

# Between Dirigisme and Unfettered Free Markets

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## Inauspicious Attitude

This is perhaps the sharpest and most disappointing fall in the mercurial temper of parliamentary politics. No sooner were we able in these columns yesterday to greet the prospect of parliamentary politics returning on to an even keel with the opposition voluntarily filing into it and urge the ruling party to err on the gracious side than comes the reversal with opposition walk-out.

The ruling party seemingly asked for it, in view of the attitude reflected by and the outlandish and un-called for remarks contained in the speeches of Treasury Bench spokesmen Telecommunications Minister Mohd Nasim and LGRD Minister Zillur Rahman — in that order. All that BNP leader Prof Badruddoza Chowdhury demanded was the formation of a parliamentary committee comprising members from both sides to probe what they termed as specific instances of 'police excesses' committed on three BNP legislators during hartal hours on January 26. Aside from the allegations of beating there was a complaint made of 'arrogant behaviour' on the part of OC, Ramna Thana. The issue involved was extremely delicate and sensitive so far as the opposition MPs were concerned because they felt 'harassed and tortured by the employees of the state'. Only a low sense of self-esteem as elected public representatives could make one trivialise such a matter. There are certain procedures to be followed in entertaining or rejecting a proposal for constituting parliamentary committee to address extra-ordinary circumstances, but the sheer dismissive attitude shown by the ruling party evidently pre-disposed such a course of action.

We find Telecommunications Minister Mohd Nasim's speech as being not only wide off the mark but also irresponsibly indulgent to 'police arbitrariness' and even naively confessional. Since the AL leaders were exposed to 'police torture' during the BNP rule, by the same token the BNP leaders could not hope to feel immune to the same now — seemed to be his bottomline. He has gone so far as to suggest that 'the state employees would not have dared humiliate the politicians today if Begum Zia had punished the police officers concerned at that time'. Zillur Rahman was equally 'beating about the bush' and dismissive.

We feel the situation could have been much better handled. While the ruling party should avoid such a pitfall in the future, the opposition is urged to take guard against any overstretched walk-out.

## Saarc Economic Integration

Economic performance of South Asian countries, with the exception of Sri Lanka, has often been likened to a slow coach — getting there all right, but later than every body else. There are many reasons why South Asia as a region has lagged behind. The degree to which regional countries have restructured their economies and reformed their critical institutions remains fairly low. In recent years, there has been some impetus in tariff liberalisation and simplification of rules governing direct foreign investment. But crucially, South Asia has failed to generate momentum towards regional economic cooperation and integration. As a result, intra-region trade still accounts for around three per cent of the total trade volume of the member-states of Saarc.

The lack of progress towards economic integration remains one of the major impediments to economic growth in the region. Trade is clearly one of the major vehicles available to nations to effect economic growth. South Asian countries have traditionally looked to the industrialised economies as their export markets as well as source of their imports. In addition, mutual political mistrust has prevented South Asian countries from looking at one another as reliable trading partners. This has persisted even when evidence from Europe and East Asia has clearly demonstrated the importance of intra-region trade to growth of national economies.

The launching of the Saarc Preferential Trading Arrangement (Sapta) was supposed to usher in an era of accelerated intra-region trade, paving the way for a South Asia Free Trade Area (Safta) by the year 2000. This hope now looks forlorn, as the Sapta process itself has stalled and become difficult to reinvigorate since the dramatic increase in political tension between India and Pakistan in May last year. But, as commerce secretaries from the seven Saarc nations currently meeting in Dhaka have already recognised, the need to accelerate integration is greater now than ever before. There is no greater stimulus to national growth than intra-region trade, and there is no greater guarantor of regional stability and peace than inter-dependence through economic integration.

## Baseless Accusations

When the going gets tough people may look for excuses. The Chief Minister of neighbouring state of Tripura in India in an interview with the BBC Saturday reportedly claimed definite knowledge of 'at least 25 training camps' for outlawed organisations inside Bangladesh territory. The Chief Minister also sounded specific about these 'camps' being located in four of our districts adjoining the Tripura state. He has also claimed that these information were gathered by detectives from the insurgents who had surrendered and the hostages released by 'terrorists', a list of which was being drawn up to be sent to Bangladesh government through New Delhi.

