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A Philosophical Reflection on Governance Paradigms in Iran; Based on the Last Four Presidential Discourses

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the philosophical foundations of governance paradigms reflected in the election discourses of Iranian presidential candidates between 2005 and 2025, highlighting how these paradigms shape governance styles. The research employed a qualitative document analysis approach, focusing on primary sources such as campaign statements, election manifestos, interviews, and media reports. A comparative method was used to evaluate the ontological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions of each presidential discourse. Theoretical frameworks from the philosophy of science, particularly regarding positivist, interpretivist, and critical paradigms, provided the lens for analysis. The study found that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's discourse embodied an interpretivist paradigm with positivist elements, emphasizing cultural narratives and measurable developmental policies. Hassan Rouhani's discourse reflected a hybrid of critical and positivist paradigms, balancing structural reforms with evidence-based governance. Ebrahim Raisi's approach was primarily interpretivist with critical elements, focusing on revolutionary ideals and social justice. Masoud Pezeshkian's emerging discourse aligned most closely with the critical paradigm while incorporating positivist techniques for policy development. Across the period from 2005 to 2025, a gradual philosophical shift was observed, moving from symbolic mobilization toward structural critique and pragmatic governance strategies. These evolving paradigms significantly influenced policymaking priorities, citizen participation models, and governance structures in Iran. The philosophical roots embedded in election discourses play a decisive role in shaping governance approaches in Iran. Understanding these paradigmatic orientations offers deeper insights into the evolution of political practices and state-citizen relations. Future studies should further explore the relationship between electoral rhetoric, governance implementation, and the broader socio-political transformations within Iran.

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Intruduction

Following the political and economic crises of the late 1970s, the concept of good governance emerged globally in the 1980s as a strategic response to development failures, spearheaded prominently by institutions such as the World Bank. Good governance was promoted as an essential framework to address the inefficiencies, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies that had plagued many states, especially in the Global South. This notion emphasized transparency, accountability, citizen participation, the rule of law, and the efficiency of public institutions, moving beyond the traditional focus on economic growth alone. As modernization theories began to reshape development paradigms, scholars increasingly argued that sustainable development required not just economic reforms, but also institutional and political reforms rooted in participatory governance and democratic practices (Yang, 2021). The global push for good governance introduced a paradigm shift in political science, steering research and policy discourse away from mere regime change toward fostering effective, citizen-centered governance systems (Faour, 2022).

In Iran's post-revolution context, governance paradigms took on unique characteristics shaped by the intersection of religious legitimacy, revolutionary ideals, and the imperatives of state-building. After 1979, Iran experienced a complex process of redefining its political structure, embedding Islamic principles within a republican framework. As the Islamic Republic evolved, competing narratives and paradigms regarding governance surfaced, reflecting tensions between tradition and modernity, centralization and decentralization, and ideological purity and pragmatic adaptation (Sadeghi, 2020). These tensions were not merely theoretical but were manifested in the practical administration of the country and its political discourse. The post-revolutionary state had to negotiate between consolidating revolutionary legitimacy and responding to modern governance challenges such as economic development, international relations, and social welfare (Rabiei, 2019). Consequently, understanding governance paradigms in Iran requires situating them within this unique historical and ideological backdrop, where both indigenous political traditions and global governance discourses interact and compete.

Election discourses in Iran serve as critical indicators of governance style because they reveal the competing paradigmatic orientations of political elites seeking popular support. Presidential elections, in particular, offer a rare platform where political actors publicly articulate their visions of the state's role, the citizen's place, and the nature of political authority. These discourses reflect underlying ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions about governance, revealing how candidates conceptualize power, participation, justice, and legitimacy (Mahor Gilani et al., 2024). Moreover, because Iranian presidential elections are highly symbolic events, often perceived as semi-competitive contests within a constrained political space, the rhetoric and promises made during campaigns provide valuable insights into the philosophical orientations that may guide governance practices after the election (Marandi et al., 2024). Analyzing these discourses thus enables researchers to trace how abstract philosophical paradigms translate

into political narratives and administrative priorities, shedding light on both continuity and change within the Iranian political system.

