The paradoxical image of democracy, votes, and elections in the selected African states

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ABSTRACT

Voting and elections are regarded as quintessential democratic and policy behaviours. The problem with elections is that they do not fully mean democracy. The rationale behind the latter is that regular, free and fair elections do not provide for individual freedoms, political equality, empowerment, an independent civil society, a free press, or scope for deliberation—key components of liberal democracy. Moreover, elections serve as a pivotal instrument designed to express and simultaneously reinforce the principles (representation, equality, and participation) on which democracy is founded. In democracy, communities exercise their voting rights to elect their representatives, who in turn hold the bureaucracy accountable for implementing decisions that affect the welfare of local communities. Looking at South Africa among African countries, the introduction of a democratic dispensation came with opportunities for the previously excluded citizens. Therefore, Section 195 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, emphasizes that ‘people’ needs must be responded to and the public must be encouraged to participate in policy making. The Paper seeks to give a comparison of democracy and elections in selected African countries. Often countries tend to practice elections and perceive democracy differently. This conceptual paper employed the use of a desktop study and has retrieved its basic contribution and argument from the existing literature on democracy and elections in Africa. Furthermore, the article discovered that in most cases citizens’ beliefs, preferences and behaviors change through political engagement, and further recommends that during voting campaigns and elections, a diversity of issues such as culture, beliefs, tradition, and individual preferences should be considered.

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Introduction

As highlighted in Lindberg (2006:9), the literature on elections and democratization in Africa is still relatively thin compared to that of southern Europe and Latin America. Yet, as has been pointed out elsewhere, Africa had its first wave of democratization in the late 1950s as countries engaged in struggles for national independence. But the history of elections in Africa started even before that. Salehyan and Linebarger (2014:2) emphasise that elections are by nature conflictual events, as rival parties compete for power. However, they have the potential to escalate from peaceful, even healthy, political debate to widespread violence and disorder. Such violence is an issue of concern in itself, but, in addition, it can jeopardize the democratic process and the trust in political institutions. Democracy, on the other hand, as emphasised by Abbink and Hesseling (2000:7) needs the consolidation of institutional, social and legal frameworks which make the process of open political communication independent of the persons who happen to be in power. It is important to note that through voting citizens have the opportunity to influence the government. Daniel (2019) emphasises that a free and fair voting process is the cornerstone of democracy, allowing ordinary citizens the opportunity to vote for change or uphold the status quo. Hence, elections are not new in Africa: since the late colonial period and especially after the Second World War many countries saw an extension of electoral processes (Abbink and Hesseling, 2000).

It is highlighted that the topic of elections and their observation or monitoring is one important element in the efforts to stimulate political liberalization and democratization in Africa (although the latter process also depends on, among other things, patterns of...
economic assistance and cooperation, the role of the military, and issues of ethno-regional pluralism) (Abbink and Hesseling, 2000). Lindberg (2006:2) highlights that elections in newly democratic countries do not signal the completion of the transition to democracy, but rather foster liberalization and have self-reinforcing power that promotes increased democracy in African political regimes. Additionally, Lindberg (2006:2) accentuates that elections also facilitate the institutionalization of and deepening of actual civil liberties in the society and are a causal variable in democratization. This is not to say that elections are the only important factor in expanding civil liberties and democracy; however, they have so far not received adequate recognition in the literature. Gyekye-Jandoh (2014:186) states that the end of the cold war in 1991 marked the beginning of the second liberation of Africa. This second liberation holds out more promise for democratization and stable democracy, because it is tinged with, and shaped by, past experiences of the pitfalls and in-competencies of military and authoritarian civilian rule.

Furthermore, Lindberg (2006:8) accentuates that, needless to say, rights of participation and competition may be legally permitted but not effectively enforced, and procedural legitimacy may exist in law by not in fact. The realization of these essential democratic qualities is not in constant, but in variables. Equal participation, free competition, and legitimacy are democratic qualities that a political system may or may not have to varying degrees. However, according to Abbink and Hesseling (2000:11) elections organized and more or less successfully held in a country with an entrenched autocratic regime not respecting basic rights of its citizens and not according any legitimate role to opposition parties, civic society, and an independent judiciary have no real meaning, not even in the widest stretch of the imagination. It is against this background that this paper intends to demonstrate and argue that the space of voting does not necessarily mean full democracy, hence the forever existence of undemocratic events such as socioeconomic and political inequalities in Africa.