This sort of irresponsible remarks are nothing new. In fact, whenever an insurgent is caught or the activities of outlawed organisations increase in the state similar statements accusing the neighbour are issued in an apparent attempt to divert public attention from problems in the state. There is hardly any reason to make Bangladesh a scapegoat when relations between India and Bangladesh are warm and friendly. Our government have always stood by its commitment of not allowing its territory to be used by insurgents or outlawed organisations of any country. And it is standing by its pledges as best as it can. The Home Minister, in an interview with BBC, has categorically denied existence of these training camps on Bangladesh territory. He has also said that so far no official communication has been received from the Indian central government to this effect. The foreign office has also denied existence of such camps in Bangladesh. We want an end to this uncorroborated misinformation campaign.

In the write-up published on 24 January 1999 in this column, I argued that for moving the Bangladesh economy, which is embarked on free market reforms and globalization, a la 'Washington Consensus' forward for the benefit of all the citizens of the country, a true working partnership between the government and the private sector needs to be established. How can a partnership between these two institutions be built so that it serves the national interests — sustained growth, poverty alleviation, social cohesion, political stability, ecological protection and renewal?

In the age of planning and government controls, the government called the shots and the private sector adjusted to the contrived regime. Even in the days of free trade prior to the First World War, the colonial governments were in the driving seat and even the multinationals originating in those countries worked in close cooperation with the respective home governments in conducting their businesses overseas, largely in the respective colonies, enriching themselves and their home countries. The free market economy of the late 20th century is of a different genre. In this case, although the multinationals and transnationals generally have their feet solidly fixed to the home economies, the home governments do not have a great deal of influence on their design and workings. They are driven primarily by their own missions shaped by their overriding goal of making profits and enhancing their share and influence globally in their respective spheres of operation.

However, they often enlist the help of their home country governments, which is true particularly of the USA-based corporations, to secure contracts around the world, particularly in the developing countries. It is not infrequent that the home governments exert influence, on behalf of the corporations, on the governments of their 'client' (i.e. aid receiving) countries.

The nation-states in the present globalization paradigm, even those of the West, do not have a great deal of control over the current proceedings of the process and the shaping of its future. In fact, it is the governments of the western countries which have released the forces of globalization, with Thatcherism in the UK and Reaganism in the USA playing lead roles in the 1980s. It is interesting to note that the denouement thus created in the world order has reduced the in-

fluence of the governments over the future dimensions and course of the process to a large extent.

The trends set are certainly irreversible, having affected all aspects of economic, political and social life across the world. Social and political tensions are visible in western countries as a result of the free market engineering, and these countries are actively looking for social democratic renewal and ways and means of building social perspectives appropriately into the economic process. A number of developing countries, Mexico in 1994 and more recently East and South Asian countries have found their reforms come unstuck and faced serious economic and financial turmoil.

The poor countries have in general been forced, through the threat of assistance cut-off, to adopt free market reforms and globalization, as prescribed. In fact, the changes wrought in the functions and functioning of the global systems are so fundamental that there is perhaps no choice for any country in the present unipolar world to avoid its impact and refrain from joining it. Indeed, the globalization is multifaceted. It has to do with world-wide spread of high technologies of unprecedented sophistication and consequences in different fields of human endeavour such as production, distribution, communication, and movement of funds. For example, it requires just the pressing of a computer button to effect an instantaneous transfer of billions of dollars from one corner of the world to another, with huge impact on parties affected one way or another. Production is being relocated, based on opportunities for cost reductions. The industrial age in the western countries is being overtaken by the knowledge age, with knowledge workers replacing industrial workers on a wide-scale.

The consequence is that employment is now often on part-time, consultancy and individual basis, rather than by way of long-term employment of many in particular industries or companies. Even in countries where industrialisation is at low levels, the impact of globalization is, through its various ramifications, bringing about sea-changes in national economic management and external economic relations. The

communications revolution (global cable TV networks, internet) and interest-based (e.g. environmental protection and labour, etc.) global coalitions are bringing even the poorest countries of the world into the fold of global networks. Under such a circumstance, the question that needs to be raised is what role the governments of a country like Bangladesh can play in shaping the country's future course of development in economic, social and cultural fields. The capitalist sector in this country is not only small but is in fact oriented more to finance capitalism and making of quick profits through trade and by serving as local agents of multinationals and transnationals. Given that the functioning of both the government

forms and development. It can deal creatively and purposefully with the key proponents of globalization, namely, the World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other international agencies and bilateral donors pushing for further free market reforms to be carried out by a country, when the logic and the strength behind the proposals and arguments it puts forward are shaped by people's needs and perspectives articulated through appropriate social institutions.

