

Eritrea

Country Overview

Politics

The state of Eritrea is a presidential republic formed after gaining independence from Ethiopia in May 1993. The executive branch is led by President Isaias Afwerki, who serves as chief of state, head of government, and head of the State Council and National Assembly. An unelected Transitional National Assembly named Afwerki president in June 1993 until formal elections could be held under a new constitution; however, Afwerki remained in office postponing further elections indefinitely.¹ The ruling party-- People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)-- is the only political party officially recognized by the government. The constitution, which was ratified by the Constituent Assembly in May 1997, has notably gone unimplemented for decades.² The legislative branch includes a unicameral National Assembly composed of 150 members serving 5-year terms, half of whom are indirectly elected by the ruling party and the other half who are elected by a simple majority vote. The country is divided into six administrative regions: Anseba, Debub, Debubawi K'eyyih Bahri, Gash-Barka, Ma'ikel, and Semienawi K'eyyih Bahri. Local and regional assembly elections are held periodically; however, these are carefully monitored and controlled by the PFDJ and do not accurately reflect local political sentiment.³ The judicial branch operates under a mixed legal system, including customary, civil, and Islamic religious law. High Court judges are appointed directly by President Afwerki; lower courts consist of regional courts, community courts, special courts, sharia courts, and military courts.⁴

Freedom House describes Eritrea as a "militarized authoritarian state," highlighting the prevalence of arbitrary detention, mandated national service, and government censorship of independent media outlets since 2001. Eritrea earned a 3/100 freedom rating in 2022, receiving 1/40 for Political Rights and 2/60 for Civil Liberties.⁵

Ongoing military conflicts, most recently in Ethiopia's Tigray region, have resulted in an environment of repression and widespread forced conscription and military labor in Eritrea. Dissent is outlawed, secret police and informants are prevalent, and arbitrary arrests as well as unjustified detentions are



commonplace.⁶ Human Rights Watch reported the conscription of men and unmarried women who were forced into degrading and low-paying working conditions. HRW has also noted the conscription of young teenage students at the Sawa military camp, who reported numerous incidents of sexual harassment and exploitation. The EU, U.S., and African members of the UN Security Council have implored Eritrea to withdraw troops from and cease military action in Ethiopia.⁷

Economy

The World Bank classifies Eritrea as a “low income” country.⁸ Although it is difficult to obtain reliable, accurate data from Eritrea, the country’s Real GDP was estimated at 9.70 billion in 2017, with a Real GDP growth rate of 5% that same year. The CIA estimates Eritrea’s GDP as comprised of 11.7% agriculture, 29.6% industry, and 58.7% services: however, 80% of the labor force work in agriculture while only 20% work in industry. Eritrea’s command economy is controlled by the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ). Eritrea’s economic development is stifled by the government’s monopoly over industry, erratic rainfall and persistent drought, as well as the general militarization of the population. Furthermore, military spending in Eritrea supersedes development and investment projects, again inhibiting greater economic growth.⁹

Excluding the mining sector, the U.S. Department of State qualifies Eritrea’s investment climate as risky and unsuitable for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). While the Eritrean government claims to encourage and desire FDI, and a 1994 proclamation decreed almost all sectors open to investors, the PFDJ in practice circumscribes the terms of private investment and the Investment center, operating directly under the President, has issued a statement that “investment developments must follow political developments.”¹⁰ FDI is in fact managed by a small private group of government officials. The government does not hold a strong record in facilitating domestic businesses either, and arbitrary and opaque government regulations stymie or preclude business development.

The government has tended to restrict access to foreign currency, and in 2015 introduced a new currency while also limiting the amount of money citizens could withdraw from the bank monthly. This new currency resulted in monetary contraction and deflation continuing through 2018. More recently, the government has tightened fiscal policy, leading to an increase to an 11% fiscal surplus of GDP in 2018.¹¹



Social/Human Development

Eritrea's population in 2022 was 6.2 million and includes nine recognized ethnic groups— Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Afar, Kunama, Bilen, Hedareb/Beja, Nara, and Rashaida. The official languages are Tigrinya, Arabic, and English, and the four state recognized religions include Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and Sunni Muslim. The population is considerably younger, with over 92% of the population under the age of 55.

