

A Retrospective View of ‘June 12’ 1993 Presidential Election in Nigeria

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Abstract

The June 12, 1993 presidential election was a historic election that not only brought Nigerians together in terms of unity of purpose but as well as marked the peak of activities towards an emerging Third Nigerian Republic. Prior to 1993 when the June 12 election took place, Nigeria has had two previous Republics. First was between 1960 when the country gained independence and January 1966 when the first military coup led to dismantling of the democratic structures. Second was the short-lived period of 1979 to 1983 when another military coup led by Major Generals Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon sent the civilian administration packing. This paper examined the June 12, 1993 Presidential election in Nigeria. Through an examination of some secondary data, it argued that the June 12, 1993 Presidential election by its annulment, failed to usher-in a Third Nigerian Republic amongst other consequences which it has for the Nigerian state. It also defied existing pattern of political contestations in the country. Above all, the experience is pregnant with some lessons for the future of politics in Nigeria.

Key words: Presidential, Election, June 12, Nigeria, Democracy, Religion

... Ethnicity and religious intolerance – are two of the major problems of the Nigerian nation. June 12 confronted these monsters frontally. June 12 offered two Muslims on the presidential ticket. They had the chance to appear before Nigerians to articulate their positions, and Nigerians – east, west, north, south -- voted, without compulsion, for the candidate of their choice! – Chido Onumah, 2008

Introduction

The above statement aptly described the malady of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election allegedly won by Chief MKO Abiola. The election marked a water shed in the annal of Nigeria’s political history because it defied the ethnic and religious pattern of political contestations in the country, brought Nigerians together in terms of unity of purpose and as well marked the peak of

activities towards an emerging Third Nigerian Republic. Part of its significance lie in the fact that; it was the first Presidential election to be held after prolonged years of military rule that began in 1984. Precursors to this second phase of military rule have been well documented in the literature (Akinwunmi, 2004; Osaghae, 1998; Ujam, 1995). Prior to 1993 when the June 12 Presidential election took place, Nigeria has had two previous Republics. First was between 1960 when the country gained independence and January 1966 when the first military coup led to dismantling of the democratic structures. Second was the short-lived period of 1979 to 1983 when another military coup led by Major General Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon sent the civilian administration packing. Interestingly, while the First Republic was midwived by the colonial overlords, the last two were midwived by the military. Again while, the Second Republic transition midwived by the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo in 1979 was a success in spite of controversies that trailed the Presidential election (see Muhammad, 2002), the 1993 Presidential election which was expected to usher-in the Third Republic abruptly ended in failure as it was annulled by the military government of General Babangida who midwived the transition. Of what significance is the June 12 1993 election for the future of politics in Nigeria? This is a critical question that this paper intends to engage. In order to be properly situating its in context, a background to the June 12, 1993 Presidential election is essential.

Prelude to the June 12 Election

What seemed to be the foundation for the June 12, 1993 Presidential election can be traced to the period of registration of political parties by the Babangida military regime in 1991. Prior to this time, the regime had conducted, in 1989, elections into local councils on a zero-party basis. However, and perhaps due to lessons learnt from the local council elections, state and national politics were designed to be on party basis. It needed to be emphasized that the decision of the administration to conduct a transition that would ultimately usher in a new Republic is in line with the administration's initial proclamation. General Babangida had in his 1985 Independence Day celebration broadcast announced the policy priority of his administration to, 'begin a vigorous search for a new political order capable of ensuring sustained economic growth and social development'. He went further that 'with this in mind', the administration 'shall in the course of 1986, announce a political transition programme for the country' (Eleazu, 1988). True to his statement, General Babangida in January 1986 inaugurated a seventeen-member political bureau headed by Dr. Samuel Cookey, with the responsibility of developing a programme for the transition to civil rule. The report of the Bureau later formed the road map towards a successful transition.