The free markets engender and accentuate economic and social inequality and exclusion, because they are the hunting grounds of the rich and the powerful. The poor and the marginalized have little or no access to them, because they are neither able (in terms of skills,

tuential help societies, voluntary groups focusing on common interests, community interactions, and social customs, conventions and understandings, etc., are also limited to the educated, elite minority. And local government institutions which, when properly constituted and mandated, can play an important role in social mobilisation at the grassroots throughout the country; are also yet to be properly developed in this country. Under the circumstances, the needs and aspirations of the excluded majority in particular cannot find proper articulation and expression. The on-going free market reforms in Bangladesh therefore contain potential forces of political and social disruptions and chaos, unless people-centred democratic checks can be instituted to moderate those tendencies.

But, democracy and unfettered free markets are in fact antagonistic to each other. The free markets, being based on individualism and meritocracy, have no use for customs and traditions and social institutions. The individual remains supreme. But democracy is a process of social intermingling and consensus building, the basic means of which are social institutions and political processes. In order to keep the markets from accentuating socio-economic exclusion, cultural degeneration and political chaos, democracy thus has a crucial role to play.

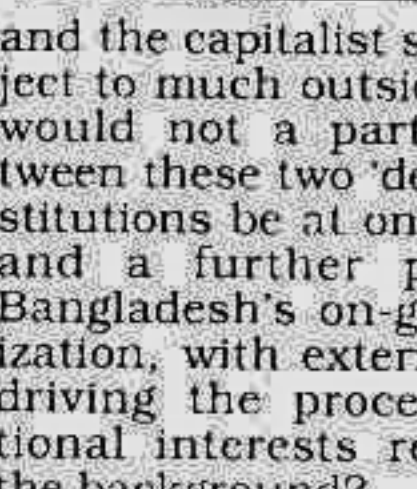
The idea is to bring the two antagonistic forces into a working partnership, which is socially desirable and economically rewarding for all. People at large are necessarily the ultimate arbiters of the contours and thrusts of this alliance. Thus, people's choices and perspectives articulated through social institutions need to be, through democratic political practices, brought to bear on the way the markets function, while the markets exploit the national and international business dynamics freely within those broad social parameters. That is, the individual initiative is allowed to flourish as moderated by social influences and the economic markets incorporate desirable social imperatives. The pathway generated as a result is one that is socially acceptable market economy, or what may be termed as social market type. How might one pursue this

goal of social market-based development pathway in Bangladesh, which is obviously a difficult to achieve? To that end, education, particularly basic education, needs to be spread as fast as possible to enable the people in a basic sense to begin to move out of 'exclusion' and mainstream themselves, but, at the same time, it is crucially important that local government institutions are properly established for the ordinary people to find an institutional framework for them to participate more actively in the decision-making processes. With education spreading, ordinary people may be expected to participate more actively in the governance process through local government institutions and eventually in wider national contexts through various social institutions and political processes. This process of social and political renewal may also unleash forces to counteract the widespread corruption and antisocial activities in public and private sectors and promote morality and ethical integrity in both.

The government may proactively assist the strengthening of social institutions for a better articulation of people's needs and aspirations, and positively respond to their points of view and proposals. At the same time, the realities facing the country (large-scale poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment; resource endowment, its limitations and potentials centring around land, water and people; technological and skill limitations; resource constrained small and marginal farming, etc.) should be properly assessed and imperatives arising therefrom built into the reform process to work out a modified reform agenda suited to the situational context and needs of Bangladesh. This may then be put to the people for debate and consensus formation. The social imperatives and reform requirements, thus evolved, would provide the basic guidelines for the government to foster partnership linkages with the private sector (domestic and foreign).

