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Buen Vivir under Correa: The Rhetoric of Participatory Democracy, the Reality of Rentier Populism

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(Received 13 February 2020; revised 23 November 2020; accepted 23 January 2021; first published online 29 June 2022)

Abstract

This article seeks to understand the relationship between populism and participatory democracy through analysis of Rafael Correa’s left populist regime in Ecuador (2007–2017). It argues that rather than adhering to its own standard for participatory democracy, what the Correa regime referred to as the “Socialism of *Buen Vivir*,” it employed the rhetoric of participatory democracy in the service of populist rule. As a result, the Correa regime failed to promote the participatory form of democracy and citizenship promised in *Buen Vivir*, its version of twenty-first-century socialism. Accordingly, analysis of the Correa regime demonstrates how the concentration of top-down executive power characteristic of populism in general, and rentier populism in particular, impedes the egalitarian and solidaristic mission of participatory democracy. Thus, inductive analysis of the Correa regime reinforces the conceptual understanding that populism is antagonistic and antithetical to participatory democracy.

Keywords: Ecuador; *Buen Vivir*; Correa; participatory democracy; rentier populism; neoextractivism

Resumen

El presente estudio investiga la relación entre el populismo y la democracia participativa a través de un análisis del régimen populista izquierdista de Rafael Correa en Ecuador (2007–2017). Este artículo defiende que en lugar de adherirse a sus propias directrices de democracia participativa (que el régimen de Correa denominó el “Socialismo de *Buen Vivir*”), éste utilizó la retórica de la democracia participativa al servicio de una gobernación populista. Como resultado, el régimen de Correa no promovió la democracia participativa y la ciudadanía, como prometió con el *Buen Vivir*, su versión del Socialismo del siglo XXI. Por ende, un análisis del régimen de Correa demuestra cómo la concentración del poder ejecutivo en la cúspide, característico del populismo en general (y del populismo rentista en particular) obstruye la misión igualitaria y solidaria de la democracia participativa. Por lo tanto, el análisis inductivo del régimen de Correa refuerza el entendimiento conceptual de que el populismo es antitético y es antagonista de la democracia participativa.

Palabras clave: Ecuador; *Buen Vivir*; Correa; democracia participativa; populismo rentista; neoextractivismo

On July 10, 2017, Rafael Correa transferred authority to his chosen successor and the victor in April’s presidential election, Lenin Moreno. Before departing Ecuador that same day for

his wife's native Belgium, Correa gave a farewell speech at the Quito airport in which he wondered openly about his successor's commitment to his Citizen's Revolution (Wray 2018, 6). But what precisely is that legacy? In particular, to what extent did Correa fulfill his regime's avowed commitment to promote participatory democracy? More broadly, what does this legacy tell us about the relationship between populism and participatory democracy?

In addressing these questions, this analysis reaches two conclusions. First, rather than promote participatory democracy, as articulated in its 2008 Constitution and *Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir 2013–2017*, the Correa regime pursued a top-down, populist form of governance. In so doing, it employed the rhetoric of participatory democracy in the service of populist rule. Second, when situated within a broader conceptual understanding of the relationship between populism and participatory democracy, inductive analysis of the Correa regime reinforces the conclusion that populism and participatory democracy are antagonistic and irreconcilable political projects.

Populism versus participatory democracy

To understand the nature of populism and its interrelationship with participatory democracy and contemporary leftism in Latin America, we must first identify the generic conditions out of which populist movements emerge and how they respond to these conditions. As Margaret Canovan (1999) observes, populism exploits the gap between democracy's promise to address the people's concerns and its performance in practice. Inevitably, democracy's performance falls short. The greater the disparity between democracy's promise and its actual performance, and thus the greater the public's dissatisfaction with existing democracy, the greater the opportunity for populist leaders to emerge and to build movements that challenge the status quo. Thus, times of significant societal crisis or decline provide the most fertile opportunities for populist leaders to mobilize followers and to ascend to power.

Populists base their challenge to the status quo on the core elements of populist ideology: that sovereignty should rest with "the pure people," that "the corrupt elite" threaten and therefore impede popular sovereignty, and that thus there exists an antagonistic relationship between the "virtuous people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 8). Populism's antagonism toward elites and its emphasis on popular sovereignty suggests that it supports democracy, at least in its majoritarian or participatory form. However, in reality, rather than support genuine popular sovereignty, populist leaders preempt it, claiming that they embody the interests of the "pure people" and therefore speak on behalf of them against the "corrupt elite." They assert their prerogative to represent the will of the people, not to promote popular sovereignty but rather to assert top-down control over civil society. Thus, in essence, populism is antagonistic to popular sovereignty and democracy. The precise nature of this antagonism becomes clear when we examine the means by which populist rulers attempt to control civil society.

Populist leaders pursue top-down control over civil society through both discursive and institutional means. In terms of discourse, populist leaders play a definitive role in constructing the narrative that defines the people and interprets or explains the elite's failure to address their needs. Ernesto Laclau assumed that populist politics would arise under circumstances in which elites are unable to satisfy a diversity of demands across society. This failure on the part of elites, according to Laclau, would result in an "equivocal moment" in which the articulators of populist discourse unite a plurality of political identities and social demands through the construction of a distinct concept of "the people" (Howarth 2015, 13). The construction of the people requires the employ of empty signifiers, "symbols that can unite heterogeneous elements into a singular identity . . .

which in populist discourse tends to be invested in the name and body of particular political leaders” (Howarth 2015, 14). As Laclau put it, “the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality . . . is inherent to the formation of a ‘people’” (Laclau 2005, 100). In other words, the people develop their collective identity through their shared identification with the populist ruler.

Thus, the people do not emerge as an autonomous, unified political actor capable of challenging the status quo through the assertion of popular sovereignty. Rather, in the absence of popular solidarity, populist leaders use appeals to diverse grievances and the narrative device of empty signifiers to construct “the people” and mobilize them against “the elite.” In the process, they characterize themselves as the embodiment of authentically popular values, uniquely qualified to redeem the excluded from the evil elite’s domination (De la Torre 2015, 11–12). They insist that they alone can speak for and act on behalf of the people and that therefore any attempt to circumscribe or curtail their power is an unjust constraint of popular sovereignty. In this way, populist leaders preempt popular sovereignty and construct the rationale for abrogating fundamental pillars of liberal democracy—most notably, the rule of law and the separation of powers—thereby increasing their concentration of executive power and control over society (López Maya 2014, 69).