Despite a relatively high poverty rate, around 70% according to recent data, the country has still made important socioeconomic advancements.¹² Adult education programs allowed the country to double the literacy rate in the last twenty years, and life expectancy rose from 50 years in 1990 to 67 years in 2020.¹³ However, there is notable gender disparity in the literacy rate, which was at 84.4% for men and 68.9% for women in 2018. The state's extreme military focus combined with inconsistent rain have contributed to food insecurity, and malnutrition is a widespread issue. The World Bank noted that 52% of children qualified as underweight.¹⁴

Eritrea has been characterized by high levels of emigration since the 1960s, following the beginning of Eritrea's war for independence from Ethiopia, but as migration has been greatly restricted with increasing military conflicts with Ethiopia that number dropped to -10.11/1,000 in 2022.¹⁵

U.S. Department of State TIP Report Summary (2022)

U.S. Department of State TIP Ranking: Tier 3

The *Trafficking in Persons Report* stated that Eritrea does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking nor its anti-trafficking capacity. Furthermore, reports demonstrated government policy and patterns of human trafficking by continuing to exploit nationals in forced labor through compulsory National Service and the citizen militia. Citizens in government work units were required to continue working following their mandatory period of service, being threatened with detention, torture, or familial reprisal if they refused to continue. The government did not indicate any efforts or intentions to address human trafficking.

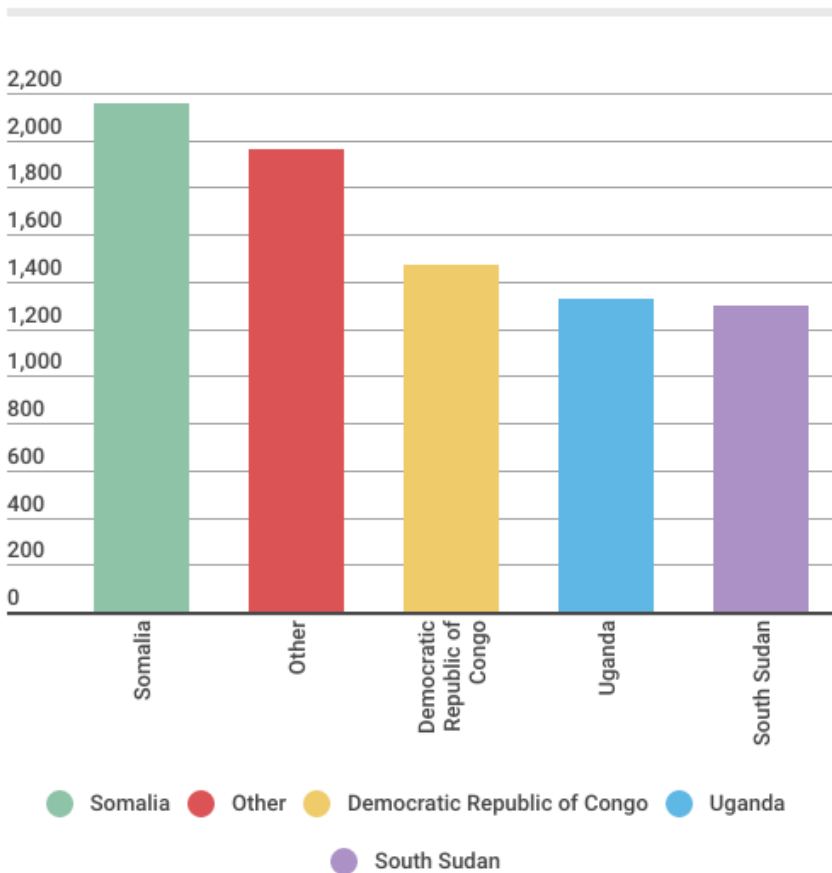
[Read the full TIP Report here](#)