The present research is grounded in the problem statement that Iranian presidential election discourses between 2005 and 2025 exhibit distinct paradigmatic characteristics that significantly influence subsequent governance approaches. Rather than merely critiquing the content of governmental performance, this study seeks to undertake a philosophical and paradigmatic analysis of election discourses, examining how each president's rhetoric reflects deeper ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments.

In conducting this research, the author adopts a critical-interpretivist philosophical stance. This orientation is grounded in the belief that governance paradigms in Iran cannot be understood merely through empirical or objectivist observation, but must be interpreted within their historical, cultural, and ideological contexts, while also being critically assessed in terms of their power dynamics and emancipatory potentials. The interpretivist lens allows for a nuanced reading of presidential discourses as meaning-making practices that shape social and political realities, whereas the critical dimension provides tools for interrogating systemic inequalities and ideological constructs embedded in governance narratives. This dual philosophical positioning enables the analysis to move beyond descriptive categorization and toward a transformative understanding of how political discourses reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant governance paradigms

Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative approach based on document analysis and comparative evaluation to investigate the governance paradigms reflected in the electoral discourses of Iranian presidents between 2005 and 2025. Primary sources such as campaign statements, election manifestos, interviews, and media analyses were systematically reviewed to identify the key philosophical components embedded within each discourse. The study focused on analyzing these materials through the lens of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, aiming to classify each discourse within one or a combination of the positivist, interpretivist, and critical paradigms. After extracting relevant elements from the documents, a comparative analysis was conducted to highlight similarities and differences across the four presidential terms. This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of how different philosophical assumptions informed governance styles and policy approaches in each administration. By integrating document-based evidence with a philosophical framework, the study offers an interpretive and critical analysis of how governance paradigms have evolved in contemporary Iran.

Philosophical Foundations of Governance Paradigms

The concept of the “paradigm” holds a foundational role in the philosophy of science, particularly through the work of Thomas Kuhn in his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn defined paradigms not merely as sets of theories, but as overarching conceptual frameworks that guide scientific inquiry by shaping what is

studied, how research is conducted, and how results are interpreted. He argued that scientific development is not linear or cumulative, but rather punctuated by periods of “normal science”—a phase in which scientists operate within a dominant paradigm and solve problems considered legitimate by that framework. Over time, however, anomalies may accumulate—observations that the current paradigm cannot explain. These tensions can trigger a crisis, leading to a scientific revolution in which a new paradigm replaces the old, in what Kuhn famously termed a “paradigm shift.” Importantly, Kuhn emphasized that competing paradigms are often incommensurable: they are grounded in fundamentally different assumptions about reality and knowledge, and thus cannot be directly compared or reconciled through empirical means alone. This insight has had far-reaching implications beyond the natural sciences, influencing the social sciences, humanities, and political theory. In the context of governance, paradigms function in a similar way: they offer ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that determine how power, authority, and legitimacy are understood and practiced. Understanding Kuhn’s conception of paradigms thus provides a powerful lens for analyzing how different governance models emerge, consolidate, or collapse over time in response to internal contradictions or external pressures (Yang, 2021). In the context of governance studies, paradigms similarly shape how political actors and institutions conceptualize authority, legitimacy, social order, and public administration. They offer the ontological, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings that define how governance is theorized and practiced. Understanding governance paradigms, therefore, requires attention to the foundational assumptions about reality, knowledge, and action that political leaders and policymakers hold, often implicitly, in shaping their approach to power and administration. Among the principal paradigms influencing governance theories, positivism stands out as one of the earliest and most enduring frameworks. Positivism is grounded in the belief that reality exists independently of human perception and can be observed, measured, and understood objectively. In this view, social phenomena are treated analogously to natural phenomena, and governance becomes a technical exercise in organizing, structuring, and regulating society based on empirical evidence and rational laws (Talebian, 2020). The ontological assumption of positivism is realism: the external world, including social structures, exists independently of observers. Epistemologically, positivism champions objectivity, emphasizing the collection of factual data through systematic observation and experimentation. Methodologically, it prefers quantitative methods, causal analysis, and hypothesis testing to uncover universal laws of political and social behavior (Borshhevskiy, 2022). In governance, this translates into a preference for structured bureaucracies, codified laws, measurable performance indicators, and technocratic policymaking. Good governance, within a positivist framework, is often associated with transparency, predictability, efficiency, and accountability, as these qualities can be operationalized and assessed through objective metrics (Roedyati et al., 2022). However, critics argue that positivist governance models may neglect the complexities of human meaning-making, cultural diversity, and the

