobonaro, an order was issued to defend the areas already under TNI control, such as Maliana, Nunura, Balibo, Batugade, and others this constituted the second phase, the defensive phase. The third phase was the offensive phase, which began on December 18, 1975, targeting areas controlled by Fretilin in the Bobonaro-Suai-Atsabe-Letefoho region, which were successfully recaptured from Fretilin. However, when attempting to capture the Ermera area, TNI forces were repelled twice. Nevertheless, the Ermera area was successfully captured on March 27, 1976. In addition, the Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya also played a role in the capture of the Cailaco region, which was secured on April 10, 1976.²⁷

When TNI troops entered the area they had recaptured, there were no local residents in the town. This was because the local residents were in hiding. However, after the TNI occupied the area and provided humanitarian aid, the local residents gradually returned to their homes and expressed their support for the TNI troops. This was evidenced by the fact that some residents handed over the heads of enemy combatants and assisted the TNI troops in subsequent operations.²⁸

In addition, the Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya, along with other regional commands, also carried out territorial operations to support combat operations against Fretilin. These territorial operations focused more on assisting with infrastructure development in East Timor and providing access to education and healthcare for local residents. The objectives of these territorial operations

²⁶ Dinas Sejarah Angkatan Darat, *Sejarah Timor Timur 1975-1999*; Syahbuddin, “Proses Dekolonisasi Republik Demokratik Timor-Leste dan Keterlibatan Indonesia,” 118.

²⁷ Komando Daerah Militer V/Brawijaya, “Laporan Operasi Seroja 1975–1976,” Malang: Komando Daerah Militer V/Brawijaya, 1976, 3–6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

were: 1) To win the sympathy of the East Timorese people; 2) To gain the people's support for the Tentara Republik Indonesia (TNI) in crushing Fretilin; 3) To guide the East Timorese people in improving their region in all areas; and 4) To foster a sincere desire among the East Timorese people to join the Republic of Indonesia.²⁹

Therefore, territorial operations were based on providing assistance to local residents, particularly in the area of education; in the regions of Maliana, Bobonaro, Atsabe, Suai, Tilomar, Batugade, Balibo, Letefoho, and Ermera, schools were established ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade. Teachers were recruited from partisan cadres and existing teaching staff. However, the teaching staff first underwent training by TNI officers to teach Indonesian, general knowledge, national songs, and religious studies. Furthermore, a Scouting program was established, a Red Cross Youth course was held in Bobonaro with 15 participants, and a school for traditional leaders was established.³⁰

In the health sector, the Brawijaya Military Command also played a role in establishing Red Cross posts and educating local residents on healthy living practices, such as how to bathe with soap, proper sanitation practices, and other topics. In addition, local residents were provided with military training so they could assist in defeating Fretilin forces.³¹

Territorial operations also assisted local residents with infrastructure improvements, including repairs to bridges, water channels, power lines, roads, and other facilities. In the Maliana region, from October 22, 1975, to November 3, 1975, a new 200-meter-long road was constructed, 3,000 meters of existing road were repaired, 11 bridges were repaired, construction of 300 meters of drainage channels, construction of one drinking water tank measuring 8x3x1.5 meters, construction of 15 public restrooms, repairs to places of worship, construction of a prayer room, construction of a helicopter landing pad, and home repairs for local residents.³²

Next is the Balibo region, where from October 26, 1975, to November 9, 1975, 3,000 meters of road were repaired, 1,500 meters of new road were constructed, and four bridges were repaired. Then there is the Lahomea region, where from January 4, 1976, to January 31, 1976, 1,500 meters of road were repaired, 200 meters of new road were built, one 4x5-meter bridge was constructed, a helicopter landing pad was built, and a 500-meter-long drainage channel was constructed.³³

Furthermore, in the Atsabe region, from February 2, 1976, to February 11, 1976, road repairs were carried out over a length of 3,000 meters, a helicopter

²⁹ Ibid., 78.

³⁰ Ibid., 82.

³¹ Ibid., 83–84.

³² Ibid., 85.

³³ Ibid.

landing pad was constructed, and a 6x4-meter bridge was repaired. In the Bobonaro region, from February 12, 1976, to February 29, 1976, road repairs were carried out over a length of 5,000 meters, landslide-damaged road repairs over a length of 200 meters, water pipe repairs, diesel and electrical system repairs, repairs to 100 school desks, and the establishment of a community cooperative. Furthermore, in the Tilomar region, a semi-permanent school building was constructed; in the Letefoho region, a helicopter landing pad and a market were built; and in the Ermera region, park improvements and tree trimming were carried out to enhance the city's beauty.³⁴

Under pressure from the joint offensive, Fretilin forces retreated to the city of Baucau. However, on December 10, 1975, Baucau also fell from Fretilin's control, followed by other cities such as Aileu, Ermera, Maubara, Liquica, Ainaro, and Los Palos. Unable to hold onto urban areas, Fretilin eventually shifted its strategy to guerrilla warfare in the mountains.³⁵

The integration of East Timor into Indonesia was finally submitted to the Indonesian House of Representatives on June 30, 1976, through a draft bill that was enacted into the Law on the Integration of East Timor into the Republic of Indonesia as the First-Level Province of East Timor. Then, on July 17, 1976, President Soeharto signed Law No. 7 of 1976, which declared the unification of East Timor as part of Indonesia as its 27th province. This was followed by the presentation of the red-and-white flag by President Soeharto to Arnaldo Dos Reis Araujo, who became the first Governor of East Timor Province, and the presentation of a copy of the text of the Proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia of August 17, 1945, to the Deputy Governor of East Timor, Francisco Xavier Lopes da Cruz.³⁶

Conclusion

Based on the above discussion regarding the role of Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya in the integration of East Timor from 1975 to 1976, it can be concluded that political parties such as UDT, Apodeti, KOTA, and Trabhalista sought to join Indonesia through the Balibo Declaration, which triggered the deployment of the Indonesian National Armed Forces to East Timor one of which was Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya. The role of the Military Regional Military Command V/Brawijaya in Operation Seroja was to deploy troops to crush Fretilin forces and assist pro-integration forces. In addition, the Military Regional Command V/Brawijaya also supported territorial operations, specifically activities to assist local residents in rebuilding East Timor. The tangible impact felt by the people of East Timor

³⁴ Ibid., 85–86.

³⁵ B Lopian dan Chaniago, *Timor Timur dalam gerak pembangunan*, 72.

³⁶ Ibid., 80; Syahbuddin, "Proses Dekolonisasi Republik Demokratik Timor-Leste dan Keterlibatan Indonesia," 118.

with the arrival of the V/Brawijaya Regional Command troops included infrastructure development, as well as the provision of education and healthcare services.

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