

The South African Communist Party's Exploration of the Path to Socialism

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Abstract

The South African Communist Party has a century-long history of exploring socialism amid hardships. As a Marxist-Leninist party, it has led the working class in struggles while upholding communist ideals. It integrates Marxism-Leninism with South Africa's realities and advances the national democratic revolution via alliance with the ANC. Facing current challenges, it reflects deeply, forms new perceptions, and uses its century-long experience to boost the innovation and development of South Africa's socialist cause.

Keywords

SACP, Socialism, Tripartite Alliance.

1. Introduction

Since its founding in July 1921, the South African Communist Party has embarked on a century-long journey. As the first political party on the African continent guided by Marxism-Leninism, it has not only maintained extensive influence and vitality in Africa's political landscape, but also consistently acted as a pioneer in the struggles against imperialism, hegemonism and racism throughout its century of development. Despite the changes of the times and historical tests, its socialist ideals and convictions have never wavered. By continuously exploring a path of socialism with South African characteristics, it has achieved remarkable practical outcomes, providing theoretical support and a practical model for the construction of a socialist development path with African characteristics.

2. The Historical Process of the South African Communist Party's Exploration of the Socialist Path

Founded on 30 July 1921, the South African Communist Party (hereinafter referred to as the SACP) is the first Marxist-Leninist political party in Africa, as well as the oldest and most influential communist party on the African continent, with a current membership of 130,000. Since its establishment, the Party has been engaged in the movement against the racist rule and apartheid policies of the white authorities in South Africa, and in the liberation struggle to actively win the support of the broad Black masses. It has also made unremitting explorations into the theory and practice of socialism, making it an important force in South Africa's anti-racist and national liberation movements.

2.1. The Spark of Revolution Under Colonial Rule

As Mao Zedong observed, "The salvoes of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism." Similarly, the October Revolution spread Marxism-Leninism to South Africa and laid a vital foundation for the founding of the South African Communist Party (SACP). Inspired by the Russian Bolsheviks, many South African revolutionists framed themselves as "South African Bolsheviks" and developed struggle strategies tailored to South Africa's national

conditions, focusing on uniting the national proletariat, fighting for workers' legitimate rights, and advancing the global revolutionary movement.

On July 30, 1921, the International Socialist League joined several local socialist groups to establish the SACP. The founding congress held from July 30 to August 1 elected William Andrews as General Secretary and Tyler as Chairman, and adopted the manifesto *Overthrow the Capitalist System*. The SACP's founding was a milestone in South African history, exerting a far-reaching positive impact on the country's later revolutionary movements.

From 1924 to 1929, the SACP rejected the Communist International's demand for a "non-white nationalism" policy. In 1930, the Communist International urged the party to become a "revolutionary mass party" and accused its leadership of reformist tendencies. In 1931, the Walton-Bach sectarian group took over the party, expelling Andrews and many members, which severely weakened the party. In May 1950, the white racist regime enacted the Suppression of Communism Act and outlawed the SACP. To preserve its strength, the SACP Central Committee voluntarily dissolved the party without grassroots consultation. Internal divisions (lingering white supremacy, erroneous Comintern guidance causing factional strife) and external state repression together caused the dissolution.

Despite these hardships, the SACP accumulated valuable experience, deepened its understanding of context-specific struggles, and carved out a unique role in the international communist movement. This experience laid a solid foundation for its subsequent leadership in the anti-apartheid struggle and underground and overseas operations.

2.2. The Pillar of the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

The growth and rising influence of the South African Communist Party (SACP) triggered strong resentment from white racists. After the racist National Party took office, it prioritized cracking down on communist activities and passed the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, which outlawed the SACP and launched brutal persecution against its members and progressive activists.

Under intense white terror, the SACP Central Committee was forced to announce the party's voluntary dissolution. For the next three years, the party continued its fight underground, reorganizing as a clandestine group adhering to democratic centralism and a strict organizational structure. During this period, the SACP focused on expanding its presence within nationalist groups, political parties and key industrial sectors, with its leaders taking leading roles in groups like the African National Congress (ANC) in individual capacities. In May 1955, the SACP co-drafted the landmark Freedom Charter with the ANC, which later became a core guiding document for South Africa's national liberation movement.