Popular democracy fares no better under populist rule. Because populist rulers claim exclusive authority to speak for the masses, they appropriate the power to decide which interests and groups in civil society are legitimate and which are not. Rather than facilitate the autonomous organization and empowerment of civil society by establishing or strengthening institutions through which civil society organizations could give voice to their concerns and interests, populist rulers attempt to thwart this autonomy by co-opting or repressing these organizations, or creating parallel organizations that they control. Populist regimes become predisposed to authoritarianism, as their rulers repress, silence, and exclude those who question their authority or policies. From this perspective, populist leaders’ removal of checks and balances, concentration of power in their hands, and restriction or prevention of countervailing forces in civil society threaten not only liberal democracy but popular sovereignty and participatory democracy as well.

To deepen our understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy, it will be useful to evaluate appraisals that posit a less critical or potentially quite positive relationship between populism and democracy. Let us first consider Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser’s conceptualization of populism’s impact on democracy. Referencing what Robert Dahl defined as the essential elements of polyarchy—participation and contestation—they argue that populism can be both a corrective and a threat to democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 16). Populism can act as a corrective to existing democracies, in their view, by increasing participation and inclusion of marginalized groups in society. On the other hand, populism threatens contestation, and thus democracy, “by *centralizing* power in the executive and *undermining* the power of counter-balancing powers” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 20; emphasis in the original). While substantial empirical support exists for the assertion that populism threatens democracy by undermining contestation, the claim that it strengthens democracy by expanding participation appears questionable. Note that in Dahl’s conceptualization of polyarchy, democratization requires both participation *and* contestation. Increased participation without contestation leads to regimes that Dahl (1971, 7) defined as inclusive hegemonies, not democracies or polyarchies. Moreover, notwithstanding any increased participation that populism may promote, the institutional threats to contestation Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser identify also threaten popular sovereignty by limiting the public’s ability to hold populist leaders accountable.

Not all scholars accept the inevitability of this negative relationship between populism and democracy. A group of scholars perhaps best characterized as neo-

Laclauians (Coronel and Cadahia 2018; Ramírez Gallegos and Stoessel 2018; Cadahia et al. 2020) recognize that Laclau's notion of populism fails to address how to institutionalize, within the state, the people's democratic eruption against elites that occurs in civil society. They ask if there is some institutional arrangement that can reconcile populism with a participatory form of democracy and genuine popular sovereignty.

We can address this question by examining the manner in which Latin America's populist leaders governed in the two populist waves identified by Kenneth Roberts (2007, 4), the first in response to the Great Depression and the second in the aftermath of the 1982 debt crisis. In the first wave, populist leaders and parties promoted the initial incorporation of the working and lower classes through state-led development. However, they did so through the top-down mobilization of their followers, employing nationalist and anti-oligarchic discourse coupled with the establishment of mass-based party, labor, and peasant organizations that dominated lower-class political representation through corporatist and clientelist linkages (Roberts 2007, 8). Thus, while the populist regimes of the import substitution industrialization (ISI) era promoted increased political participation and the expansion of social welfare benefits, they did so through institutional arrangements that promoted the leader's top-down control of civil society at the expense of popular sovereignty.

The failure of the ISI development model, coupled with the deleterious impact of structural adjustment policies on the social welfare of Latin America's most vulnerable following the 1980s debt crisis, created conditions conducive to the emergence of the second populist wave. Across the region, the transition from ISI to neoliberalism contributed to what Roberts (2007, 10) describes as a "crisis of political representation," in which labor and the popular sectors more broadly were "politically marginalized, if not orphaned, by dramatic shifts in parties' programmatic orientations." The failure of established elites and representative institutions to address the social deprivation created by economic crises and the adoption of neoliberal reforms precipitated profound voter disenchantment with the status quo, which in turn provided an opening to aspiring populist leaders.

Sebastián Mazzuca's (2013, 2021) concept of rentier populism is particularly instructive in regard to the mode of governance of left populist leaders who ascended to power in this second wave of populism. As Mazzuca (2013, 112) points out, these second-wave left populists pursued "superpresidentialism," the concentration of executive power and circumvention of liberal oversight. In this sense, first- and second-wave populists were similar. However, he observes that these second-wave populists differed from their predecessors in a number of important ways. Instead of relying on the industrial working class, these left populists targeted unemployed and informal-sector workers as their primary base of support. The dramatic increase in informality precipitated by neoliberal reforms adopted in the 1980s and 1990s facilitated the success of this political strategy. When Rafael Correa rose to power, for example, the vast majority of Ecuadoran workers were in the informal sector.¹

Furthermore, these left populists cultivated support from these workers through economic transfers financed through commodity exports (Mazzuca 2021, 444). The commodities boom, driven by demand from China beginning in 2002, facilitated this strategy (Mazzuca 2021, 439). Thus, these left populists eschewed a return to ISI; they neither closed their markets to foreign competition nor promoted industrialization through increased investment in national industries. Instead, they pursued

¹ According to World Bank data, informal employment in Ecuador from 2001 to 2007 averaged 82.25 percent. See World Bank, "Informal Economy Database," <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/37511318c092e6fd4ca3c60fa0bea3-0350012021/related/informal-economy-database.xlsx> (accessed May 17, 2022).

neoextractivism, according to which the state increases its control, if not ownership, over the commodities that provide the primary source of national income.²

In addition to the distribution of rents generated through neoextractivism, rentier populists pursue charismatic linkage with previously unorganized segments of civil society. Through this mode of linkage, typically facilitated through a personalist political party, the populist ruler presents himself as uniquely qualified to comprehend, promote, and protect the will of the people, while followers find meaning in their direct identification with the charismatic leader rather than a coherent set of principles or programmatic policies (Hawkins, Rosas and Johnson 2011, 189). Through promotion of the charismatic leader's radical populist vision, top-down mobilization of previously unorganized segments of civil society, and politically targeted distribution of social welfare resources, all of which are facilitated through the operation of a populist party, rentier populists are able to build majoritarian mass movements in support of their personalistic rule.