Following the call for interested associations to register as political parties, about 30 political associations signified intention but only 13 eventually applied for registration with the established electoral umpire, National Electoral Commission (NEC). They were the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP), The Ideal Peoples Party (IPP), The Nigerian National Congress (NNC), Nigerian Peoples Welfare Party (NPWP), The National Union Party (NUP), Peoples Front of Nigeria (PFN), Patriotic Nigerians Party (PNP), Peoples Solidarity Party (PSP), Republican Party of Nigeria (RPN), United National Democratic Party (UNDP), Peoples Patriotic Party (PPP), The Liberal Convention (LC) and The Nigerian Labour Party (NLP). Although these parties were successful in the screening exercise organized by NEC, none was eventually registered because registering them would run contrary to the administration's commitment to creating a new political order for the Third Republic by ensuring that parties registered are not reincarnates of those of the First and Second Republics. In espousing on the reasons for not registering the parties, General Babangida had noted that one of them is a:

reincarnation of a make-shift alliance during the Second Republic containing people who betrayed the parties that elected them into office... Another is almost a pure-bred re-emergence of a Second Republic party, with same ideas and loyalties as the political association mentioned earlier. A Third political association is a proxy organisation founded and funded by influential people who are disqualified from political activities during the transition period. A fourth party appeared to be an association of wealthy individuals who use their money to determine who joins them and who does not; and who gets what, when, how and how much (Quoted in, Yaqub, 2002: 126).

In their place, the Babangida military administration opted for a two-party *de Jure* system and imposed on Nigerians the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) with ideological inclination of 'a little to the right' and 'a little to the left' respectively. It must also be stated that the Babangida regime conducted a phased election with gubernatorial and state Houses of Assembly election in 1992 and the Presidential election in 1993.

However, the unfortunate annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential election which was widely believed to be won by Chief MKO Abiola of the SDP, resulted in serious political impasse which Babangida himself could not resolved before he 'stepped aside' in August 1993 after putting in place an Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Earnest Shonekan (Muhammad, 2009). Although the June 12, 1993 Presidential election by its annulment failed to usher-in a Third Nigerian Republic, it nonetheless defied existing pattern of political contestations in the country as the next section shows.

Pattern of Political Contestations in Nigeria

Since independence in 1960, there has been a continued hovering of ethnic and religious influence on the politics and government of Nigeria. Scholars have emphasised this in its various dimensions. While some have focused exclusively on religious influence (Kukah, 1993; Gofwen, 2004; Suleiman and Muhammad, 2006; Muhammad, 2011; Muhammad, 2008; Muhammad, 2006; Birai, 1996), some others have espoused on the ethnic dimension (Akinyele, 2002; Ibeanu, 1999). Yet, others have examined the issue of ethno-religion as it affects the country's politics (Akinwunmi, 2004; Osaghae, 1998; Falola, 1998). What is apparent is that, Nigerian politics, especially after independence, have not been immune from the destructive influence of its ethnic and religious character. While Nigeria's ethnic groups have been variously estimated to be between 250 and over 400 (Otite, 1990; Kurian, 1979), the number of its religious groups is still a subject of debate. But the most popular groupings are Islam, Christianity, and the African Traditional Religion (ATR). Interestingly, the ATR has remained passive while the duo of Islam and Christianity has engaged themselves in a race for ascendancy and in the process, influencing the pattern of political contestation. That is, the two groups have continued to exercise profound influence not only on party politics and electoral process but also, the general pattern of politics and governance.

It is important to note that prior to independence there was low salience of ethno-religious influence on Nigerian government and politics. This may be attributed to the fact that all saw a common enemy in the colonial government and as such, worked as a group to fight colonialism. Yaqub (2002) was thus right to have observed that despite their different ethno cultural backgrounds, the political parties of pre independence era never failed to mobilise across ethnic and religious divides in order to defeat colonialism and fight for self-government. However, the modus operandi of these parties changed with the certainty of independence. Each embarked on what can be described as politics of ethnic and or religious mobilization. That is, each concentrating on its ethnic region for political support. Interestingly, Nigeria's ethnic boundary roughly coincided with its ethnic boundary. It, therefore, becomes difficult to separate ethnic considerations from religious sentiments. The outcome of the 1959 election in which each of the parties had the greatest support from its ethnic base underscored this fact.