Migrant and Other Vulnerable Populations

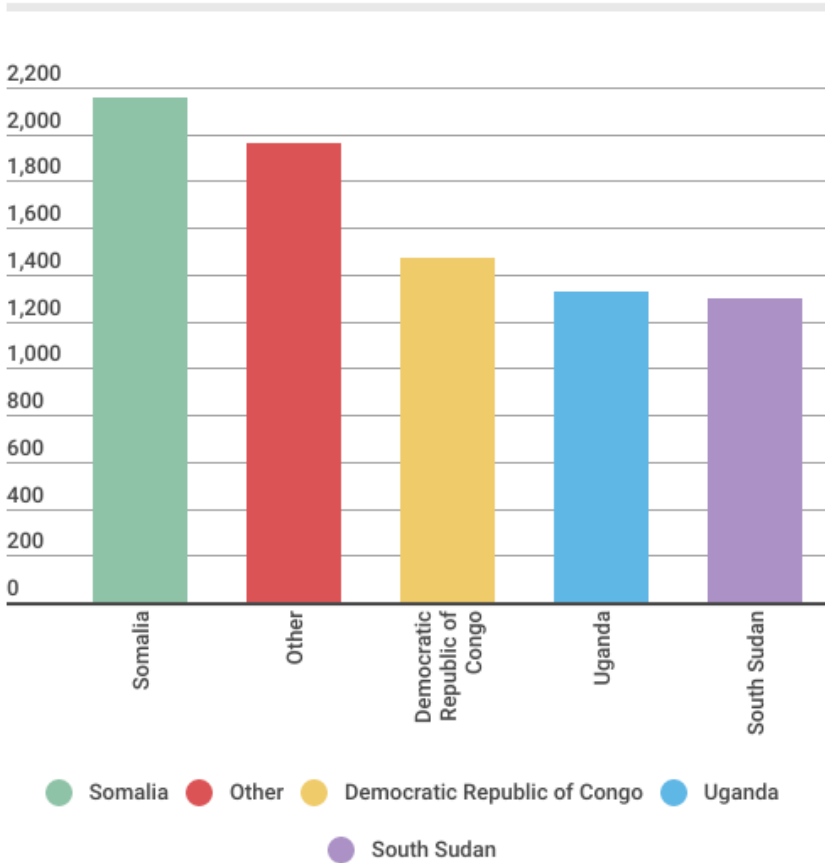
From the country’s inception in 1993, Eritrea has been a leading refugee source country. As of 2022, Eritrea holds a net migration rate of -10.11 migrants/1,000 population, and remittances comprise 30% of the country’s GDP. Eritrean refugees typically migrate to Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Egypt, or Israel, and have faced increasing threats of trafficking in the Sinai Desert.¹⁶

Migrants to Eritrea



The second highest category of migrants to Eritrea are categorized as “Other,” meaning the origin is unknown. These migrants may have passed through multiple different countries before coming to Eritrea.

Migrants to Eritrea



Exports and Trade

Eritrea’s top exports include gold and other minerals, livestock, sorghum, textiles, food, and small industry manufactures.¹⁷