Reliance on plebiscitary support from the largely unorganized popular masses contributes, in turn, to an unconstrained mode of governance in which the separation of powers is all but nonexistent and the president dominates the decision-making process (Mazucca 2021, 443, 451). The resulting plebiscitary relationship between the populist leader and the people is antithetical to a participatory form of democracy. It impedes the autonomy of historically marginalized segments of society and the capacity of citizens to check executive power or to articulate, protect, and promote their interests free of constraint or manipulation by the populist regime.

The contradictions between Buen Vivir and participatory democracy

Examination of the Correa regime provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate the validity of this conceptualization of the relationship between populism and participatory democracy. The first step in this evaluation is to determine how the Correa regime defined participatory democracy. To do this, we examine how the 2008 Constitution and *Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir 2013–2017* address three key issues: political participation and state-society relations; the structure of power and authority within the political regime; and social welfare provision. Each of these categories reflects how the form of democracy the Correa regime advocated was to be profoundly more participatory, inclusive, and empowering of the masses than the prevailing liberal democratic regime.

Political participation and state-society relations

With regard to popular sovereignty and participation, Article 95 of the 2008 Ecuadoran Constitution is very explicit:

Citizens, individually and collectively, shall participate as leading players in decision-making, planning and management of public affairs and in the people's monitoring of State institutions and society and their representatives in an ongoing process of building citizen power. Participation shall be governed by the principles of equality, autonomy, public deliberation, respect for differences, monitoring by the public, solidarity and interculturalism. The participation of citizens in all matters of public interest is a right, which shall be exercised by means of mechanisms of representative, direct and community democracy.

² The increased reliance of the Correa regime on oil extraction to finance expanded social welfare provision is well-documented; for an informative overview of this issue see Chimienti and Matthes (2013).

Similarly, the *Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir 2013–2017* emphasizes the importance of popular participation:

At the heart of a democratic participatory government is an active citizenry and strong social movements that work in open networks, to deal with local and national issues. Also, it is necessary to institutionalize multiple spaces for participation, in which is generated a public dialogue between society and the State, in order that the citizenry gains the capacity of influence and control over political decisions, and activates the interest and participation of the most underprivileged sectors (Senplades 2013, 26; author's translation).

Universal social rights, social equity and cultural diversity

The realization of popular participation and regime accountability to the citizenry are to be achieved, in part, through the state's provision of social welfare resources and the protection of social rights for diverse and historically marginalized segments of the population.

The universal access to healthcare, education, dignified work, housing and habitat is a basic goal for the deepening of other dimensions of wellbeing and the betterment of the quality of life.

The satisfaction of human necessities should be realized in a manner that maintains and strengthens the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country (Senplades 2013, 27; author's translation).

From the foregoing description, we can extrapolate the essential elements of the Socialism of Buen Vivir, which broadly speaking, include the following:

1. The expansion of social rights through universal access to social welfare benefits.
2. The expansion of citizen sovereignty, participation and bottom-up control of government.
3. The strengthening of citizenship, particularly for historically marginalized segments of society, by increasing their agency and capacity for collective action through social solidarity.

The Correa regime's failure to realize these leftist principles reflects a fundamental contradiction between the regime's rhetoric and practice. In rhetoric the regime claimed to be committed to empowering historically marginalized groups in civil society. However, in practice, Correa and his acolytes controlled civil society in top-down fashion, thwarting autonomous organization and mobilization, particularly of segments of society or groups that were critical of their rule. These contradictions epitomize the antagonism of populism to participatory democracy.

We can clarify these contradictions between rhetoric and practice by considering the distinctions between personalistic versus participatory and programmatic forms of party linkage, as well as distinctions between universalistic and populist welfare regimes. Additionally, we can consider whether the manner in which civil society organizations are institutionalized and regulated promotes bottom-up channeling of pressure and demands from civil society or top-down control by the populist ruler. Ultimately, we see through this analysis that the Correa regime pursued a personalistic form of party linkage, distributed social welfare benefits on the basis of political calculations and loyalty

rather than universalism, and controlled civil society organizations in top-down fashion, stymieing in the process their autonomy, solidarity and capacity for collective action.

Personalist party linkage

Political parties can engage with civil society in a variety of ways. However, for the purposes of this analysis, three forms of party-society linkage appear most relevant: participatory, programmatic, and personalistic. As the following analysis makes clear, participatory and programmatic party linkage conform quite well with the notion of participatory democracy articulated in the Correa regime's vision of Buen Vivir and its Citizen's Revolution. However, evaluation of how the regime's dominant party, Alianza País (AP), has functioned in practice points clearly to a personalist form of linkage between Correa and the party's supporters in civil society.

Mass-based organizational structures and participatory modes of affiliation characterize participatory party linkages. Parties that adopt a participatory form of linkage attempt to serve as agents through which citizens can themselves participate in politics, and they tend to be closely linked with organizations in civil society such as labor unions, peasant associations, and urban neighborhood organizations. Thus, they maintain strong grassroots organizations and promote horizontal, bottom-up organization, even when they possess centralized, hierarchical leadership structures. We typically find such party linkages among mass-based populist or leftist parties with close ties to labor movements and traditions of popular mobilization in civil society (Roberts 2002, 17–18). In the European context, parties that have adopted a participatory form of linkage, socialist parties in particular, have often promoted programmatic linkage as well. In other words, they have developed ideologically consistent and coherent positions that clearly differentiate them from their competitors. Citizens who identify with such parties tend to have relatively well-developed ideological and programmatic preferences (Roberts 2002, 18). Because programmatic parties use formal procedures to select candidates and set priorities, they exercise relative autonomy from their leaders (Casullo and Freidenberg 2017, 284–285). These forms of party linkage have been rare in Latin America, because populist parties have typically mobilized the working class in countries across the region (pre-dictatorship Chile is a notable exception) (Roberts 2002, 18).