Following the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, where authorities violently crushed anti-Pass Law protests, the SACP publicly reaffirmed its existence and called for armed struggle to overthrow the white minority regime. In February 1961, the SACP and ANC co-founded Umkhonto we Sizwe, launching the armed struggle, though mass arrests of its members soon weakened both groups domestically. The 1976 Soweto Uprising, despite brutal suppression, allowed the SACP and ANC to recruit large numbers of exiled students and activists, filling the political vacuum left by the crackdown on the Black Consciousness Movement and the death of Steve Biko.

From 1980 onwards, the SACP focused on expanding its organizational power. In February 1990, the apartheid government lifted the ban on liberation groups, and the SACP formally re-established itself as a legal party on July 29 that year. Its 8th National Congress in December 1991 adopted a new manifesto, noting that negotiations had replaced armed struggle as the main path to power, while reaffirming Marxism-Leninism and socialism as its long-term goal, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union. The congress also expanded the party's mass base by electing new leaders including trade union representatives.

Overall, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the birth of democratic South Africa, the SACP had not gained state power and could not implement substantive socialist policies. Its core work focused on three areas: spreading and researching socialist theory, leading anti-apartheid struggles alongside the ANC, and upholding the revolutionary direction of the national liberation movement through its scientific theoretical framework.

2.3. Role Transformation in the Political Landscape of the New South Africa

In the initial years after the SACP regained its legal status in South Africa in 1990, its influence rose sharply for a time. However, this period coincided with the drastic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which dealt a heavy blow to the SACP. Faced with this grave situation, the SACP Central Committee, led by Chris Hani, Joe Slovo, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and others, stood firm under pressure and unwaveringly upheld the Party's identity, guiding ideology, organizational principles and strategic goals.

The new democratic South Africa was officially founded in 1994. In April 1995, the SACP held its 9th National Congress, at which the Party adopted a report delivered by General Secretary Nqakula and revised its Party Constitution. The Congress set forth the line that "The future belongs to socialism; let us build it starting today." It defined the main tasks of the SACP in the coming period as safeguarding the achievements of democracy, advancing the democratic process, conducting the national democratic revolution by relying on the strength of the working class, and assisting the ANC-led national unity government in implementing the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), its key economic strategy.

In July 1998, the SACP convened its 10th National Congress, which heard a report by General Secretary Nqakula entitled *Expanding People's Power: Building Socialism Now* and adopted the Programme of Action. The Congress held that the Party's central task at that stage was to deepen the national democratic revolution. In this process, the SACP would strengthen its leadership over the working class and mass democratic organizations to ensure that the balance of class forces in South Africa continued to shift in favor of the working people. The Congress called on all Party members to act to "build socialism where we live and work" and to consolidate and deepen the national democratic revolution through a socialist approach.

The SACP held its 11th and 12th National Congresses in 2002 and 2007 respectively. Since then, the Party has further revised and refined its line and strategies for the transition to socialism. At this stage, against the backdrop of evolving international dynamics, shifting domestic realities, and its own development needs, the South African Communist Party has consistently taken Marxism-Leninism as its fundamental guidance. To effectively respond to the challenges of the struggle under the new circumstances and advance its cause, the Party has dynamically adjusted its domestic and foreign strategies as well as its path of organizational development in close connection with South Africa's specific national conditions. It has not only preserved the essential characteristics of a communist party but also played a pivotal role in the country's political process, while conducting innovative explorations around the theory and practice of socialism.

3. Challenges for the SACP in Exploring the Socialist Path

Over the past century, the SACP has consistently positioned itself as a vanguard force for the socialist cause and played a vital role in South Africa's national liberation movement. In 1994, the SACP joined the Tripartite Alliance as a core member, marking a new phase of democratic governance and socialist exploration under peaceful conditions.

Amid profound shifts in the domestic and international landscape, the SACP now faces unprecedented challenges unseen during the national liberation era. How to incorporate

diverse real-world variables into its strategic planning and steadily advance the exploration of a socialist path has become a major question that the Party must address.