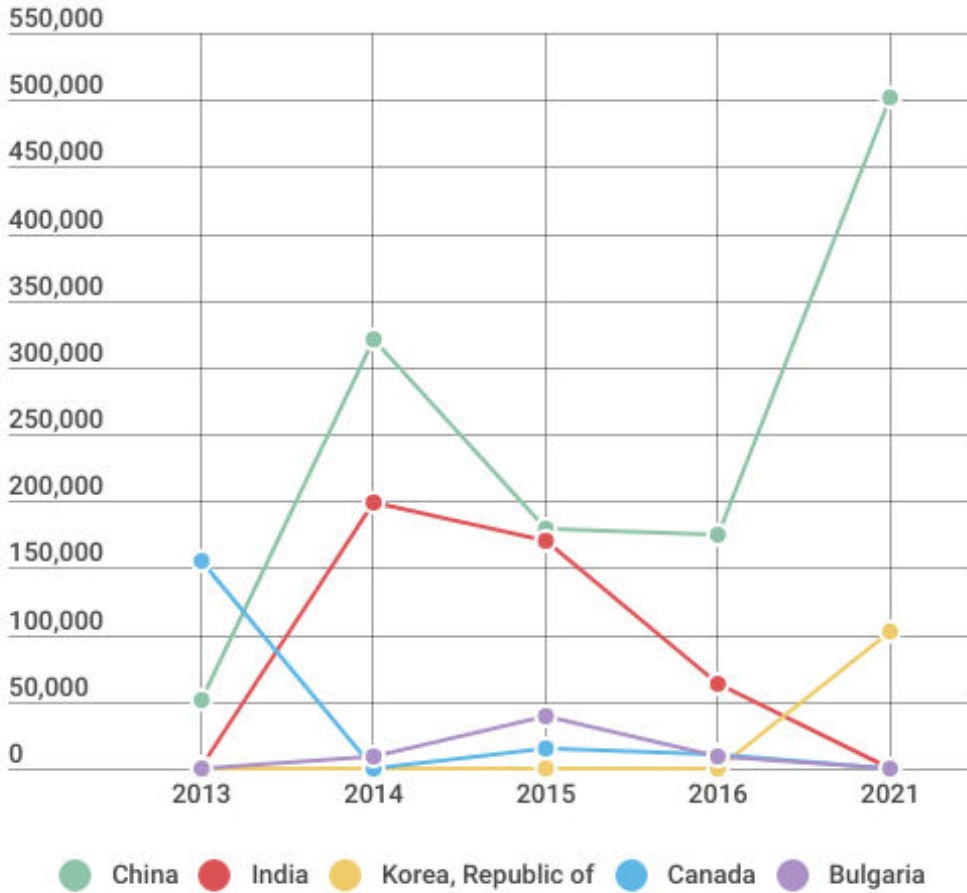
2020



According to mirror data, Eritrea’s main export partners in 2021 were China and South Korea.¹⁸



Eritrea Export Partners (USD/Thousands)



Eritrea was the 204th largest supplier of goods to the United States and the 19th largest goods export market of the United States in 2019. There is no recent data on U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Eritrea available.¹⁹

Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors Analysis

Legal/Policy Risk Factors

Level of Legal Protection for Civil Liberties and Workers' Rights



Freedom of Association

The Eritrean government does not recognize citizens' right to freedom of assembly; protestors face arbitrary detention or violent attacks from state security forces.²⁰ Large gatherings required government pre-approval, and those that did not have this were subject to close investigation and harassment from security forces. In March 2020, the government introduced COVID-19 measures that banned large gatherings altogether; this legislation is still in place.²¹

Similarly, independent trade unions are prohibited in Eritrea, and, despite the government's ratification of the International Labor Organization's eight fundamental conventions in May 2020, the government actively prevents the formation of new unions. The only umbrella union to legally exist, the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, is strongly affiliated with the ruling party.²² The law does allow for the right of workers to form and join unions, but labor laws do not fully cover civil servants, domestic workers, police, national service conscripts, and informal workers—who comprise the majority of Eritrea's labor force.

While freedom of speech is a legal right, in practice this is greatly restricted by the government, which controls broadcast media and closely monitors internet use. Self-censorship to avoid government retaliation is also very common. Given the war with Ethiopia, the government cites national security concerns as justification for its stringent approach to freedom of speech.²³

Working Conditions

The national minimum wage for government employees is set below the international poverty line, and for private sector workers there was no national minimum wage. Workers are technically entitled to overtime pay, but this is neither reliably nor effectively enforced by the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare. Workers are legally granted a rest period of one day per week, but the average employee receives one and a half days off per week.

There are no official universally applied health and safety standards, although each government enterprise works with quasi-government unions for specific sectors to define safety standards. Furthermore, workers do maintain the right to remove themselves from dangerous working situations without jeopardizing their employment. There are no recent government reports detailing abuses of health and safety standards or major industrial accidents available.²⁴

Discrimination

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or gender, even mandating equal pay for equal work; however, the U.S. Department of State reported discrimination against the Afar people and social and economic



prejudices towards women.²⁵ Moreover, the law does not criminalize sexual harassment.