contested nature of social reality. In contrast to positivism, interpretivism offers a fundamentally different view of reality and knowledge. Interpretivist paradigms reject the notion of an objective social reality existing independently of human consciousness; instead, they posit that realities are socially constructed through language, culture, and shared meanings (Moradi-Joz et al., 2018). Ontologically, interpretivism embraces a relativist stance, suggesting that multiple, context-dependent realities coexist. Epistemologically, it emphasizes understanding over explanation, focusing on the subjective meanings that individuals and groups attach to their experiences. Methodologically, interpretivism favors qualitative methods such as discourse analysis, ethnography, and narrative inquiry, seeking to uncover the rich, nuanced, and situated understandings of political and social life (Nazari, 2019). In terms of governance, an interpretivist approach highlights the importance of culture, tradition, and historical narratives in shaping political institutions and practices. Governance is not merely a matter of legal compliance or institutional design but is deeply embedded in the symbolic and experiential dimensions of collective life (Ashraf, 2024). Policy-making, in this view, should be sensitive to the lived realities of citizens, drawing on inclusive dialogues and deliberative processes that acknowledge diversity and contestation. Interpretivist governance thus tends to prioritize participatory decision-making, local knowledge, and cultural resonance in policy design and implementation.

A third paradigm, critical theory, moves beyond both positivism and interpretivism by foregrounding the role of power, ideology, and systemic inequality in shaping social and political realities. Critical paradigms assert that existing social structures are neither neutral nor inevitable but are historically produced and maintained through relations of domination and exclusion (Faour, 2022). Ontologically, critical theory often adopts a realist perspective that acknowledges the existence of material conditions and power asymmetries, but it also emphasizes the socially constructed nature of those conditions. Epistemologically, it is rooted in a critical-reflective stance, seeking not merely to understand or explain the world but to transform it by exposing and challenging structures of oppression. Methodologically, critical approaches combine empirical analysis with normative critique, often employing participatory action research, critical discourse analysis, and emancipatory methodologies (Ropik & Kawwami, 2022). In governance, the critical paradigm frames the state not just as an administrator or coordinator but as a site of contestation where struggles for justice, equality, and emancipation unfold (Mahbob Kilidbari et al., 2024). Governance models informed by critical theory emphasize empowerment of marginalized groups, dismantling of systemic barriers, and the creation of more democratic and equitable forms of participation. They critique technocratic or culturally neutral models for masking the reproduction of structural inequalities and for failing to address deeper questions of legitimacy and justice.

Each of these paradigms leads to profoundly different models of governance. In a positivist governance model, the state assumes the role of a rational-legal authority that manages society through regulations, policies, and performance metrics. Governance

becomes a technocratic endeavor aimed at optimizing outcomes based on evidence-based policy designs (Bayquni & Santoso, 2021). Citizens are largely seen as clients or subjects whose needs and behaviors must be measured and addressed through efficient service delivery. In an interpretivist model, governance is reconceived as a meaning-making process, where the state acts more as a facilitator of social dialogues and a custodian of shared values and traditions. Policymaking involves deep engagement with the cultural and historical specificities of communities, emphasizing narrative coherence and social legitimacy over mere procedural efficiency (Gonabad et al., 2017). In critical governance models, the state is both a battleground and an instrument for emancipation, with governance processes oriented toward confronting and transforming unjust power relations. Here, policy design is not only about solving technical problems but about reimagining social realities and expanding the space for democratic agency and collective self-determination (Bazoobandi, 2023).

Understanding these philosophical foundations is essential for analyzing governance paradigms, especially in contexts like Iran where ideological struggles, historical narratives, and aspirations for justice intersect so vividly with political practice. Each paradigm offers distinct insights into the nature of political authority, the possibilities of citizen engagement, and the meaning of public policy. By situating election discourses within these paradigms, it becomes possible to discern not just the strategic rhetoric of political candidates, but the deeper philosophical commitments that shape the trajectory of governance itself.