3.1. Internal Division of the Working Class

The SACP regards itself as the vanguard of the South African working class. It is committed to safeguarding the interests of the working class, mobilizing and organizing workers into a strong political force, and thus securing its dominant position in various economic and social fields. The realization of this goal relies on the unity and cohesion of the South African working class and their shared class interests and political demands. However, in recent years, obvious interest divisions have emerged within the working class, hindering the SACP's efforts to achieve the goal of building "One South Africa, One Federation of Trade Unions". The most prominent sign of this is the split within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). In 2014, COSATU expelled the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the most militant, largest and most powerful trade union in its history. NUMSA refused to support the ANC in the 2014 general election, arguing that the ANC no longer represented the interests of the working class. Following the withdrawal of this largest affiliate, COSATU's membership dropped from 1.9 million to 1.6 million. Later, NUMSA established a new federation, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), and more left-wing trade unions broke away from COSATU. As a result, the once-dominant COSATU gradually lost its legitimacy in political struggles.^[2]

In March 2015, Zwelinzima Vavi, General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, was also dismissed. These two closely linked events constituted a watershed in labor politics in the post-apartheid era. The working class grew increasingly disillusioned with the trade union, believing that COSATU's leadership had become increasingly detached from workers and the unemployed.

Beyond the split within COSATU, the South African working class has also shown tendencies toward division and fragmentation, which is bound to affect the SACP's efforts to organize, mobilize and unite the working class. On the one hand, the working class has become significantly divided due to multiple factors such as the capitalist division of labor, income disparities and technological development. Neoliberal economic policies have demanded greater labor market flexibility, accompanied by a rise in outsourcing and labor intermediaries. This has led to a decline in formal employment in traditional sectors including manufacturing, mining and public services, while a large number of informal workers such as temporary workers, contract workers and casual workers have emerged.

From 2000 to 2017, the share of formal employment in South Africa fell from 73 percent to 61 percent, while the number of informal workers surged by 371 percent over the same period. Currently, approximately one-third of the labor force is engaged in informal work^[3]. These workers are generally less educated, economically vulnerable, unorganized and fragmented, with extremely limited access to rights. As a result, their interests and values differ significantly from those of the traditional working class. Largely outside the trade union system, they pose a challenge to the SACP's efforts to organize and mobilize the working class.

On the other hand, the South African working class has become increasingly fragmented, accompanied by a steady decline in trade union density. For instance, union membership among South African workers peaked at 40.9 percent in 1995 but has since dropped to just over 20 percent^[4], meaning more than 70 percent of workers choose not to join any trade union. This trend is closely associated with South Africa's deepening economic and employment crisis over the past two decades.

According to Statistics South Africa, the country's unemployment rate reached a record high of 32.6 percent in the first quarter of 2021, with 7.242 million people unemployed in the preceding three months^[5]. These marginalized unemployed groups constitute an important

part of the working class. Amid South Africa's economic predicament of low investment, low productivity, low wages and weak employment growth, the SACP faces far greater difficulties than in the early industrial era in expanding its membership, launching labor movements, building a unified political foundation and securing the political hegemony of the working class.

3.2. The Weakening of the ANC

The SACP has long held that supporting the national democratic revolution led by the ANC constitutes the most direct path for South Africa to advance toward socialism. However, a series of problems have emerged within the ANC in recent years, including factional strife and rampant corruption, which have weakened the leading force of the national democratic revolution and undoubtedly posed a challenge to the SACP's exploration of socialism. Since the 21st century, internal factional conflicts within the ANC have led to at least two major splits.

The first split occurred in 2008 during the presidential contest between Jacob Zuma, then former Deputy President of the ANC, and Thabo Mbeki, then President of South Africa. Zuma's victory prompted Mbeki's supporters to secede from the ANC and form the new Congress of the People, which claimed to compete with the ANC for governing power. The second split took place in 2013, when Julius Malema, former President of the ANC Youth League, was expelled from the ANC and subsequently founded the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Embracing a leftist stance and advocating economic emancipation, the EFF put forward a host of controversial propositions, including the nationalization of South Africa's mines and banks and the expropriation of land for redistribution. It also called for a series of measures to expand access to quality education, improve health and welfare services, and condemn corruption and discrimination, thereby garnering extensive support among young people, the poor and the unemployed. The EFF performed exceptionally well in the 2019 elections, securing nearly 11% of the national vote, and has now become South Africa's third-largest political party^[6].