Table 1: Results of the 1959 Election showing Ethnic Support of the Parties

Party	Northern Region	Western Region	Eastern Region	Lagos	Total
NPC	134	0	0	0	134
NCNC /	8	21	58	2	89

NEPU					
AG	25	33	14	1	73
Others	7	8	1	0	16
Total	174	62	73	3	312

Source: Osaghae, 1998

From the table above, it is observed that although the NPC had majority of seats in parliament, all are however from the North, its ethnic base. Similarly, the NCNC which align with NEPU polled largest from the East which is the ethnic base of the NCNC while the AG based in the West also polled its highest votes from the Western region. This situation of ethno religious support for parties and indeed, ethno religious sentiment in governance continued until the military struck in January 1966 to terminate the democratic administration. Unfortunately, the succeeding military regime was not immune from the prevailing sentiment as some considered the January coup to be an attempt by Igbo officers to exterminate the North from main stream governance (Ademoyega, 1981). Thus, there was another coup in July of same year by mostly Northern elements in the military in retaliation for the January coup which was considered an Igbo affair. Precursors and aftermath of this events as well as its polemics has been well documented in the literature (Akinola, 2000; Ejoor, 1989; Mainasara, 1982; Ademoyega, 1981). The influence of ethno religious sentiments continued through successive military regimes that define Nigeria's first epoch of military rule (1966 to 1979) and has been alleged to form part of the scheming that produced the Second Republic (Kukah, 1993).

In the Second Republic (1979 to 1983), ethno-religious sentiments began to influence the trend of politics prelude to the commencement of the Republic. This was in the Constituent Assembly of 1978 where debates over inclusion of Shariah court of appeal in the impending constitution almost stalled debates. The logjam was resolved following intervention of the then military government which declared it 'no go area'. However, the process of party formation was not that immune. This is because, most of the political parties that emerged then were reincarnates of the ethnic based parties of the First Republic both in their leadership and origin. For example, both the NPN and PRP of the Second Republic were similar in its leadership and origin with the NPC and NEPU of the First Republic respectively. Similarly, the UPN of the Second Republic was led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo who also led the AG of the First Republic while Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who led NCNC of the First Republic also led the NPP of the Second Republic. In fact, the Second Republic became completely enmeshed in ethno-cultural politics that people became suspicious of the government anytime policies are made. Like the First, general elections in the Second Republic also brought influence of these sentiments to the fore as each party was in firm

control of their respective regions both in the Presidential and governorship elections.

Although the entire Nigerian political land scape is usually characterised by such influence, it often becomes more pronounced at periods of elections to the extent that even religious symbols are used as object of campaign. For instance, supporters of NPN (mostly northerners and Muslims) do refer to the two fingers raised by UPN during campaign as symbolizing polytheism while the single finger raised by NPN symbolizes monotheism preached by Islam. On this basis, the NPN is the natural right choice for any Muslim. In effect, Nigerian politics up to the time of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election have always been characterized by large scale influence of ethnic and religious sentiments. This pattern of contestations not only characterized civilian governments but also military despite the fact that they claim to be nationalistic in outlook.

June 12: A Different but Failed Election

At the risk of over emphasis, the June 12, 1993 Presidential election is unique in Nigeria's political history. This uniqueness derives from the fact that elections in the country before and even after June 12 have been characterized by ethno-cultural considerations. However, the June 12 1993 election seems to defy this known pattern of political contests. For the avoidance of doubt, Nigerian politics for the periods before June 12 has been defined by two factors. That is, ethnic considerations and or religious influence. As earlier observed, foundation for the election was laid with the registration of political associations as political parties in 1991. However, despite the fact that the 13 political associations that applied for registration as political parties struggle to meet the minimum guideline that any association to be so registered as political party must have effective and functional offices in at least two-third states of the Federation including the Federal Capital, and that its leadership must cut across different ethno-geographical divides, but none was eventually given registration. The reason for this, according to President Babangida was to avoid a situation where such parties emerge as off shoots of parties of the previous Republics. In their place, the government established the SDP and the NRC. The implication of this is that the SDP and the NRC that were eventually decreed by the government became an amalgam of so many political associations and actors who forcefully became members of these government-imposed parties. This trend increased the extent of opposing sentiments within the parties. Indeed, the government became fully involved in the establishment and functioning of these parties. The government gave them their manifestoes, built their secretariats at all levels and appointed interim officers for the parties. Noteworthy is that these were the two parties that contested the 1992 parliamentary elections as well as the June 12, 1993 Presidential election. Outcome of the elections shows that the SDP had an edge above the NRC in both elections. This is graphic in the table below.