While participatory and programmatic linkage tends to empower organizations in civil society, personalist party linkage facilitates top-down control of civil society by populist rulers. This form of linkage is based on personalistic or charismatic bonds between the leader and his followers. Under these conditions, parties become vehicles for the fulfillment of the ambitions of individual politicians. As a result, such parties possess no autonomy from their leaders and typically tend not to be well institutionalized or to have deep roots in civil society (Casullo and Freidenberg 2017, 284–285). Since they are not designed to serve the interests of the polity but rather those of the charismatic candidate or leader, they encourage political participation exclusively for this purpose. Leaders of such parties typically engage in clientelist or patronage politics in order to attract supporters and cultivate their loyalty. Thus, this type of linkage encourages electoral participation based on narrowly defined material interests or affective attachments to charismatic leaders, each of which undermine the autonomy of civil society and social solidarity (Casullo and Freidenberg 2017; Roberts 2002, 18–19).

Buen Vivir's call for "an active citizenry and strong social movements that work in open networks to deal with local and national issues" (Senplades 2013, 26) conforms well with the notion of participatory party linkage. Consistent with personalist party linkage, however, AP lacked deep roots in civil society, was wholly dependent on Correa's leadership to determine its direction, and facilitated Correa's top-down control of civil society by

engaging in clientelist politics and promoting supporters' affective attachment to Correa based on his charisma. Examination of the genesis and operation of AP demonstrates that Correa controlled the party to pursue a personalist form of linkage with his supporters, which, in turn, facilitated his top-down, populist control of civil society.

AP emerged in 2006 as a loose conglomeration of social and political movements whose mission was to propel Correa to the presidency and thereby end the partidocracy, the rule of established parties on behalf of powerful groups within Ecuador's oligarchy (Hernández and Buendía 2011, 132). However, as Casullo and Freidenberg (2017, 298) observe, "once Correa was elected, the transition of Alianza País from a collection of parts into a populist machine began. It had a significant clientelistic and electoral capacity and created a clear vertical hierarchy whose cohesion rested on Rafael Correa's charismatic leadership."

Thus, AP originated as an electoral vehicle rather than an agent to empower and mobilize organizations in civil society (Clark and García 2019, 234; Hernández and Buendía 2011, 139). The party did not engage civil society in the process of social transformation; it neither facilitated intermediation between state and social organizations nor promoted collective action around the struggle for change (Ramírez Gallegos 2010, 189). Instead, Correa organized AP as a vehicle to promote his electoral ambitions. Following Chávez's model of Bolivarian Circles in Venezuela, he created family committees, each ten members strong, with the goal of organizing fifty thousand committees before the 2009 election. Moreover, in typical populist fashion, Correa employed a moralistic, Manichaean discourse, in which he presented himself as sole decision maker and communicator on behalf citizens in opposition to the corrupt oligarchy (Casullo and Freidenberg 2017, 298–299).

Correa and AP failed to provide these organizations with opportunities and space to debate politics and shape public policy. Three consequences resulted from this failure. First, many leftist leaders who had initially embraced the party abandoned it. Second, the failure to provide space and opportunities for the participation and empowerment of civil society created enormous distrust and resentment toward the government on the part of social organizations (Hernández and Buendía 2011, 135–136). Finally, Correa and AP compensated for the lack of support from these organizations by pursuing an electoral strategy built on Correa's image as a strong leader and traditional clientelist politics. Gustavo Larrea, former interior minister under Correa, observed: "PAÍS has been converted into a clientelist structure. With very few exceptions, its bases do not obey a political or ideological position. Rather, they obey as clients of favors the government can give them in terms of public sector employment, grants, and scholarships, not on the basis of conviction. An organic structure does not exist. What exists is support from sectors that are beneficiaries of public policies. This is AP's structure, its electoral base" (América Economía 2012).

The personalist nature of AP is evident in the party's behavior since Correa left the presidency. Prior to Correa's departure, AP "was little more than a hodgepodge of self-interested cliques held together mostly by their desire to stay in power and by their personal ties to Correa" (Conaghan 2018, 50). President Lenin Moreno, in an effort to cultivate his own base of support both within and outside AP, and to heal the wounds of a divisive national election in which his right-wing opponent, Guillermo Lasso, lodged accusations of electoral fraud, launched a "national dialogue" shortly after assuming office in May 2017. Through this dialogue, he sought proposals to confront corruption and the nation's economic and political crises. In July 2017, not long after initiation of this dialogue, the party split into *morenista* and *correísta* factions, with Correa and his followers leaving the party in January 2018 to construct an oppositional movement, Movimiento Revolución Ciudadana, dedicated to defending the Citizens' Revolution (Wolff 2018, 282, 288). In February 2018, the Moreno government held a national referendum based on proposals it had received from the citizenry through its national dialogue. While virtually

the entire spectrum of Ecuador's sociopolitical forces advocated for full approval of the referendum, the *correístas* staunchly opposed it, particularly the exclusion from politics of anyone convicted of corruption, the termination of indefinite reelection, and restructuring of the Council of Citizen Participation and Social Control and terminating the terms of its existing members (Wolff 2018, 290). Thus, while these items and the referendum as a whole ultimately passed by wide margins, Correa's supporters, through their opposition, demonstrated their loyalty not to AP but to Correa.

Politically targeted distribution of social welfare resources

Correa's dominance over the AP while he was in office, and the absence of other political parties capable of checking his power, facilitated his government's distribution of social welfare resources in clientelistic fashion. As noted above, Buen Vivir called for the expansion of social rights through universal access to social welfare benefits. Such universalism would strengthen citizenship by allowing citizens to advocate for their political interests without fear of losing access to essential resources.

If the Correa regime had promoted this universalism, it would have reversed the traditional pattern of clientelistic distribution of social welfare resources prevalent in Ecuador. However, evidence indicates that rather than rein in clientelistic distribution of social welfare resources, Correa deepened it in at least two ways. First, he centralized and institutionalized the distribution of benefits through the Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH, Human Development Grant), a conditional cash transfer program to reduce poverty targeting poor households across the country. Second, his government made receipt of resources—schools, hospitals, infrastructure—contingent on compliance with its extractivist policies.

The centralization of resource distribution represents a divergence from historical precedent. Historically, clientelism in Ecuador was conducted primarily at the local level through regionally based political parties, which constructed local clientelist networks that served as intermediaries between urban elites and local populations. The top-down distribution of benefits through the BDH, in which poor citizens receive nationally distributed benefits through an electronic card system, enabled Correa to engage in clientelism directly, circumventing local intermediaries and strengthening his top-down control (Tedesco and Diamint 2014, 37). While Correa weakened local bosses, the view that clientelism persisted under Correa, though in top-down form, was widespread among a broad range of Ecuadoran elites. Of the sixty-four legislators, political and party leaders, journalists, and academics that Tedesco and Diamint interviewed in Quito between 2009 and 2011, 90 percent “affirmed that clientelism is still used as a tool to maintain power through a network of exchanges of benefits for political loyalty” (Tedesco and Diamint 2014, 38).