Religious discrimination of those who do not subscribe to an officially recognized religion— Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical— is prevalent. Those who practice unrecognized religions may face imprisonment, torture, and forced disappearances.²⁶ Numerous international religious organizations maintained that authorities were not only interrogating prisoners as to their religious affiliation but pressuring them to identify other practitioners of unofficial faiths.

Labor laws proscribe discrimination against employees based on race, color, sex, disability, social origin, nationality, political orientation, or religion. Labor laws, however, do not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, HIV-positive status, language, or age. Persons with disabilities in the private sector reportedly faced discriminatory hiring practices.²⁷

Forced Labor

While Eritrean law nominally prohibits forced labor and slavery, loopholes and gaps in the law enable these practices to continue. Namely, these laws exclude most public sector workers from these protections, overlooking forced labor under national service or civic obligations, prison sentences, and “communal services rendered during an emergency.”²⁸ Almost all Eritrean citizens between the ages of 18 and 50 have national service obligations which consist of an 18-month service in either the military or the government. This 18-month service limit, however, can be extended in times of national emergency, which the government has declared since the outbreak of war with Ethiopia in 1998. Conscripts receive low wages, with the government sometimes substituting rations for wages. Refusal to serve in the military is often met with detainment. Discharge from service is arbitrary, with no clear, consistent procedure, and some Eritreans have reported forcibly serving for over 20 years.

Child Labor

Eritrean law does not proscribe the worst forms of child labor or hazardous working conditions for children. The law does prohibit people under the age of 18 from employment between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. and for more than seven hours a day, and 14 is the legal minimum age for employment. The Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare are responsible for ensuring adherence to these laws, but enforcement was generally inconsistent. The specific work children engaged in depended on geography, with urban children typically working as street vendors and rural children working on family farms, illegal mines, or herding livestock.



While education is mandatory and free through grade seven, and the government has made significant efforts to encourage attendance, students must complete their final year of high school at the Sawa National Training and Education Center, where students are subjected to forced labor.²⁹

Civil Society Organizations

Nongovernmental organizations are meticulously vetted and are generally restricted to humanitarian relief efforts. However, even these groups are not truly independent civil society organizations.³⁰

Citizens technically hold the right to form organizations for political, social, economic, and cultural reasons as long as they are transparent and reflect the principles of “national unity and democracy.” The government, however, prohibited nongovernmental organizations from forming, and generally prevented local organizations from receiving funding or associating with international organizations.

Immigration Policies Limiting the Employment Options or Movement of Migrants

The law does not grant asylum or refugee status, and there is likewise no system for protecting refugees. Ethiopians, Sudanese, or South Sudanese are considered economic migrants as opposed to refugees by the government, but these people were still allowed to live among the local population in the country. Refugees were not allowed formal work permits, but many still worked informally.³¹

Ratification of ILO Conventions Related to Human Trafficking or Rights of Workers and Migrants



Conventions	Status
ILO 29 Forced Labor	In force
ILO 87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize	In force
ILO 98 Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining	In force
ILO 100 Equal Remuneration	In force
ILO 105 Abolition of Forced Labor	In force
ILO 111 Discrimination	In force
ILO 138 Minimum Age	In force
ILO 181 Private Employment Agencies	In force
ILO 182 Worst Forms of Child Labor	Ratified
ILO 97 Migration for Employment	In force

Use of Export Processing Zones (EPZs)

While there are two designated Free Trade Zones in Eritrea, one in Massawa and the other along the border between Eritrea and Sudan, neither is operational.³²

Promotion of Emigration/Remittance Economy

Over the past three decades, Eritrea has experienced high rates of emigration and, consequently, a large diaspora abroad. This diaspora is an important source of remittances, which comprise 30% of the country’s GDP annually.³³

The U.S. State Department did not note any sign of Eritrean efforts to protect trafficking victims or prevent trafficking. There are reportedly no official procedures in place to identify potential trafficking victims, and the government did not provide any information indicating evidence of services provided for such victims.