Table 2: Results of 1992* and 1993 Elections

Party	Presidential Election (Percentage of Total)	Number of Seat in Senate (Total is 91)	Number of Seat in the HoR (Total is 593)
SDP	58.36%	51	314
NRC	41.64%	37	275
Total	100.00%	89	589

Source: Computed by author from, African Elections Data Base: Elections in Nigeria. Available at: <http://africanelections.tripod.com/ng.html> (Assessed on 27 Dec 2011).

*At the conclusion of the legislative election in 1992, 2 and 4 seats still remain vacant in the Senate and House of Representatives (HoR)

Interestingly, the outcome of the election shows that both ethnic and religious sentiments had no place in the elections. First, the Presidential candidate of the SDP and his running mate were both Muslims (same religion) while the NRC attempted to balance the Christian – Muslim divide by having a Muslim as its Presidential candidate and a Christian as running mate. Yet, it had a low outing in the election. Second, in spite of the fact that the Presidential candidate of the SDP is from the South, it received larger percentage of votes from the North than the NRC candidate who is from the North. As Akinterinwa (19997) noted, the SDP victory was national in scope. It was in two of the then 30 states, Sokoto and Kebbi that the SDP fail to obtain one-third of the total votes required in two thirds of the states in order to be elected. This shows that ethno-religious sentiments had little or no place in the outcome of the elections. Suberu (1997) was thus right to observe that the initial maneuverings for partisan advantage within and between the NRC and the SDP reflected complex and shifting patterns of alignments that do not directly reinforce or revolve around the Christian – Muslim divide.

June 12, Third Republic and the Future of Politics in Nigeria

Although the June 12 imbroglio may have come and gone but the vestiges have been enduring. Also, while the entire country was affected one way or the other by the events of June 12, the South Western part of the country was the most affected. Above all, it marked the complete eclipse of another attempt at returning power to democratically elected government. Among the implications which the episode has for future politics in Nigeria is that it raised the consciousness of the government and peoples of Nigeria about the nature of politics in the country.

On the one hand, the government was able to realize that whatever goes wrong or disaffection in one part of the country is capable of affecting the entire country. While riots and demonstrations were more pronounced in the South West and South East probably because of the ethnic affiliation of the supposed winner of the election, the entire country seem to have felt the pangs as it affects inter group relations, businesses as well as economic activities throughout the country. Indeed, it has often been contended that the registration of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) as a political party in 1999 despite the fact that as an association, it did not meet requirements for registration, was to assuage the South Westerners for what they suffered over the June 12 crisis (Yaqub, 2002). This was because, the electoral law stipulates that for a political party to continue to exist and function as a political party, it was expected to score at least, a minimum of five (initially ten) percent of the total votes in at least 24 states of the federation during the December 1998 local governments elections. However, the aftermath of the election shows only the All Progressives' Party (APP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) as passing the litmus test. The AD was third with 5 percent of votes in 14 states of the federation. Eventually however, the AD was also registered as a political party.

On the other hand, the aftermath of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election raised the political consciousness of most Nigerians as they became more politically conscious and active during this period and afterwards. The proliferation of Civil Society Groups in Nigeria during that time and after is a reflection of the new political awakening among Nigerians. As observed by Muhammad (2009), the proliferation of civil societies in Nigeria after the annulment of the June 12 election was unprecedented in the history of the country. This was because, a survey of Civil Society Groups conducted by IDASA prelude to Nigeria's 2007 elections, revealed that out of the about 394 list of Civil Society Organisations identified to be working on the democratic and governance themes, only 127 had their existence predating ten years (IDASA, undated). This suggests that the 267 remaining organisations began to emerge from about the mid 1990s which was when the June 12 imbroglio began to take its toll on the country. In other words, the denial of Abiola's right to assume office encouraged the proliferation of pro-democracy groups and other organizations of civil society who, despite repression, bravely harassed their Abacha dictatorship.