Both statistical and qualitative data reinforce this conclusion. For example, statistical analysis of the Correa regime's distribution of the BDH suggests that it distributed resources through this program using political criteria. During his 2006 campaign for the presidency, Correa promised to double the size of the BDH cash transfer. Subsequent to Correa's election victory, his government doubled the size of the BDH benefit from \$15 to \$30 dollars and expanded the program at an increasingly rapid rate relative to previous years' rates of increase (Winters 2010, 4). More importantly, statistical analysis of these increases reveals that cantons that voted for Correa in the first round of the 2006 presidential election received significantly greater increases than cantons that did not (Winters 2010, 8–9).

Qualitative data provides further support for the conclusion that the Correa regime manipulated the distribution of state resources in clientelistic fashion. In particular, the regime made receipt of essential resources, particularly among Indigenous communities,

contingent on compliance with its extractivist policies. Field research by Luis Tuaza reveals that recipients of the government's subsidies consider them as gifts that come from high, and consequently they feel obligated to show their gratitude and loyalty. For example, he quotes the president of an Indigenous community who exhorts his community members to support the government: "The government is concerned for us, we must be grateful" (Tuaza 2011, 146). In examining these exchanges, Tuaza observes that members of the Indigenous population gain access to state benefits by virtue of being poor, not their status as Ecuadoran citizens. As a result, members of the Indigenous population are reluctant to complain or question the government for fear of "remaining on the margins of presidential providence" (Tuaza 2011, 146).

Field research by Carmen Martínez Novo revealed similar patterns of clientelistic resource distribution. In recounting her experience attending a 2008 speech given by President Correa in an Indigenous community, she noted that people attending the president's speech told her that they had to attend or their communities would be fined. As one attendee shared, "The governor [Curicama] has said if we do not go, we will lose the bonus of poverty . . . and our water projects" (Martínez Novo 2014, 111). On the basis of her field research, Martínez Novo (2014, 121) concluded that "these resources [bonus for human development] are used to strengthen support for the government, and to divide, and co-opt, indigenous organizations. Indigenous people fear the withdrawal of these funds if they do not demonstrate faith in the government."

In-depth interviews I conducted in Quito in 2014 with leaders of political parties and Indigenous, human rights, environmental and labor organizations provide further evidence of the Correa regime's clientelistic distribution of state resources. All of the interviewees remarked on the conditional nature of the regime's resource distribution. For example, Jorge Herrera, president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Confederación de Nacionalidades de Ecuador, CONAIE) observed that the Correa government "gives work to people, gives them food so that they go to the *Sabatinas* [Correa's four-hour-long radio and television show] every Saturday. It gives out *bonos* [*bonos de desarrollo humano*] and pays people to gain their support during election campaigns."³

Santiago Utitaj, national director of Pachakutik's school for political formation and leadership, further illustrated this pattern. He noted that the Correa regime presented access to social welfare resources as conditional on their acceptance of plans to exploit oil reserves in Indigenous territory:

For example, the government says it is going to construct a Millennium School in the Amazon; Correa tells the Indigenous population that lives there that this construction is in exchange for extracting petroleum. If you allow us to extract petroleum, we will be able to build more houses in the Amazon. This is a discourse where you are unable to enjoy what the government gives you; you do not think it is your right as an Ecuadoran; it is conditional.⁴

Additionally, Utitaj noted how the Correa regime distributed resources in a manner designed to divide the Indigenous community:

We have our own code of conduct as an Indigenous organization. The members that betray our organization are censured or expelled. This government welcomes all

³ Jorge Herrera, president of the Confederación de Nacionalidades de Ecuador, CONAIE, interview with author, July 29, 2014, Quito, Ecuador.

⁴ Santiago Utitaj, national director of Pachakutik's school for political formation and leadership, interview with author, August 5, 2014, Quito, Ecuador.

those expelled in order to create an internal counterweight to our influence. And to these groups they give infrastructure projects, highways and in the *Sabatina* they promote them by name, they say they are intelligent managers, in contrast to those that are stupid. They have insulted us, called us *indios rocas* [stone Indians], nobodies, *caras de tocones* [stump faces], and many other insults.

Eduardo Pichilingue, director of the Center for Economic and Social Rights (Centro de Derechos Económicos y Sociales, CDES), an organization that promotes Indigenous rights and environmental justice, provides similar examples of the Correa regime's efforts to use resource distribution as a means of dividing the Indigenous community. He emphasizes how this strategy enabled Correa to pursue extractivism on Indigenous land:

Lamentably, the president, with all of the power he has—and he knows it—and with all of his arrogance, has said very openly: “Fine, there are communities that are opposing the Water Law . . . well, give me a list of communities that do not wish to have water . . . that do not wish to have schools, hospitals. Because if they are opposing mineral extraction they are not going to have hospitals or schools . . .” All of these resources, these basic services, the state uses as mechanisms of coercion. They say to the people: “If you support me, I support you . . . if you do not support me, you have nothing.” From there originates the fracturing and division of the bases of organization and it is because of this that the Indigenous organization does not mobilize; it cannot, it has no strength.

I worked with the Huaorani in Yasuní. The managers of public enterprises, of state petroleum, would grab the Indigenous leaders and say, “Look, you have \$20,000, sign the document that supports my petroleum project. Of the eight Indigenous leaders that I know that received offers, seven said yes, and one said no. The government engages in the same kind of behavior with each state project, at all levels and throughout the country, not just in the Amazon, not only in the south of the country. The people do not react to this because they do not understand that these are their rights!”⁵

To the extent that the Correa regime engaged in the clientelistic distribution of state resources as described above, its behavior would certainly not be unique or distinct from historical practice in Ecuador. However, such behavior on the Correa regime's part belies its vow to empower the poor and marginalized, to provide universal access to social welfare resources, and to strengthen participatory democracy and citizenship. If the impoverished feel that their receipt of government support is contingent on allowing the extraction of resources from their land, or at the very least, on not complaining or criticizing the government, they have not been empowered as citizens.