**Democracy and election: a conceptual clarity**

This paper has, however, found its feet on two critically and often most debated concepts (democracy and elections) across various disciplines such as international relations and politics, political science, sociology, philosophy, public administration, and development administration. While this paper does not aim to discuss categorically the clarification of the two concepts according to the scientific fields that were picked above, this section aims to present a holistic clarification of the two concepts as discussed below.

**Elections**

In the context of the subject at hand, elections go hand in hand with voting because voting happens in elections. Elections are seen as a democratic process whereby citizens aged 18 and above elect candidates to represent them and their interests locally, nationally or internationally in some African countries and across the world. (Westlancs, 2014). The process is determined by a voting system where citizens vote for one candidate or a particular political party of their own preference. Furthermore, Lindberg (2006) states that elections are one of many ways of choosing leadership and disposing of old governments in a political system.

Martin (2016:4) highlights that elections are an important part of life, therefore, voting in elections gives people a voice in what kind of laws they have and what kind of taxes they pay. Elections thus give people a voice. Furthermore, Martin (2016:6) indicates that an election happens when a group of people votes on something. People also vote for leaders, such as the mayor of their city or the governor of their state. Boothroyd (2016:5) states that on Election Day, people vote, and when people vote, they make a choice, they choose our leaders, and the leaders will run our government.

**Democracy**

According to Martin (2016:4), democracy is a kind of government that allows people to have the voice in how the government is run. Lindberg (2006) indicates that the core value of democracy is understood to be self-government, and the three necessary attributes are equality of political participation, free political competition, and procedural legitimacy. It is further highlighted that democracy has to do with the means that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them; that is, democracy is about conducting elections and choosing political leaders.

**The relationship between elections and democracy**

Adejumobi (2000) highlights that elections constitute an important element in liberal democracy. They are a viable means of ensuring the orderly process of leadership succession and change, and they are an instrument of political authority and legitimacy. On the other hand, according to Sarsar and Adekuhle (2012:xxix), democracy is easier to understand than to live. It is not a quick fix or to be practiced only on election days. It is a generational project that must be anchored in the participation of citizens, accountability or rulers, open economies, and just societies. Gyekye-Jandoh (2014:185) emphasizes that elections, particularly free and fair elections, are a key criterion of the democratic system, alongside the freedom and independence of the media and the protection of civil rights and liberties. Elections emphasize two key elements of democracy- participation and competition. Furthermore, Mangu and Budeli (2008:107) highlight that elections offer the opportunity for citizens to freely choose among several programs or policies presented by several parties or candidates.

Sarsar and Adekuhle (2012) highlight that democracy cannot be achieved through manipulated elections or rubberstamp parliaments. For any country to have democracy, its political structures must be based on a multiparty system without ideological disqualifiers. Its elections must be free, frequent and fair to ensure the consent of the governed. Its judiciary must be independent and must apply
the rule of law in an equitable and impartial manner. Its fundamental individual civil liberties and political rights, such as freedom of expression and assembly, must be protected. Human rights, religious freedoms, human development, and economic freedoms of its citizens must be guaranteed. Additionally, Gyekye-Jandoh (2014:185) states that elections help ensure democratic peace and reduce the likelihood of a democratic reversal. Elections also allow for competition among elites and provide for participation of the public in the selection of leaders. As highlighted by Richard Joseph in Mangu and Budeli (2008:108), elections and democracy have become virtually synonymous in Western political thought and analysis. It has also been observed that, more recently, in the hurry to globalise democracy after the end of the Cold War, democracy was reduced to the crude simplicity of multiparty elections to the benefit of some of the world’s most notorious autocrats who were able to demonstrate their democratic credentials without reforming their representative regimes. In the liberal conception, ‘elections are the defining institution of democracy.’