Paradigmatic Analysis of Presidential Discourses

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidential discourse reflected a strong interpretivist orientation interwoven with distinct positivist elements. Ontologically, Ahmadinejad emphasized a socially constructed vision of national identity and Islamic values, portraying Iran not as a mere geographical entity but as a sacred sociopolitical reality shaped by divine guidance and collective faith. His persistent invocation of religious symbols and narratives underscored the interpretivist view that reality is produced through shared cultural meanings (Mahor Gilani et al., 2024). At the same time, Ahmadinejad's governance model demonstrated positivist leanings, particularly in his portrayal of economic management and development policies. He framed poverty alleviation, housing programs, and distribution of financial aid as objective necessities to be achieved through measurable, technocratic interventions (Gonabad et al., 2017). Epistemologically, Ahmadinejad oscillated between experiential knowledge rooted in popular religious sentiment and an objectivist reliance on quantitative outcomes. His frequent references to "the people's will" suggested an epistemology grounded in collective lived experiences, while his government's focus on development statistics and public service metrics revealed an additional positivist belief in empirical validation. Methodologically, Ahmadinejad favored a dual approach: populist mobilization through rhetorical appeals to tradition and faith, combined with state-directed programs measured by output indicators. Campaign statements such as his famous slogan

of "bringing oil money to the people's tables" encapsulated this hybrid methodology (Bazoobandi, 2023). His governance thus sought to operationalize moral and ideological commitments through concrete, quantifiable programs, blending symbolic construction with empirical management in a manner consistent with both interpretivist and positivist paradigms.

Hassan Rouhani's discourse during his presidential campaigns and subsequent governance exhibited a distinct hybridization of critical and positivist paradigms. Ontologically, Rouhani acknowledged systemic structures and institutional constraints that shape political and social realities, aligning with the critical perspective that society is embedded within power dynamics and historical inequalities (Sadeghi Golafshani et al., 2024). However, he also accepted an objective reality to be navigated through rational planning and diplomacy, reflecting positivist realism. Epistemologically, Rouhani's discourse promoted a pragmatic and reformist vision of knowledge: he encouraged critical reflection on Iran's domestic and international positioning while emphasizing evidence-based policymaking, particularly in economic and foreign affairs (Rabiei, 2019). For example, his engagement with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and his emphasis on empirical economic indicators to argue for moderation and global engagement demonstrated a reliance on data-driven decision-making (Faour, 2022). Yet, he simultaneously critiqued internal structures of exclusion and called for greater civil liberties, thereby incorporating a critical epistemology focused on emancipatory transformation (Nademi & Shirzadi, 2024). Methodologically, Rouhani's administration balanced formal negotiations and statistical analyses with discursive strategies aimed at expanding political participation and transparency. His campaign highlighted themes such as "prudence and hope," invoking a vision of governance that required both technocratic competence and structural reform (Roedyati et al., 2022). By integrating critical reflections on governance with positivist techniques of management and evaluation, Rouhani's discourse embodied a hybrid paradigm that sought gradual, systemic change through rational, measured reforms.

Ebrahim Raisi's electoral and presidential discourse leaned heavily toward interpretivism, with noticeable critical elements shaping its structure and content. Ontologically, Raisi's worldview was centered on the cultural and spiritual identity of the Iranian nation, conceived as a sacred community bound by shared religious and revolutionary narratives. His emphasis on values such as justice, piety, and national dignity revealed a deep commitment to the interpretivist understanding of reality as constructed through collective symbols and meanings (jan, 2023). Raisi portrayed governance as an extension of the people's spiritual aspirations rather than a mere administrative mechanism, positioning the Islamic Republic as a cultural and moral project rather than simply a political entity (Ashraf, 2024). Epistemologically, his approach privileged traditional knowledge sources, including religious texts and revolutionary ideology, while also endorsing a critical stance toward global hegemonies and domestic inequalities. Raisi frequently criticized the socio-economic disparities perpetuated by previous administrations, suggesting a critical epistemological