It should be in the interest of the private sector to take those social and political dynamics into its stride and build the partnership that will allow its functioning, as sanctioned by a consensual social contact providing the basis for general acceptability and systemic stability, within a broad social market economy and globalization framework, as opposed to unfettered free markets and untamed globalization, entailing undesirable and disruptive social and political consequences.

## Lest We Forget ...



by Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad

and the capitalist sector is subject to much outside influence, would not a partnership between these two 'dependent' institutions be at once a product and a further promoter of Bangladesh's on-going globalization, with external interests driving the process and national interests remaining in the background?

The ability of the nation-states, particularly in the developing world, to manoeuvre the workings of the private sector in the globalized setting is rather limited, given that the reform agenda pursued by a government is externally dictated and has not been sanctioned by the country's polity autonomously through a process of debates and consensus-building. This clearly is an anachronism in a democratic set-up. In a democracy, the political agenda, to have broad-based support within the polity, must reflect economic, social and cultural perceptions, desires and goals of the people, articulated by the people themselves through appropriate social institutions.

In fact, it is not only through a political agenda thus generated can the government act with authority in the shaping of policies and programmes of re-

access to resources and institutions) nor informed to do so. Now, if the baseline is characterised by high inequalities and an overwhelmingly large exclusion ratio, then the free market reforms instead of promoting progress for all will further widen the exclusion and may generate social disruptions and political upheavals of serious proportions.

The Bangladesh society is characterised by the pre-dominance of economic, political, social and cultural exclusion. Half the people are poor on the basis of lack of access to the minimum required calorie intake. The number poor goes up by millions more if other basic needs including a measure of freedom of choice are taken into consideration. The majority of the population is illiterate; un- and under-employment is widespread; the large majority of those employed in most sectors, particularly in agriculture, small enterprises and informal sectors suffer from low productivity, and the decision-making processes (national and local) bypass the overwhelming majority.

In this setting, social institutions such as professional associations, trade unions, mu-

# 'Guaranteeing' Secularism: Religion is no Answer

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

*Modern tolerance derives from secular, universal values of citizenship. It completely opposes those who want to base politics on religion. That is the project shared by the pre-partition Muslim League with its two-nation theory, and today's Hindutva.*

THE ghastly killing of Graham Stewart Staines by Bajrang Dal activists is the logical culmination of Hindutva's campaign of anti-minority hatred. It just won't do to condemn the incident without relating it causally to the sangh parivar's anti-Christian witchhunt. The barbaric method used to kill the missionary bears testimony to the basic passions that the parivar is stoking. These passions are reinforced by the legitimacy that the BJP's top leaders have bestowed upon Hindutva fanatics. None other than Mr A.B. Vajpayee did this when he called for a 'national debate' on conversions. This conceded that the Dangs attacks were 'provoked' by 'forced' conversions.

Mr L.K. Advani added his own vitriol to this by declaring that 70 per cent of all foreign contributions to charities go to Church groups. This was based on half-truths, numbers pertaining to a single quarter, which are unrepresentative. The charge of 'forced conversion' involves arrogant paternalism, coming as it does not from those who have converted, but from their self-appointed guardians. Unless those who were 'forced' feel aggrieved, and say so, society must treat conversion as a deeply personal matter. The objection to this comes from upper-caste

Hindus who 'know better' and want to 'rescue' 'poor', ignorant tribals from the missionary. Mr Vajpayee obviously sympathises with the paternalists. However, he should know that the Constitution has a 'basic structure' that includes the freedom to practise and propagate religion. The 'basic structure' is not open to amendment. Mr Vajpayee must have also known that the political impact of his endorsement of the anti-conversion agenda would be to fan the flames of anti-minority hatred.

The fact that those flames consumed Staines is purely incidental. They could have equally devoured a non-Christian, say, in Gujarat, sooner or later. Things may have been different had the BJP not repeatedly appeased the perpetrators of violence. Appeasement has a cruel logic. You cede a little to the bully and he'll come back for more. You give in on shilanyas in 1989, and he'll demolish the Babri mosque in 1992. You condone

those who vandalise Husain's paintings, and they will soon want to ban 'Fire' or burn Ambedkar's 'Riddles of Hinduism'.... You stoke jingoism and machismo through 'Pohkharan-i' and you'll have an explosion of bigotry, neighbour-baiting and night-is-right tub-thumping. Many of our parties, including the BJP's own friends, understand this logic. Even the Telugu Desam says the BJP has lost moral authority. But our biggest party is turning a blind eye to it. Instead of confronting Hindutva, the Congress is busy discovering secular virtues in Hinduism and trying to win upper-caste support.