Political Risk Factors

Level of Corruption

Corruption by public officials is criminalized under Eritrean law. In 2015, a law was introduced requiring officials to account for any unexplained increase in wealth or income. The government’s lack of transparency, however, renders it a challenge to understand to what extent these laws are applied. Eritrea is notably not a signatory to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, and there are no independent NGOs in Eritrea dedicated to investigating corruption. There



is likewise no organization or independent official body to report corruption of the Afwerki regime.³⁴ In 2021, the World Bank ranked Eritrea in the 9th percentile for Control of Corruption.³⁵ On Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions index in 2021, Eritrea ranked 161 out of 180 countries.

Level of Crime and Violence

In 2021, the Institute for Economics & Peace rated the country at a “Low” state of peace, ranking Eritrea 136 out of 163 countries. Asmara is generally considered a safe city, although petty crime is present. More violent crimes, such as homicides, are typically committed by people known to the victim, and are often the result of land disputes, crimes of passion, or domestic issues, but there are occasionally homicides resulting from an assault or robbery against strangers. Vehicle break-ins are not uncommon, while vehicle thefts are rare. The U.S. Embassy does not warn against any major criminal activity besides petty theft and harassment. Eritrea has very strict drug laws, with harsh penalties, and the U.S. Embassy does not report the presence of major drug crime.

Likewise, there are few reports of terrorism in Asmara, but since the outbreak of war with Ethiopia in Tigray in 2020, the border region is not a secure or safe area.³⁶

State Persecution

There is rampant persecution of the state's political opponents: journalists and former members of government considered threats to Afwerki's rule have been detained for decades.³⁷ Freedom House reports severe state persecution of practitioners of non-State supported religions, such as Jehovah's witnesses, who face potential arrest, detainment, loss of property, and even denial of their citizenship. While the government did release around 74 religious prisoners since early 2020, 35 religious followers were arrested in March 2022.³⁸

Political Instability or Conflict

Eritrea received a 95.9 on the fragile states index, which measures cohesion, economic, political, and social indicators, placing it in the “Alert” category.³⁹ In the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Eritrea ranked in the 15th percentile for Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism category in 2021.⁴⁰

Socio-Economic Risk Factors

Level of National Economic Development

Eritrea received a human development score of 0.492 from the UN in 2020, placing it in the “Low” category with a ranking of 176 out of 191.⁴¹ Moreover, the World Bank categorizes Eritrea as a “low-income” economy.⁴² However, the



African Development Bank group projects Eritrea's GDP to increase by around 4% in 2023 due to increased international prices for metals.⁴³

Level and Extent of Poverty

Eritrea does not provide clear statistics for multidimensional poverty or inequality.

Degree of Gender Inequality

Eritrean law provides for equal rights for men and women, even requiring equal pay for equal work. Nevertheless, women still faced significant social and economic discrimination, particularly in rural areas. Sexual harassment and assault of female recruits fulfilling compulsory national service is reportedly commonplace, but generally goes unreported and unpunished. There are as of present no laws against sexual harassment.⁴⁴

Landlessness and Dispossession

There is no recent data on stateless persons or IDPs in Eritrea as of 2022.

Environmental Factors

Key environmental risks facing Eritrea include deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, and overgrazing, which may threaten Eritrea's agrarian based domestic economy.⁴⁵ Other risks include flooding during the rainy season, recurrent droughts, and desert locust infestations.⁴⁶

Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Key Commodity Supply Chains

Copper and Gold Mining

Copper and Gold Mining Overview

Eritrea has reserves of gold, copper, silver and potash. The government has actively sought to develop the commercial mining sector, although artisanal gold mining is also present. Gold mining accounted for nearly 90 percent of all exports in 2012. Production decreased 70 percent in 2013, as reserves started to exhaust at existing mines and has remained low, although reserves still exist in other locations. Copper



mining began in 2013 and was ramping up through 2016. Under national law, the government holds ten percent interest in privately held mining companies.⁴⁷

Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Copper and Gold Mining

Forced labor associated with compulsory national service has been noted in association with commercial mining interests in Eritrea, particularly in infrastructure development around mines. All construction companies in Eritrea are owned by the government and therefore are subject to the use of conscripted labor. Previously conscripted workers have reported being required to work on development of commercial mining sites in highly hazardous conditions.⁴⁸



Gift of the United States Government

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Endnotes

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