At another level, the annulment of the June 12 election re-echoed the ethno religious sentiments in Nigerian politics and vociferous call for power shift to the south. The underlying assumption is that the annulment was a ploy to frustrate the emergence of a President from the Southern part of the country. In other words, ethno religious undertones were greatly downplayed in the processes

leading to the election, the annulment of the election rekindled ethno religious sentiments in a manner that threatens the very basis of the country. Thus:

It could be asserted that undying flames from the political impasse force the political class to the informal consociational arrangement of 1998/99 in which it was tacitly agreed that the Presidency of the country be zoned to the southern region. ... This arrangement culminated in the major political parties - Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Peoples Party (APP) and Alliance for Democracy (AD) - adopting a southerner as their presidential flag-bearer (Muhammad, 2009).

Another significant lesson from the June 12 imbroglio and the moribund Third Republic is that, the episode represents a turning point in the political history of Nigerians. First, it exposed the military as incapable of been corrective regimes which they often claim to be and second, it points to the fact that the military institution is not in any way immune from the socio-political ills that characterised the larger Nigerian society. On the one hand, the transition was prosecuted with reckless abandon or with scant regard for accountability (Anifowoshe, 2007). In this connection, Babawale (2007) notes that at the time the transition became moribund in 1993, the government had committed about 400 Million Naira on the programme without realizing the intended outcome. On the other hand, the transition that was climaxed by the June 12 election and its annulment signaling the death of a Third Nigerian Republic was the longest in the history of the country. It started in 1991 with creation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) by the government. This perhaps informed Diamond et al's (2007) description of it as transition without end. The implications of this are the huge economic costs, the frustration and skepticism it engendered on the psyche of many Nigerians manifesting in voters' apathy. For example, out of close to 58 million registered voters, only about 30 million representing 52%, turned out to vote in the February 27 Presidential election (<http://www.electoralgeography.africanelections.tripod.com>). The close to 70% turn out recorded in the 2003 election reinforced this belief. In a way, this experience was useful in the planning of subsequent transition attempts. Aside the transition under General Sanni Abacha that succeeded the ING put in place as General Babangida depart, the General Abdulsalami Abubakar transition programme was the shortest in the history of the country having lasted for barely 11 months. This way, colossal waste of a long transition had been avoided and as well, it rekindled optimism on the part of the citizens. Equally, the idea of having an Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was to ensure independence (?) of the electoral umpire and show significant departure from the past where electoral umpires are more of an extension of the Presidency. Although the extent of independence of

INEC is still a subject of debate, but the idea of having an independent institution derives from lessons of the June 12 episode.

Many years after June 12, it still haunts and inspires Nigerians. First, it is believed to symbolize Nigerians' crave for enduring democratic rule and second, it sustains the prospect of having a united Nigerian society devoid of politicised cleavages. The thought of what many went through during the June 12 imbroglio remained with many Nigerians till date to the extent that even the succeeding generations of Nigerians have come to identify with the spirit and goals of June 12. This aspiration is reflected in the declaration of June 12 every year as commemorative day for democracy by South Western states and its recent adoption by the federal government. Although the declaration of June 12 every year may be in line with thinking of the state governments (in the western region) but the vociferous advocate for it by Civil society Groups and individuals in the south west before it was adopted by the federal government must not be wished away. No doubt, it is an expression of their political will.

In addition, June 12 shows that at least electoral democracy is feasible in the country. That is a situation of truly free and fair elections, where votes count much as it put on notice that the country's patience with military dictatorship is growing thinner and thinner. The current resilience of Nigerians in promoting and protecting its democratic practice despite growing hiccups is a reflection of this realization among Nigerians. Also, the aphorism that the worst civilian government is better than the most benevolent military government underscores current preference of most Nigerians.