Sarsar and Adekuleh (2012) highlight that for democracy to work, all major political factions, including opposition groups, must agree to play by the same rules and uphold the same law. The rule of law is essential as a safeguard against those who would limit democracy to its formal trappings by creating what amounts to a single party system, or those who would seek power with the intention of ultimately disempowering others. Adejumobi (2000) further states that the failure of elections or their absence largely defines the predominance of political dictatorships and personalized rule in Africa. The wave of democratic enthusiasm has elicited a process of competitive and multiparty elections. This has provided a platform for the civil society to make political claims on the state. Hayward (1987) in Gyekye-Jandoh (2014) rightly highlights that elections are about power, where winners gain access to power and voters exercise power in making choices; elections facilitate in practical terms the idea of the consent of the governed, which legitimizes the elected; elections are sometimes used by candidates and parties to express positions and demonstrate support, without necessarily expecting to win.

In addition, Mangu and Budeli (2008:109) state that to usher in a democracy or contribute to democratic consolidation, elections should meet a number of criteria that need to be revisited. First, a democratic regime being one based on the rule of law, democratic elections should be provided for and organized in terms of rules and principles adopted by the legitimate representatives of the people and accepted by the majority of the citizens and parties. Without a constitution or electoral legislation adopted or agreed upon by the citizens or the major political parties, elections are unlikely to be open, free, and fair. Second, democratic elections should be fair, open, and free. This requires that elections are held on a regular basis. Third, elections are likely to be open, free, and fair when the electoral process is managed by a special body established by law. This body, generally known as an electoral commission, should be impartial. It should be independent from the government of the day, from all political parties, and from any other internal or foreign force. Fourth, the electoral process usually ends with the proclamation of the results. This is left to the judiciary, to which the electoral body or commission is subject, and which decides the electoral disputes.

**Key components of democracy**

As highlighted in Teshome (2008), the minimum standards of democracy should include ‘periodic election of political leadership through secret ballot; popular participation of all adults in the election process; choice of programmes and personalities in the elections; an orderly succession; openness of the society; and independent judiciary; freedom of the press to include freedom of ownership; institutional pluralism; a democratic culture and democratic spirit; and fundamental human rights. Participation is regarded as one of the principles upon which democracy can be found. Among others, only participation will be discussed in the article.

Participation in decision making is entrenched in Section 19 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 which declares that every citizen is free to make political choices and to participate in the political process (Van der Waldt, 2007 in Sikhakane and Reddy, 2011). It is envisaged that the quality of lives of all citizens will be enhanced by new systems and processes as public accountability has been entrenched as a basic constitutional principle to promote service delivery which must be construed as being efficient, effective, and economical (Sikhakane and Reddy, 2011). Teshome (2008:5) emphasises that one of the most significant ways people can participate in decisions that affect their lives and hold their elected representatives responsible for results are elections. Furthermore, it is stated that between 1989 and 1994, almost 100 elections had taken place in Africa. In a democracy, elections have three major functions: They serve as a means for people to choose their representatives; an orderly succession; openness of the society; and independent judiciary; freedom of the press to include freedom of ownership; institutional pluralism; a democratic culture and democratic spirit; and fundamental human rights. Participation is regarded as one of the principles upon which democracy can be found. Among others, only participation will be discussed in the article.

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**Nature of elections in selected African countries**

Gyekye-Jandoh (2014:185) accentuates that elections in the African context are replete with diverse meanings and functions. Mangu and Budeli (2008:107) emphasise that the right to vote and to be elected is entrenched in almost all modern Constitutions and electoral laws enacted to enforce them. On the domestic level, there is no single African country where the Constitution does not provide for the right of every citizen to vote during regular, free and fair elections even though electoral politics has taught otherwise. According to Sikhakane and Reddy (2011:86), the historic first South African democratic elections held in 1994 introduced a political democratic dispensation in which respect for fundamental rights was institutionalised. It is important to understand that different countries have
different requirements for allowing a citizen to participate in the voting. Although voting has been said to be a right, it has limitations or boundaries because in countries like South Africa, it excludes people under the age of 18 years (Vasquez, 2017). Furthermore, Sarsar and Adekuhle (2012:xxx) state that Botswana has had a good track record of healthy multiparty elections, even though a single party has ruled since independence.