These two splits reflect the acute internal contradictions within the ANC, highlighting the urgent need to strengthen inner-party democracy, the rule of law within the party and inner-party culture across the board. Factional strife within the ANC has also spilled over into the government, undermining policy implementation and inter-departmental cooperation. Divided administrative departments have failed to form a highly efficient government, creating a potential risk of governance paralysis. Political divisions stemming from inner-party factional struggles, coupled with the entrenchment of party members and cadres—especially the party's leadership—in corruption scandals, have exposed the ANC's image and its governing position to the most severe test since the end of the apartheid system. In the 2019 South African general election, the ANC won only 57.1 percent of the votes, marking its lowest share in national elections since it came to power 25 years prior^[7]. Its failure to address the promised economic problems, unemployment, land reform and corruption led to the loss of substantial support from the Black middle class and young groups.

3.3. The Impact of Populist Movements

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the growing polarization between the rich and the poor has fueled the surging populist movements in developed countries, leading to the continuous rise of anti-establishment forces. The driving role of populism can be seen in events ranging from the Brexit referendum to Donald Trump's election as US President. In developed countries, populist movements are prominently manifested in opposition to immigration, free trade and regional integration.

Nevertheless, populist movements are not confined to developed countries; developing countries are also confronted with the challenges posed by such movements. Affected by the 2008 financial crisis, the problems of poverty, inequality and unemployment in South Africa have further worsened. The long-standing failure to address these issues has provided fertile

ground for the breeding of populist movements. In May 2008, large-scale xenophobic riots broke out in South Africa, claiming 62 lives in total—almost equivalent to the combined death toll of all violent xenophobic incidents that occurred from 2000 to March 2008. The foreign laborers targeted in the violent attacks were mainly poor Black people from Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and the then Thabo Mbeki administration even had to deploy the military to quell the riots.

According to a tracking study on public violence in South Africa conducted by the Institute for Security Studies, a total of 2,880 protest or public violence-related gatherings took place in South Africa between 2013 and 2015, 53 percent of which were violent in nature. As a result, protests in South Africa have not only escalated but also become increasingly confrontational. In recent years, the frequent occurrence of violent xenophobic incidents and public protests in South Africa has clearly reflected the severe upward trend of populist movements in the country.

The SACP has categorized populist movements in South Africa into two major forces: first, political forces expressed in a more “left-wing” form, represented by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF); second, more conservative and traditional political forces, such as the ANC Youth League and the ANC Women’s League, which maintained close ties with the Gupta family. According to the SACP’s analysis, both populist forces exhibit strong Africanist inclinations, show little respect for the rule of law and democratic constitution, and employ political discourse against imperialism and white monopoly capital.

The two forces differ in their social bases and rhetoric. The former draws its support mainly from unemployed urban youth and adheres to ultra-left political demands, such as the expropriation of white-owned land without compensation and the nationalization of mines, banks, and other key sectors. The latter relies more on rural residents, the elderly, conservatives, and networks tied to political patronage, and tends to discourage popular political participation^[8].

Whether as a political ideology or a political movement, populism poses a severe external challenge to the SACP’s strategic exploration of socialism. It presents ideological and conceptual challenges to the SACP and the South African national liberation movement. Meanwhile, populist forces represented by the EFF have directly undermined the ANC’s governing position. Many of the EFF’s radical policy proposals have resonated with unemployed and marginalized groups, who not only vote for the EFF but also launch protests under its instigation, severely disrupting social and political order. The EFF often encourages its supporters to confront the ANC and other progressive political forces through violent means rather than legitimate political channels, thereby inflicting serious damage on South Africa’s democratic process and political dialogue^[9].

Against this backdrop, the rise of populist forces in South Africa has, to a certain extent, plunged the ANC into a dilemma marked by “weakened representative capacity.” For the SACP, should the ANC government become mired in a crisis of representation, the strategic foundation of its alliance with the ANC to advance the national liberation process would face severe challenges. In this context, strong appeals for the SACP to contest elections independently have emerged within the Party in recent years.