Control over civil society organizations (CSOs)

Despite the Correa regime's avowed commitment to promoting popular democracy, and the 2008 Constitution's creation of institutional arrangements for this purpose, in practice the regime manipulated these institutions in order to control civil society from above. This top-down control was evident in a number of ways. First, the executive branch influenced the election of members of the Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social (CPCCS, Council for Civil Participation and Social Accountability) to its advantage. The strategic importance of the CPCCS with regard to controlling civil society is evident in

⁵ Eduardo Pichilingue, CDES, interview with author, July 30, 2014, Quito, Ecuador.

its institutional responsibilities: to select the directors of the comptroller agencies, to promote civil participation, and to coordinate the regulation of social accountability. Of the seven elected members of this council, four were from the government's party, AP, while two were from the *Movimiento Democrático Popular* (Popular Democratic Movement), at the time, a staunch government ally; only one member was from an opposition group (Ortiz Lemos 2015, 34).

Once in operation, the CPCCS elected the same members to lead the comptroller agencies as those previously chosen by the government. Critics denounced this decision and the government's interference in the election process. Particularly controversial was the election of President Correa's cousin as the new state attorney (Ortiz Lemos 2015, 35). Furthermore, while the legislative branch organized discussions and solicited input regarding the drafting of the Citizen Participation Law (*Ley Orgánica de Participación Ciudadana*), it excluded civil society organizations not aligned with the government, as well as Indigenous leaders; the core groups invited were already part of AP's base of support (Ortiz Lemos 2015). Professor Mario Melo, director of the Center for Human Rights at the Catholic University of Ecuador, observed that "a great majority of the country considers that the process of selecting the members of the Council of Citizens' Participation is politicized and that the members that the government wants are always going to be elected. In fact, the current magistrates are sympathetic to the government."⁶

While the Citizen Participation Law did establish some institutional means for promoting the participation of civil society, these structures were severely constrained by being subject to the control of state institutions. The government's Equality Councils (*Consejos de la Igualdad*) serve as a prime example. The predecessors to these councils, established by the 1998 Constitution, enjoyed significant autonomy from the State and served as important spaces of social movement action and influence. In contrast, the new councils were subject to "absolute control of the government" (Ortiz Lemos 2015). As Belén Cevallos, project coordinator for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, explained, "by imposing academic requirements to participate in these councils, the government delegitimized the idea that a campesino could participate. Later the Council of Participation transformed itself into a form of political spoils with the power to elect some judicial authorities. Thus the government begins to control these councils—they are controlled by the government, which appoints people tied to and in sympathy with it."⁷

In order to reinforce its efforts to undercut the influence of a traditional civil society organizations and NGOs, the Correa regime employed its control over state bureaucracy to stymie their work. This was particularly evident in its handling of organizations that challenged its extractivist policies. The regime's treatment of *Acción Ecológica*, one of Ecuador's oldest environmental NGOs, illustrates this point. Cecilia Chérrez, director of communications for *Acción Ecológica*, related that "the government shut us down in 2009 with an administrative argument. They said that we were not registered with the Environment Ministry. But when we were established [in 1986], the Environment Ministry did not exist. Therefore, we had to register with another public institution. We were in legal limbo for months—we could not work fully, we were unable to pay our vendors or distribute funds. Our account was closed." Ms. Chérrez observed that the government's attacks against the organization and others like it had a chilling effect on the public's willingness to participate and to protest government policy. "People fear that the government is watching those who protest and fear losing their benefits, their

⁶ Mario Melo, director, Centro de Derechos Humanos, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, interview with author, July 26, 2014, Quito, Ecuador.

⁷ Belén Cevallos, project coordinator for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, interview with author, August 12, 2014, Quito, Ecuador.

bono, so they avoid protesting. There are people who in the past participated in protest with us who have said, ‘forgive us, but we are not able to protest because we are afraid.’”⁸

Concerns regarding government surveillance appear to have been well founded. Santiago Utitaj of Pachakutik noted that “the government searched my house, I have received suspicious phone calls to my unlisted number—they ask ‘Where are you going? Where are you traveling?’ The government follows us [party and social organization leaders] when we meet. So we disassemble our phones by removing the batteries and chips to prevent them from listening in.”⁹ Eduardo Pichilingue, director of CDES, describes a similar experience:

The government’s system of intelligence has ... become incredibly high tech ... surely they are listening to us at this very moment. In many meetings of civil society NGOs it has become a ritual that everyone who enters the meeting has to put his telephone in a tray and this tray is put in a refrigerator. Because the refrigerator is the only place where their signal cannot penetrate and they cannot listen. Friends who work inside the government’s security organizations told me: “If you think your cell phones are bugged, you can be sure that they have been bugged. If you think your land lines have been tapped ... your email accounts, your social media networks—Facebook, Twitter ... We have control over all of this.” People who work inside the government, who work in this kind of surveillance have told us this ... and they know it perfectly.¹⁰

News reports substantiate these claims regarding the Correa regime’s secret surveillance of groups and individuals that opposed its policies. John Vidal of the *Guardian* reported in 2014 that the news publication received nearly two hundred pages of secret internal documents collected between 2010 and 2013 that appear to be from Ecuador’s spy agency, the Secretaría Nacional de Inteligencia (SENAIN). Included among these documents were “emails, photographs taken at rallies and public meetings, aerial photos of demonstrations and the suspected political and financial links between different groups and individuals ... also attempts to trace the foreign sources of finance for NGOs and indigenous organizations” (Vidal 2014). The Moreno government’s willingness to allow a *New York Times* video crew to interview the country’s intelligence chief, Col. Jorge Costa, at the SENAIN’s intelligence bunker outside Quito led to the inadvertent revelation of the government’s secret surveillance apparatus, technology that Ecuador had imported from China. As the *Times* reporter Jonah Kessel recounted, “Feeds from the ECU-911 cameras—which they claimed not to have access to—were clearly streaming right in front of us on some of the TVs. And there was no way to deny it anymore. The discovery allowed us to make a connection between the activists’ claims and the agency, and to conclude that the public wasn’t being told the entire story of how the public security cameras were being used” (Kessel 2019).