Mangu and Budeli (2008:93) emphasise that while regular multiparty elections do not necessarily guarantee the establishment of a democratic state, no state can be said to be democratic if it does not hold regular elections according to a set of rules that are fair to the political parties involved. In Africa, many countries moved away from one-party states towards a system of multipartyism in the late nineteenth-1980s, but this has not always resulted in the establishment of true democracy. Gyekye-Jandoh (2014) states that the disputed Kenyan elections in December 2007, and the Zimbabwean debacle beginning with the general elections of March 29, 2008, have given some credence to the pessimistic assessments of competitive multiparty elections in Africa as voting without choosing, resulting in ‘choice-less democracies’. It is further highlighted by Mangu and Budeli (2008:95) that the rules that governed the electoral process in the Democratic Republic of Congo were to be found in the Constitution, in the Electoral Act, and in a number of decisions and guidelines set up by the EIC. The 2006 Constitution of the DRC states that national sovereignty is vested in the people. All power emanates from the people who exercise it directly by referendum or elections and indirectly from their representatives.

Gyekye-Jandoh (2014) further highlights that a positive development since 1991 has been that the quality multiparty elections, in the sense of being free and fair, has improved in some African countries, with Kenya and Zimbabwe the most recent exceptions. The first sign of this is that harassment by incumbent governments has waned, and opposition candidates, parties, and supporters have greater freedom to campaign and prepare for elections. Second, both foreign and domestic observers are now regarded essential components of the electoral process. Third, voter turnout at elections has been fairly high at almost two thirds of registered voters. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there has been systematic popular support throughout Africa for elections and democracy, and a consensus that military rule should be a thing of the past.

Mangu and Budeli (2008) accentuate that elections have become a political game that has to be played according to some agreed rules and principles entrenched in the Constitution and electoral laws. Unfortunately, the rules of the game are very often manipulated by some political leaders to remain in power. In Nigeria, the evolution of politics reveals a tendency to oscillate between civilian and military rulers (Sarsar and Adekuhle, 2012). More often than not, the beneficiaries of democratization have not been its best promoters. Many of those who benefited from the democratization efforts manipulated the electoral system and the constitution making process in their countries to ensure that they retained power. Furthermore, in Kenya and South Africa, elections after multiparty elections have not been characterized by higher electoral quality and improved democratic consolidation. The worst-case scenarios involve rulers who refuse to step down peacefully when they lose elections (ibid., 2012).

Bratton and Kimenyi (2008: 1) accentuate that the cycle of violence around elections in Kenya appears to support views expressed by the first generation of independent African leaders, who argued that Africa was best suited for single-party systems of governance because multipartyism would result in increased tribalism. Therefore, Carbone and Cassani (2016:35) indicate that voting does not always propel democratisation, but it sometimes does. Elections do not equal democracy, even when they are periodically repeated and open to opposition parties. However, elections are indicators of democracy and even potential drivers of democratic progress.

**Electoral systems in African countries**

In the DRC, as highlighted by Mangu and Budeli (2008:97), the legal framework provides for the direct election of the president, the members of the National Assembly and the members of the provincial assemblies by universal suffrage. However, senators, the governors, and vice-governors of the provinces are elected indirectly by the members of the provincial assemblies and not directly by the people. The territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo constituted a single constituency for the president, while the provinces formed the constituencies for the elections of governors and vice-governors. The candidate who obtained the most votes was declared elected. The governors and vice-governors were elected for five years by the members of the provincial assemblies and inaugurated by the president, who was himself directly elected by the people for the same period. Omotola (2012:34) highlights that since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1992 Ghana has developed a reputation for a reasonably high degree of institutionalisation in the administration of its elections. This is partly the result of the degree of public confidence and trust in the independence, professionalism, and political impartiality of the Electoral Commission of Ghana (EGG), which tends to make all political actors accept the results of elections. The acceptance of opposition parties for election results is an important component of democratic legitimacy. It presupposes that both voters and candidates believe that the electoral administrators have complying substantially with the electoral rules.