4. New Practices of the SACP in Exploring the Socialist Path

Faced with multiple challenges both at home and abroad, the SACP has conducted in-depth reflections and analyses on the current world situation, the multiple crises of capitalism, the development trend of socialism, and the Party’s self-construction. It has formed a series of new understandings and judgments. Drawing on its valuable experience forged over a century of

hard struggle, the SACP has taken active measures to address challenges and further strengthened its confidence in the socialist future.

4.1. Strengthening Party Building

The SACP attaches great importance to strengthening its self-construction. Party Chair Nzimande stresses that, as the socialist vanguard party of the working class, the SACP must attach great importance to and strengthen Party building and cultivate a contingent of revolutionary cadres capable of functioning in Party organizations at all levels from local to central^[10].

First, the SACP works to enhance Party cohesion and leadership. The SACP is a united organization that plays an active role among the working class and the poor. Despite considerable differences within the Party over the nature of the ANC and whether there are commonalities between the objectives of the SACP and the ANC, unity is fundamental to the Party. To strengthen Party unity, it must first strengthen Party leadership: all Party members and cadres must put the Party first, uphold Party leadership, and rally closely around the Party. Second, the Party opposes sectarianism to prevent splits. Finally, the SACP emphasizes its identity as the vanguard of the working class. The SACP bases its organization among the working class and the poor and carries out active work in workplaces and communities where the working class is concentrated. With technological progress and changes in social structure, and to expand its social base, the SACP attaches special importance to implementing the policy of the broadest class alliance, gradually transforming itself from a vanguard party of the working class into a party of the working class and all working people, and building itself into a Party organization representing the broad working masses. Second, the SACP improves its organizational structure and strengthens internal supervision. The Party Constitution revised at the 15th National Congress in 2022 stipulates the establishment of a Central Ethics Committee (CEC) composed of 4 to 5 members, with a leading position taken by a member of the Political Bureau. The CEC is responsible for ensuring that every Party member consciously abides by the revolutionary ethics of Marxism-Leninism and the four major disciplines: organizational discipline, political discipline, ideology, and personal conduct. The CEC must report its work to the plenary sessions of the Central Committee and to the National Congress in the form of an organizational report of the Central Committee. The new Party Constitution stipulates that internal disciplinary inspection organs must report to the CEC and have the power to investigate Party organizations and individuals^[11]. Third, the SACP strengthens the building of grassroots Party organizations. The SACP Constitution stipulates that a group of 25 or more Party members may establish a Party branch to carry out grassroots work. The Party attaches importance to the role of grassroots Party organizations, especially their role in responding to emergencies. To this end, the SACP focuses on building the contingent of grassroots cadres by encouraging grassroots Party cadres to participate in training institutions, conducting ideological and political education and training for grassroots Party members on a regular basis. The SACP also encourages Party branches to organize various activities and debates and supports Party members in participating in various forms of online forums promoting socialist ideas, so as to expand the Party's appeal and cohesion in emerging fields.

4.2. Consolidating the Tripartite Alliance

The Tripartite Alliance was jointly formed as an institutional arrangement in May 1990 by the ANC, the SACP, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The ANC plays a leading role within the alliance, and the three political organizations have agreed to base their decision-making on coordination and consensus in accordance with democratic principles. Each political organization maintains independence and may formulate its own positions and launch its own campaigns, while the alliance formulates joint action plans on the basis of consensus.