commitment to unveiling and addressing systemic injustices (Balan, 2024). Methodologically, his governance style blended narrative persuasion rooted in Islamic teachings with policy initiatives aimed at redistributive justice. His campaign slogans, such as "a government of the people for the people," emphasized a participatory model anchored in collective faith, while his administrative strategies, such as judicial reforms and anti-corruption campaigns, illustrated efforts to dismantle entrenched privileges and promote social equity (Roedyati et al., 2022). Thus, Raisi's discourse and governance practices reflected a synthesis of interpretivist cultural engagement and critical structural critique, striving to reassert revolutionary ideals through participatory yet hierarchically anchored policies.

Masoud Pezeshkian's emerging discourse represents the most explicitly critical paradigm among the four analyzed figures, though it is tempered by selective positivist influences. Ontologically, Pezeshkian views Iranian society as stratified and conflict-ridden, emphasizing the need to confront and transform unjust power relations. His vision of reality incorporates both material inequalities and discursive constructions that sustain exclusion, aligning with the critical paradigm's emphasis on the historical contingency and contestability of social structures (Marandi et al., 2024). Epistemologically, Pezeshkian adopts a reflexive approach to knowledge, encouraging the questioning of dominant narratives and advocating for marginalized voices within Iranian society (Amini et al., 2024). His campaign discourses frequently highlight themes of social justice, civic empowerment, and participatory democracy, demonstrating a commitment to emancipatory knowledge practices (Mahboob et al., 2025). At the same time, Pezeshkian's engagement with issues such as healthcare reform, technological innovation, and economic revitalization reveals a positivist concern for evidence-based policy and measurable outcomes (Azadi et al., 2025). He does not reject empirical data or technocratic methods; rather, he seeks to harness them in the service of broader transformative goals. Methodologically, Pezeshkian's approach is dual: he advocates for participatory action research models that engage communities directly while simultaneously supporting statistical analyses and scientific planning to guide policy interventions (Karabiyik, 2023). His campaign rhetoric, often centered on listening to the people and addressing systemic corruption, illustrates a methodological commitment to both critical deconstruction of existing power systems and rational design of alternative futures (Nazari, 2019). Pezeshkian's governance paradigm thus reflects a critical-positivist synthesis, aiming to dismantle oppression through a combination of cultural critique and technocratic pragmatism.

Overall, the analysis of these four presidential discourses reveals the evolving and hybridized nature of governance paradigms in Iran between 2005 and 2025. Ahmadinejad's interpretive populism combined with a positivist developmentalism represents a governance style rooted in symbolic mobilization and empirical redistribution. Rouhani's hybrid of critical reflection and positivist administration reflects a technocratic reformism tempered by awareness of systemic constraints. Raisi's interpretive-cultural revivalism, infused with

critical concerns about justice, signals a return to revolutionary narratives infused with structural critique. Pezeshkian's critical emancipatory discourse, supplemented by positivist planning, marks a forward-looking attempt to reconcile systemic transformation with empirical governance tools. Each figure, through their ontological, epistemological, and methodological orientations, embodies a different trajectory in Iran's ongoing negotiation between tradition, modernity, justice, and rationality in the domain of governance.

Comparative Discussion

The comparative analysis of presidential discourses between 2005 and 2025 in Iran reveals significant shifts in the philosophical underpinnings of governance paradigms, reflecting broader transformations in both domestic political culture and global influences. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's discourse, heavily interpretivist with positivist elements, marked a populist surge emphasizing national and religious identity, while simultaneously relying on measurable developmental outcomes to legitimize governance practices. Ahmadinejad's ontological stance on the sacredness of Iranian society, constructed through collective faith narratives, set a tone for governance that prioritized cultural resonance over institutional rationality, yet his focus on quantifiable achievements in economic redistribution reflected an underlying positivist orientation (Gonabad et al., 2017). By contrast, Hassan Rouhani's administration exhibited a deliberate move toward a hybrid model that incorporated critical reflection alongside positivist management techniques. Rouhani's emphasis on structural reform, citizen rights, and international diplomacy, coupled with his reliance on economic indicators and technocratic expertise, indicated a philosophical evolution toward balancing emancipatory goals with pragmatic governance (Sadeghi Golafshani et al., 2024).