**Democracy in selected African countries**

Many African countries have made significant economic progress in recent years. Economic progress has been accompanied by important, although gradual, social advances (Gylfason, 2013). Experience suggests that democracy is also good for growth through various channels, including more and better education. Despots sometimes feel threatened by too much education. Democrats, by contrast, typically favour education- for its own sake, as well as because educated voters tend to support democrats rather than anocrats or autocrats. Democracy is good for education and education is good for growth (Gylfason, 2013). Gyekye-Jandoh (2014:
185) emphasizes that democracy involves a political system with ‘meaning and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties), either directly or indirectly, for the main positions of government power; a ‘highly inclusive’ level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, and at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major social group (adult) is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties, freedom of expression, freedom of press, freedom to form and join organizations. Furthermore, Gylfason (2013) states that empirical evidence also suggests that corruption generally thrives less well under democracy than under autocracy. Democratic rule is more conducive to the establishment of institutional structures and mechanisms that restrain corruption.

According to Mangu and Budeli (2008:103), democracy is a complex concept that is closely related to multipartism and elections. It is the most discussed and contested notion of political theory. Sarsar and Adekuhle (2012: xxxii) highlight that the Babangida administration did not provide a safe gateway to democracy. Thus, the struggle to establish true democracy began in 1999, when the country returned to civilian administration. However, the Nigerian quest continues to be interrupted by acts of violence that include political assassinations, harassment, and intimidation. Sarsar and Adekuhle (2012) also found that ‘godfatherism’ and political and economic corruption combine to hinder the smooth running of democracy. Human rights have been violated as a result of the prevalent insecurity arising from political violence. Hostage taking, especially in the Niger Delta, inflicts negative effects on the economy of the nation.

Ghana, on the other hand, has achieved some success in democracy and development. While the path of democratization in Africa must be designed by Africans, democratic nations around the world have the obligation to help Africans help themselves. Additionally, Sarsar and Adekuhle (2012:xxxii) indicate that democracy will materialize only when the dictatorship changes and stops relying on intimidation, brutality and human rights abuses, electoral fraud and corruption, patronage politics, and the constant interference in the constitution to suit the powers that be. Carbone and Cassani (2016) emphasise that although there is little doubt that full democratisation requires political development that go well beyond elections, no contemporary nation that does not go to the polls on a regular basis has ever been deemed democratic. Moreover, when new democratic advances are attributed to a country, this is typically in relation to electoral rounds, whether because the latter marked the end of dictatorial rule, because their freedom and fairness was improved, because the opposition gained political strength, or because peaceful handovers of power took place. Most importantly, elections can also advance democratization. Furthermore, Sarsar and Adekuhle (2012:xxxiii) highlight that political context, national economy, party systems, ethnic divisions, and external influences all have played crucial roles in advancing or retarding Africa’s democratization processes and practices. According to Gylfason (2013) until 1850, autocratic or anocratic government was the rule, and democracy was a rare exception. Without democracy, there was little regard for human rights.

**Ethnicity, politics and elections in selected African states**

According to Bratton and Kimenyi (2008:1) ethnicity has played a central role in Kenyan politics, as evidenced by patterns of political mobilization, resource allocation, and public service appointments, notably to the cabinet. It is further highlighted that for advanced democracies, elections tend to take the form of a referendum on the economy, with voters rewarding or punishing incumbent political parties at the ballot box depending on their past policy performance.

Bratton and Kimenyi (2008:1) emphasise that voters in new democracies and deeply divided societies are held to rely on cultural attachments when deciding how to vote. In his published article, titled “Ethnic Groups in Conflict” by the Journal of International African Historical Studies, 1989 Donal L. Horowitz coined the term “ethnic census” to describe elections in which racial, linguistic, or tribal solidarities so strongly predict voting behaviour that elections are little more than a head count of identity groups. While people will vote according to their ethnic origins, they will also care about policy interests such as personal economic wellbeing, economic performance, and government policy record in select issue areas (ibid., 2008). Additionally, Bratton and Kimenyi (2008:11) emphasise that cultural, linguistic, and hometown ties remain critical elements in the calculus used by African electors to choose their leaders. However, it would be mistaken to conclude that elections in contemporary Africa are nothing more than an ethnic census. Ethnic-linguistic identity does not play a significant role in the choice of votes. It is justifiable that ethnic politics has or has played a large role in electioneering systems and processes in African states, thus affecting minorities.