Strengthening alliance unity, especially unity with the ANC, and promoting internal reform and restructuring of the Tripartite Alliance remain the driving forces for the SACP to advance the transition from the national democratic revolution to the socialist revolution. At its plenary session of the Central Committee held in October 2023, the SACP stated that, committed to restructuring, strengthening and enhancing the influence of the alliance, it would stand side by side with its alliance partners to deepen and defend the democratic revolution, and would make the pursuit of alliance restructuring its primary approach for the 2024 elections. This shows that the SACP continues to facilitate the restructuring of the Tripartite Alliance and to consolidate the governing position of the alliance together with the ANC and COSATU. For the SACP, reshaping the Tripartite Alliance requires not only improving the operational efficiency of the alliance but also ensuring that alliance partners adhere to the principle of democratic consultation, act under the guidance of shared ideals, and maintain unity in action. In July 2023, the SACP and the ANC held bilateral talks and reached agreement on strengthening alliance unity. Beyond forging consensus among alliance partners and formulating unified plans through a series of institutional mechanisms such as alliance summits, the alliance political committee and the alliance secretariat, the fundamental aspect of alliance restructuring lies in translating top-level designs such as joint plans and election manifestos formulated through consultation among alliance partners into policy implementation by the ANC government. The key to transforming shared values and policy plans into concrete practice is for the Tripartite Alliance to deploy representatives to state authorities at all levels, who must abide by the discipline formulated by the alliance and accept its guidance and oversight. The SACP took an active part in drafting the 2024 election manifesto of the ANC-led alliance, putting forward numerous suggestions both orally and in writing on the draft manifesto prepared by the ANC. The 2024 election manifesto therefore represents the outcome of consultations between the SACP, the ANC and COSATU.

4.3. Leading Mass Movements

The SACP has been committed to advancing the government's efforts to tackle pressing issues concerning the people's quality of life through large-scale national mass movements, with the core objectives of strengthening the working class's influence across South Africa's political, economic and social spheres, and striving for the early achievement of genuine democracy and socialism. This strategic approach has become a vital practice for the party to advance its revolutionary goals amid complex domestic challenges.

On one hand, the SACP actively collaborates with a wide range of grassroots and mass organizations to exert targeted pressure on the government through diverse peaceful and legitimate forms of action, including peaceful marches, targeted strikes, large-scale public rallies, and formal official statements. In November 2023, the SACP joined hands with numerous progressive mass groups to release a formal statement outlining a detailed twelve-point anti-austerity policy proposal, which clearly pointed out that to effectively resolve deep-seated social ills such as severe unemployment, widespread poverty and widening inequality, South Africa urgently needed sufficient financial investment to support structural economic transformation, rather than implementing harsh austerity measures that would further harm the interests of the working class and vulnerable groups.

On May 15, 2024, SACP General Secretary Solly Mapaila, other members of the Party Central Committee, together with a large number of social activists and grassroots representatives, gathered at the Union Buildings in Tshwane to celebrate the formal enactment of the National Health Insurance Bill into law. During the event, they called on the entire working class and more progressive social organizations to unite closely, and firmly defend the people's fundamental right to equal access to free and high-quality medical and health care services.

On the other hand, the SACP leverages national mass movements to facilitate extensive public discussions on key national issues across the whole society, pushing the government to take concrete actions to address these problems. The most iconic and influential mass movement led by the SACP is the annual Red October Campaign. In the 2023 Red October Campaign, the party sharply criticized the government's implementation of fiscal austerity policies, and once again reaffirmed the specific measures and core demands included in its twelve-point anti-austerity policy framework, sending a clear signal to safeguard the rights and interests of the working class and the poor.

5. Summary

In its exploration of the path of socialist development, the SACP has formulated many innovative theoretical programs. Judging from its current state of development, the Party has achieved modest progress in both the theoretical and practical exploration of socialism. However, since the SACP's work started relatively late and has not yet entered a mature stage, its theories and visions for socialism still need to be tested and verified through practice. Therefore, when analyzing the SACP's exploration of socialist theory and practice since the 21st century, we must recognize its positive contributions to the development of Marxism, while also acknowledging the difficulties and challenges it will face in its future development.

To achieve the strategic goal of building a fully socialist South Africa, the SACP has carried out extensive explorations and forged a socialist path with distinct South African characteristics. This path not only reflects the advanced and contemporary nature of Marxism and enriches the theory of world socialism, but also provides useful references for the theory and practice of proletarian parties in other countries. It has contributed to the rejuvenation of world socialism and inspired the revolutionary enthusiasm of the proletariat around the world, making it worthy of study and emulation.

We are convinced that the indomitable fighting spirit and firm convictions upheld by the SACP will enable it to overcome numerous difficulties and challenges, and ultimately realize the great ideal of a communist South Africa.

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