Along with secret surveillance, the Correa regime engaged in more overt forms of intimidation and control of civil society organizations. These included criminal prosecution of activists from organizations that protested the government’s extractivist policies, prominent among which were Indigenous organizations such as CONAIE, and Correa’s vilification of such organizations during his weekly *Sabatina* (Conaghan 2017, 516). The experience of the Programa Andina de Derechos Humanos at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar illustrates Correa’s use of this strategy. Gardenia Chávez, coordinator of this

⁸ Cecilia Chérrez, director of communications for Acción Ecológica, interview with author, August 6, 2014, Quito, Ecuador.

⁹ Santiago Utitaj, interview.

¹⁰ Eduardo Pichilingue, interview.

human rights program, noted that after the program published reports critical of the government's human rights record, Correa attacked the program during the *Sabatinas*:

His most subtle attack was to accuse us of academic fraud. In response to our citing of a news release by CONAIE that claimed that the government was criminalizing protest . . . he tried to disqualify our human rights reports . . . He said that we should not cite the CONAIE because it is a political actor, that we should not cite the media because it is corrupt . . . in a following *Sabatina*, he said our work was dishonest [*mentirosos*] . . . that the report of the forced removal of an Indigenous population to build a mega hydroelectric dam in which a pregnant woman was beaten and lost her child was false—that this event did not happen. The day that the government was saying this on national television, the university held a news conference to respond to its accusations. And by luck, the leaders of the community that the government had attacked over the dam project were attending another event at the University. When they saw what the government was saying, they came to the press conference to give their testimony—that this, in fact, did occur.¹¹

In addition to the means described above, the Correa regime intensified its efforts to subvert the influence of civil society organizations through the enactment of Decrees 812, 16, and 739. Enacted first, in 2011, Decree 812 increased legal controls over foreign NGOs. Specifically, it required foreign NGOs to obtain government approval for all projects, required these projects to align with the government's national development plan, and prohibited NGO personnel and family members from engaging in “political” advocacy. The government also barred foreign NGOs from channeling funds from bilateral or multilateral institutions, which reduced the supply of funds for organizations and allowed the government to monopolize such assistance (Conaghan 2017, 515).

Decree 16, issued by executive order on June 4, 2013, expanded the rules that govern the registration of civil society organizations under the Unified System of Information on Social Organizations (SUIOS, Sistema Unificado de Información de las Organizaciones Sociales). The official rationale for the expansion of the SUIOS under Decree 16 was to promote citizen participation by strengthening the government's ability to identify and collaborate with groups on projects of mutual interest. However, the SUIOS contain provisions that go well beyond monitoring the behavior of civil society organizations. Indeed, the process of registering civil society organizations established by Decree 16 empowered the government to withhold legal recognition of organizations at the outset of the application process or to dissolve them if it finds that they have engaged in behavior or activities that it finds objectionable (Conaghan 2015, 17).

SUIOS applications require organizations to provide an extensive range of information, including data on founders and current leaders, financial assets, projects and targeted beneficiaries, and internal governance structures, which must meet fifteen criteria stipulated by article 17.3 of the decree. Additionally, Article 26 of Decree 16 specified nine infractions that allowed the government to dissolve CSOs. These include, most importantly, any group activity that deviates from an organization's specified objectives and “pursuing partisan activity which is reserved for parties or interfering in public policies in a way that contravenes internal or external security of the state or disturbs the public peace” (Conaghan 2015, 18). In short, Decree 16 required civil society organizations to register with and provide the government with extensive information on their operations, and prohibited them from engaging in activities related to public policy (Appel 2014, 68; Conaghan 2015, 18). Moreover, it gave the government the authority to shut down any

¹¹ Gardenia Chávez, coordinator of the Programa Andina de Derechos Humanos at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, interview with author, Quito, August 7, 2014.

organization which “moves away from the objectives for which it was created” or “compromises public peace” (Wilkinson 2015). From the perspective of Ecuadoran CSOs, these restrictions were highly problematic. As the president of Ecuador’s Confederation of Civil Society Organizations noted, “Citizens are guaranteed the right to participate in public policy formation. How can you prohibit this and dissolve an organization for an activity which is constitutionally guaranteed?” (Appe 2014, 68).

This rhetorical question reflects the NGO community’s frustration and alarm over the Correa government’s swift exertion of the powers it assumed through Decree 16. Examination of the Correa government’s handling of the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini block of the Yasuní National Park (Yasuní ITT) demonstrates the validity of these concerns. Yasuní ITT, and the park as a whole, is one of the most biodiverse places on the planet. It is also home to a number of uncontacted Indigenous groups, including the Tagaeri and Taromenane. When President Correa assumed office in 2007, he announced that Ecuador would permanently ban oil extraction in the ITT, but only if the international community helped compensate it for the loss of oil revenues foregoing extraction would entail by providing half the amount of potential revenues, a donation of approximately \$3.6 billion. The government’s effort to collect its target amount of donations failed miserably. In August 2013, it announced that it would open the ITT block for exploitation. In response to this decision, Fundación Pachamama, then the most prominent environmental and Indigenous rights organization in the country, joined forces with other Ecuadoran environmentalists to form Yasunidos, a group intent on preventing oil drilling in the Yasuní ITT by putting the Correa government’s decision to a national referendum.

The government responded, in turn, with decisive action to thwart opposition to its intention to drill in Yasuní ITT. On December 4, 2013, in response to Fundación Pachamama’s involvement in protest activity against drilling in the Yasuní, the government used its authority under Decree 16 to dissolve the foundation, giving it no advance warning and no opportunity to challenge the decision (Wilkinson 2015). As explained by Professor Melo, a staff member at Fundación Pachamama before its closure,

We argued that the closure was arbitrary, based on false accusations that were never proved. Above all the government did not give us due process. They never notified us that there had been a denunciation. One day the authorities removed the staff from the office and posted signs indicating that we were closed. Then the secret police attempted to kidnap a US student who had volunteered for Pachamama. His friends surrounded the car and would not let them take him. This teenager had his papers in order; he had a visa, which authorized him as a volunteer for the foundation. But the next day, the authorities revoked his visa and expelled him from the country with an act of force, of stigmatization.¹²

Subsequent to the Correa government’s closure of Fundación Pachamama, in May 2014, the National Electoral Council (CNE, Consejo Nacional Electoral) rejected the Yasunidos referendum petition, despite the fact that the group had collected 750,000 signatures, 25 percent more than the legal minimum necessary to authorize a petition. The CNE ruled that more than half of the signatures were invalid, for reasons that ranged from alleged duplicates to signatures being written on the wrong paper stock, in blue rather than black ink, or with identity numbers that had been found to fall outside the boxes provided (Wilkinson 2015; Vidal 2014). Thus, the Correa regime undercut the popular democracy it avowedly supported through its deployment of Decree 16, which allowed it to restrict severely the capacity of civil society organizations to challenge its policy decisions.