**Citizens and voting**

According to Vasquez (2017), voting is a fundamental right given to any citizen that enables them to choose their preferable leaders of tomorrow. Furthermore, Biemolt (2017) states that voting allows registered citizens to cast their choice for the political leader that they believe can accurately make the choices that will better the country. It is further emphasised by de Kadt (2017:670) that voting is regarded as the quintessential democratic behaviour. Yet, voting is a novel act for the citizens of many new democracies, particularly those who were disenfranchised under colonialism, dictatorship, or one-party rule. A major challenge in new democracies lies in turning these newly enfranchised citizens into voters. One possibility is that through repeated exposure to elections and democratic processes, citizens may become more likely to vote in the future, more politically engaged and informed, or more supportive of democracy as a system of government (Lindberg, 2006; de Kadt, 2017).

Biemolt (2017) accentuates that the ability to vote allows citizens to say their opinion and choice on a variety of issues. Furthermore, Vasquez (2017) highlights that voting is important because if citizens get involved in voting, not only will they be able to vote for
political parties, however, there will be realization of the importance of citizenship. Vasquez (2017) continues to add that voting makes a change because many of the nation’s political foundations are built using elections. Biemolt (2017) highlights that through voting, citizens have the opportunity to influence the government. All in all, voting is a constitutional right of many countries, hence citizens should best make use of that right instead of squandering it and disregarding what our founders stood for. Furthermore, Vasquez (2017) highlights that it is the right, benefit, and obligation to vote as a citizen of your nation and an individual from your society. Individuals may figure that their vote does not make a difference, but rather votes can shape remote monetary and social arrangements.

Bureaucracy and citizenry

Sikhakane and Reddy (2011:86) highlight that accountability denotes an answer to some authority or person, or justification of one’s actions or inaction, which can be measured against set standards or expectations. As indicated by Sikhakane and Reddy (2011:89), administrators and politicians recognise their interdependence. Administrators look for political signals and support that are accountable to external groups. A key consideration is being responsive to public needs which can be determined by conducting customer satisfaction surveys. The administrator is the responsive actor, and the stakeholders are the relevant constituencies. The administrator has to anticipate the mandate of politicians and public needs. Public servants should build a strong relationship between themselves and politicians and make sure that the image of government is not denied by being irresponsive to public concerns, dealing with problems promptly, efficiently, and effectively.

Sikhakane and Reddy (2011:89) emphasise that accountability serves various purposes including: accountability as control measure (ibid., 2011:89), it is referred to as the monitoring of activities in order to determine or not individual units in an organisation are utilising available resources economically, efficiently, and effectively. Furthermore, Sikhakane and Reddy (2011:91) accentuate that accountability is a key component of good governance and is enhanced by citizen participation, transparency, responsiveness, and representivity.

Conclusions

In conclusion, a free and fair voting process is the cornerstone of democracy-allowing ordinary citizens the opportunity to vote for change or uphold the status quo. It is important to note that elections are important; hence, the failure of elections or their absence largely defines the predominance of political dictatorships and personalized rule in Africa. The wave of democratic enthusiasm has evoked a process of competitive and multiparty elections. This has provided a platform for civil society to make political claims on the state. Elections offer the opportunity for citizens to choose freely between several programmes or policies presented by several parties or candidates. Rules that governed the electoral process in the Democratic Republic of Congo were to be found in the Constitution, in the Electoral Act and in several decisions and guidelines set up by, for instance in South Africa, the Independent Electoral Commission. Furthermore, in Kenya and South Africa, elections after multiparty elections have not been characterized by higher electoral quality and enhanced democratic consolidation. There is no contemporary nation that does not go to the polls on a regular basis has ever been deemed democratic. The paper notes that democracy, voting, and elections may seem to be one element in nature because of their interchangeable process defining the final result, which is democracy, but all have distinct characters which need to be treated as such. For example, voting may be characterised by a myriad of actions such as vote-buying, etc., electioneering and campaigning is one element that defines the praxis of elections. Therefore, the aftermath of elections and votes is subsequently democracy. In which many researchers, scholars, and interested communities may then critique and analyse the form of democracy born by the two systems.

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