In a way, June 12 strengthened the resolve by Nigerians to keep the country united irrespective of what it takes. Nigerians came to the realization that the military, no matter how benevolent should never be allowed to interfere in governance. This perhaps informed why Nigeria has been in the fore front of opposition to military seizure of power or unconstitutional rule in Africa using the platform of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This nationalistic feeling and desire to promote democracy in Nigeria also informed why there was no breakdown of governance despite the initial hiccups in the early days of Nigeria's democracy especially in the face of disagreements between the executive and the legislature. This position was given bight by former President of the Nigerian Senate, Ken Nnamani, when he observed that:

We want democracy to survive in Nigeria. The dismal experience of past military dictatorship has assured Nigerians of the value of democratic governance. Having tasted the bitter waters of tyranny, Nigerians are thirsty for liberty and freedom that come with democracy. Nigerians are determined to fight for democracy.

All the disagreements, debates and contestations over governance issues in Nigeria should be seen as eloquent expressions of this desire to keep the nation on the part of democracy (Nnamani, 2006).

Similarly, civil society organisations became more vociferous in their campaigns. They became more focused not on events such as the June 12 imbroglio alone but became advocates of good governance and accountability.

The June 12 election also brought to the fore the fact that obliterating religious influence in Nigerian politics is not a hopeless tragedy. Indeed, the combination of Abiola and his running mate, Kingibe, both Muslims, proved that it is possible for religion not to be a factor in the emergence of leaders. The election, no doubt, points to the possibility of harmonizing political divisions in the country. It is often said that religion is a weapon in the hands of corrupt politicians which they use to divide the country for selfish interests. The case of the June 12 has shown that with resistance and determination of citizens against such tendencies, issues of religion can no longer play a divisive role in the government and politics of Nigeria.

Related to the above is that the outcome of the June 12 election demystified an age long myth in the country that only northern-dominated political parties like the defunct Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and the equally defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN) can win elections. This is because going by the personality of its Presidential candidate and the gatekeeping strategy of the administration in avoiding ethnic based parties, the SDP cannot be described as outrightly a northern based party. Yet it was able to win the elections. An unofficial detail of results of the election indicates that the SDP has 58.36% of total votes cast as against 41.64% by the NRC (<http://africanelections.tripod.com/ng.html>). The implication of this is that politics in Nigeria may not always be determined by ethnic affiliation but by the personalities involved.

Part of the lessons of the June 12 election is the realization by political parties, of the need to carry along all the different sections of the country. In doing this, the six unofficial (since they are not recognized in the constitution as layers of representation) geo political zones are now used as basis of appointment to party positions. Political parties now recognize the geo political zones as basis of representation to the extent that a deputy national chairman is appointed for each zone while zonal caucuses are recognized by party constitutions. This way, they are able to mitigate intra party conflicts and reduce the number of contenders for national chairmanship. This is a fall out of the June 12, 1993 imbroglio.

Conclusion

This paper has examined, in retrospect, the June 12, 1993 Presidential election whose annulment also signaled the death of what was supposed to be Nigeria's Third Republic. Bearing in mind that political contestations in Nigeria has often been influenced by its peculiar character defined by its multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups, the paper revealed that the June 12, 1993 election defiled this known pattern of political contests. This underscores the significance of the election. The paper thus concludes that while the military has successfully superintend a political transition in the past (1979 and under General Olusegun Obasanjo), the inability of the Babangida military regime to hand power over to a democratically elected Civilian President in August 1993 as he promised cannot be divorced from the political environment which has transformed and became more complex compared to 1979. In other words, the toga of ethnic and religious cleavages, though not noticed in the course of the election, has eaten deeper into the fabrics of Nigerian government and politics to the extent that even the military is not different from the larger society in terms of ethno-religious politicization. The surreptitious influence of some top military brass in the annulment amplifies this. Equally, although it has come and gone, the vestiges of the June 12 election have continued to influence, directly or indirectly, in a profound manner, the future of politics in Nigeria. Part of this influence includes engineering a new political awakening in the country as well as directing the trend of future policies in electoral and governance matters as this work reveals.

Looking back in retrospect we may say that, though it has had some positive impacts on Nigeria's political future, its negative influences cannot be wished away; in the least, the colossal loss of lives and properties during the imbroglio and the dent which the annulment created on the country's external image are worthy of note. Thus, in this, is a lesson for present and future generation of Nigerians.

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