Ebrahim Raisi's discourse represented a partial return to the interpretivist paradigm, reaffirming traditional revolutionary narratives of justice, faith, and resistance against external hegemony. However, Raisi infused this interpretivism with a critical perspective, openly addressing systemic inequalities and the failures of previous administrations (Jan, 2023). While maintaining a cultural and religious framing of governance, Raisi's critical turn suggested a deeper engagement with questions of social justice and institutional accountability. In contrast, Masoud Pezeshkian's emerging discourse reflects the most pronounced critical orientation among the four, directly challenging established power structures and advocating for participatory governance rooted in civic empowerment (Amini et al., 2024). Yet, Pezeshkian's pragmatism in embracing evidence-based policy-making demonstrates an evolution toward a critical-positivist synthesis, signaling an openness to blending structural critique with empirical problem-solving (Azadi et al., 2025).

Over the two decades from 2005 to 2025, a philosophical shift is evident: Iranian governance discourse moved from a strong reliance on cultural-interpretive mobilization under Ahmadinejad, through a technocratic-reformist balancing act under Rouhani, toward a renewed interpretive-justice orientation under Raisi, and finally into a transformative critical paradigm under Pezeshkian. This trajectory suggests an increasing awareness among

political elites of the necessity to address both symbolic legitimacy and structural injustice, while also acknowledging the role of empirical governance tools in crafting effective policies (Faour, 2022).

The dominant paradigms adopted by each administration profoundly shaped policy-making processes, modes of citizen participation, and governance structures. Ahmadinejad's administration, steeped in interpretivist populism, fostered policies centered on redistributive justice but often sidelined institutional capacity-building and participatory mechanisms (Bazoobandi, 2023). Rouhani's hybrid model promoted citizen participation through controlled reforms, seeking to expand civic space within existing institutional constraints while prioritizing technocratic management of economic and diplomatic affairs (Rabiei, 2019). Raisi's discourse, while rhetorically participatory, emphasized moral alignment with revolutionary ideals, shaping governance structures that favored ideological cohesion over broad-based pluralism (Mahor Gilani et al., 2024). Pezeshkian, however, articulates a governance vision that calls for structural democratization, addressing both procedural and substantive dimensions of citizen participation, and designing policies that respond to both systemic injustices and empirical realities (Karabıyık, 2023). Thus, the paradigmatic evolution not only reflects philosophical shifts but also signals broader transformations in the way governance is conceptualized and practiced in Iran's contemporary political landscape.

Conclusion

The analysis of Iranian presidential election discourses from 2005 to 2025 highlights the profound influence of philosophical paradigms on governance styles. Each president's approach to policymaking, citizen engagement, and institutional management was deeply rooted in their ontological, epistemological, and methodological orientations. The study revealed that the philosophical assumptions underlying campaign discourses are not merely rhetorical flourishes but are predictive of the governance models that later emerge. Interpretivist, positivist, and critical paradigms each offer distinct frameworks for conceptualizing power, justice, and participation, and these frameworks tangibly shape the structure and priorities of governmental action.

The dynamic interaction between elections, paradigms, and governance evolution in Iran underscores how political discourse serves as a critical arena for negotiating the meaning and practice of governance. Elections not only reflect public sentiment but also act as sites where philosophical contestations over the nature of the state, society, and citizenship are played out. Over the two decades studied, there has been a discernible shift from a predominance of symbolic and cultural mobilization toward a more critical and transformative engagement with systemic structures, indicating a maturation in the political consciousness and expectations of both leaders and citizens.

Future research should expand on this paradigmatic analysis by incorporating comparative studies with other political systems experiencing similar post-revolutionary

trajectories. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the implementation gaps between electoral discourses and actual governance outcomes could provide deeper insights into the resilience or erosion of philosophical commitments over time. Exploring how emerging technologies, globalization, and shifting demographic trends influence the evolution of governance paradigms in Iran would also offer valuable perspectives for understanding the future trajectory of the Iranian political system.

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