No other interpretation of its Working Committee's January 16 resolution declaring Hinduism as 'the most effective guarantor of secularism' is permissible. This is further underscored by Ms Sonia Gandhi's recent speeches in Delhi and Pune. After Tirupati, Ms Gandhi plans to visit Hardwar and Belur. Even as she attacks 'the merchants of poison and hatred', she quotes liberally

from Hindu scriptures. There is nothing wrong with holding such views, or claiming that tolerance lies at the 'authentic' core, if not lived in reality, of a particular religion. What causes problems — and there are big — is the proposition that 'tolerant' Hinduism is secularism's 'guarantor'. Similar claims about 'core' tolerance can be made in respect of most religions.

But it can also be plausibly claimed that all religions have elements of intolerance. What is special about Hinduism is not tolerance, but polytheism, multiple sects and plural forms of worship. Once the Congress says Hinduism is uniquely tolerant, with what conviction can it oppose 'Hindu rashtra'? It is even abandoning the dilute sarva dharma samabhava version of secularism. Secondly, is Hinduism really all that tolerant?

The claim is unconvincing because today's Hinduism is inseparable from casteism and belief in social hierarchy. Indeed, the claim appears

grotesque at the end of a decade that saw the Babri demolition, much communal carnage, and injection of religious hatred into organs of the state and society. Third, it is illegitimate to equate tolerance with secularism. Secularism means the basic separation of religion from politics. Secularism is uncompromising on tolerance. Religions may be ambivalent. After all, faith usually demands unshelving adherence to some notion of the divine, of salvation of the Other. World. This could make for intolerance towards other faiths.

The pre-modern idea of tolerance is about co-existence with, or indifference towards, other religions. You tolerate them although you know they have not seen the Light. The modern conception of tolerance involves an active relationship; it has to do with respect, empathy and understanding for others. You are tolerant because you are secular — believe that religion and politics should not be

mixed so each retains its integrity. Modern tolerance derives from secular, universal values of citizenship. It completely opposes those who want to base politics on religion. That is the project shared by the pre-partition Muslim League with its two-nation theory and today's Hindutva. The Congress, if it wants to rescue itself after its long, disastrous flirtation with 'soft-Hindutva', must forcefully reject the communalist project.

The party has to go beyond verbal assertion. It must actively mobilise against the Hindutva onslaught and defend the minorities. And it must fight Hindutva's reactionary social function: maintaining hierarchies that guard the powerful. This means the Congress will have to identify with the under-privileged and social transformer. The party has not yet fallen for 'soft-Hindutva'. It is only flirting with a 'soft-Hindutva' line. If it proceeds further in that direction, it could become the BJP's B-team. To avoid this fate, the Congress must break with all shades of communalism and adopt an agenda of empowerment and social emancipation. That alone is secularism's 'guarantor'.

## To the Editor...

### Let us forget politicians and politics

Sir, Politicians of this country have forgotten us, the people. This statement, I believe, does not need any elaboration. In order to make our presence felt, I propose the following steps only for one week.

a) We shall not discuss anything related to politicians, political parties or politics in our drawing rooms, offices, restaurants or in corner lanes.

b) We shall not visit houses of any politicians, be him a national or union/ward leader. c) We shall wear (not necessarily a badge saying 'We do not discuss Politics & Politicians').

The newspapers can also support this. Please join this silent protest. This country belongs to the people and not to 'so-called politicians'.

Dr M Rafiqul Islam  
Dhaka

### The political scene

Sir, The Establishment is learning to get practical, instead of depending entirely on verbal power and propaganda. It has mentally oriented to the reality and evil power of hartals, and under public pressure, accepted the cat-and-mouse game by announcing that the government offices would be kept open on weekly holidays to compensate for the hartal days.

The question is for how long? 180 days? Why 180 days? No clarification is needed. How long the public will buy it? Nobody knows.