¹² Mario Melo, interview.

Table 1. Buen vivir vs. rentier populism.

	Buen vivir	Rentier populism/Neextractivism
Participation	Bottom-up (civil society), autonomous, inclusive, pluralistic	Top-down organization and mobilization of informal sector; exclusion/repression of other groups, e.g., labor, youth, Indigenous, environmental
State/society relations	Pressure from civil society groups shapes state policy and action	State manipulates civil society to legitimize predetermined ends
Resource distribution	Universalism; social rights	Politically targeted distribution, contingent on likely or demonstrated regime support
Political regime	Participatory democracy: state power checked by mobilized, autonomous civil society	Power concentrated in executive's hands; mass mobilization to support populist leader; loss of rents exacerbates authoritarian tendencies
Economic development	Rents used to reduce inequality, increase diversification, reduce reliance on unsustainable extraction	Increased extraction to increase rents to facilitate continued/expanded support of informal sector

Additionally, its control over the CNE enabled it to thwart popular efforts to challenge state policy through referenda.

The Correa regime confronted considerable pushback against Decree 16. International organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International expressed concerns over Decree 16's harmful effects on civil liberties, and Ecuadoran CSOs launched demonstrations in 2014 and 2015, one of the principal demands of which was overturning the decree. In anticipation of mass demonstrations planned for mid-August 2015, the Correa government adopted Decree 739, which it framed as a simplification of the rules regulating CSOs. While Decree 739 did scale back the extensive reporting requirements mandated by Decree 16, it nonetheless preserved the ban on "partisan activity" as well as the authority of the government to dissolve organizations that deviated from the missions and objectives enunciated in their organizational statutes. Thus, like Decree 16, Decree 739 restricts fundamental civil liberties of speech and association by prohibiting the right of CSOs to be involved in politics (Conaghan 2017, 520). The potency of this prohibition became apparent a year after the Correa regime's enactment of Decree 739, when in August 2016 it dissolved the National Union of Teachers (UNE, Unión Nacional de Educadores), the largest teachers' union in the country, which had been in existence since 1950 (International Labour Office 2017).

The Correa regime's dissolution of the UNE was not an isolated incident. Instead, this action epitomized the regime's overarching effort to control civil society in top-down, populist fashion. Rather than empower, it fragmented civil society, intimidating, surveilling, and in the most extreme cases, dissolving civil society organizations. It distributed social welfare resources in clientelistic fashion, subverting social solidarity and social rights and fragmenting Indigenous communities in the process. Finally, rather than function as an agent to mobilize and empower civil society organizations, the AP served as Correa's personalist electoral vehicle. In summary, rather than promote participatory democracy as conceptualized in Buen Vivir, the Correa regime pursued populist control of Ecuadoran society. Table 1 summarizes these contradictions.

Conclusion

Inductive analysis of the Correa regime reinforces the conclusion that populism and participatory democracy are antagonistic and irreconcilable political projects. Rather than

empower the powerless and nurture a participatory form of democracy and enhanced citizenship, the Correa regime sought, in typical populist fashion, to concentrate power in its hands and control civil society from the top down. It did so through personalist party linkage, control of civil society organizations, and the clientelistic and politically targeted distribution of social welfare resources. Personalist party linkage allowed Correa to control Alianza País as a vehicle for his own political ambitions rather than enabling organizations in civil society to use the party to channel their concerns and demands to the government. The Correa regime controlled civil society organizations through a combination of bureaucratic manipulation and constraint, surveillance, intimidation, repression, and clientelism. It was able to engage in clientelism and the politically targeted distribution of social welfare resources through its centralized control over state resources, made possible through its neoextractivist development model. Neoextractivism and clientelism were mutually reinforcing—clientelism enabled the regime to co-opt Indigenous leaders in order to extract resources from their land, while such extraction provided the resources necessary to engage in clientelism.

This political economic logic—the marriage of rentier populism and neoextractivism—betrays the spirit and intent of Buen Vivir as a participatory form of democracy. In the final analysis, while the ideals of Buen Vivir hold strong appeal for those committed to participatory democracy and social justice, the Correa regime did not offer a model of enhanced political citizenship or popular democracy and empowerment of the disadvantaged in civil society. Instead, this research demonstrates the fundamental antagonism between the political economic model that the Correa regime pursued to maintain its top-down, populist control and modes of development that encourage bottom-up democratic participation, increased autonomy, and empowerment of civil society.

The broader conceptual implications of these findings indicate the need to distinguish clearly between populism and an expanded notion of citizenship rooted in participatory democracy, and to better understand how the concentration of top-down executive power characteristic of the former impedes the egalitarian and solidaristic mission of the latter. In other words, when evaluating so-called socialist or radical leftist regimes, we must distinguish clearly between rhetoric and practice. As this analysis demonstrates, effective means for realizing this important analytical objective include examining three regime features. First, is the prevailing mode of party-society linkage participatory or personalistic? Second, are the structure and function of institutions ostensibly intended to facilitate popular participation controlled from above or below? And third, is the social welfare regime based on universal rights and access, or on clientelism and the political targeting of resources? Employing this analytical approach should help us determine the true nature of self-avowed leftist regimes across Latin America and elsewhere. It should enable scholars and policy makers to identify those policies and practices that are supportive of—or inimical to—citizenship grounded in participatory democracy and the genuine deconcentration of economic and political power in favor of the disadvantaged and marginalized.

Acknowledgements. I extend my gratitude to the three anonymous reviewers, whose constructive comments helped me to strengthen the analysis. Any remaining errors or omissions are mine.

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