The regime has opened other fronts some risky. The madrasah education would remain or continue, it has been officially asserted. What if lakhs of madrasah students go on a movement? Can't lathi-charge students, the liberators in any country, nor tear-gas them incessantly. How to get the support of the Muslim world? That is a big question, regardless of the Taliban bogey. Cannot ignore this world, with 90 per cent Muslim population in the country.

The risk may be calculated, but who will benefit, and what percentage would be disgruntled? Whatever be the issue, only an overall majority will ensure stability. When the nation last tried any issue through Referendum? Will it work in this country and provide a true picture?

These questions are not irrelevant. Such situations might arise one day, so why not be mentally prepared? Those who ask questions are also patriotic, and are not traitors of anti-national!

A Zabr  
Dhaka

### Destructive politicians

Sir, In a couple of hours many of us, citizens of this nation, will cross 70. We had

all our days of pleasure and displeasure, exuberance and dismay, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, ethos and lack of it, hope and despair. In all these states of mind, there was always a string of ethos that lead us to the later stage of life with the continuous process of evolution in our private or personal life. Events like the Second World War, influx of Burmese refugees, Gandhi's non-violent movement to oust the British Raj, the Language Movement, 21 — later 6 — point demand for autonomy by the citizens of this part of the then Pakistan, crack down of Pak army lead us to the path of war of independence culminating in the establishment of the new nation — the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

We started with high hopes and aspirations, with immense will to sacrifice for building a new nation. The people believed and were ready to sacrifice the present so that the nation would become a happy and a prosperous one. We gave our politicians a free hand to write a constitution and the politicians faithfully produced the most commendable constitution to guide the nation to a process of establishing a democratic way of life. But what followed next was the path to destroy the constitution, leading to a bleak future.

Without recounting what has happened to this nation one can safely say that the people are frustrated, dismayed and counting their days in misery with no sign of light for the

coming days. The moral values and beliefs that were supposed to safeguard the people's right, now usurped and seriously affecting our sensibilities.

We are being humiliated by the destructive powers of the politicians.

Syed Waliullah  
Dhaka

### Commendable campaign

Sir, Over the last couple of weeks, the DS has published a series of reports highlighting the use of leaded fuel in our country and its adverse effects on humans. These reports have helped to increase public awareness for a problem we know is present, but have often disregarded.

I was even more disturbed to know that the country's lone oil refinery had been lying idle for a long period of time. Such a negligence on government's part in failing to tackle problems at hand despite resources being available is reproachable. One is lead to believe that the only reason measures were eventually taken to revive it by our government while paying heed to public concerns was the recent wave of reports. I thank the Daily Star for its commendable campaign to clean our city's air and taking a positive step towards public health.

Asif Zaman  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

## Art Buchwald's COLUMN

### Sharing the Pain

DEAR Miss Know-It-All: My mother says I have to thank people who send me Christmas cards. I think she has been eating too much fruitcake. Please advise that she is wrong. — Buffie Charists.

Dear Buffie: Unfortunately, your mother is right. You have to thank someone who sends you a card. The Christmas card is a sacred document, and good manners dictate it has to be acknowledged as part of our holiday festivities. Here is a sample thank-you letter:

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Minderman: Thank you for your wonderful season's greeting with the picture of Santa Claus and his reindeer. I can't tell you what it meant to open the envelope and discover that your family wished my family not only a wonderful Yuletide, but also a Happy New Year. Once again, it shows how generous the Minderman I have saved for years. You certainly know how to touch another person's heart. Etc., etc."

You don't have to reply to Christmas cards — but don't put it off for too long or the sender will start believing you are an ungrateful wretch.

Dear Miss Know-It-All: I work in the same office with a girl named Alice. Our boss gave me a plastic wallet and Alice a trip to Bermuda. Is there something wrong with this? — Sally Chaffe.

Dear Sally: I'm sure your boss knows what he's doing. If you would send me a photo of yourself and one of Alice I might be able to get to the bottom of the puzzle. Besides, Bermuda is rather cold this time of year.

Dear Miss Know-It-All: All my friends say there is no Santa Claus. What gives? — Virginia Thor.

Dear Virginia: The others I have saved for years. You certainly know how to touch another person's heart. Etc., etc. Merged, your friends are right.

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