BRIGIDO B. PAREDES, PETITIONER, VS. THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS, THE PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, AND BERNARDINO TELOREN, RESPONDENTS.

G.R. NO. 169534. July 30, 2007

Ponente: CHICO-NAZARIO, J.

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CHICO-NAZARIO, J.:

For resolution is a Petition for Certiorari under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court filed by petitioner Brigido B. Paredes, seeking the reversal of the Decision[1] dated 15 October 2004 and Resolution[2] dated 20 July 2005 of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. SP No. 71928, which dismissed the Petition for Certiorari filed by petitioner and denied reconsideration thereon. The Court of Appeals affirmed the Orders dated 10 April 2002[3] and 11 June 2002[4] in Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC), Branch 52 of Talibon, Bohol, denying petitioner's Motion to Dismiss.

Culled from the records are the following salient facts:

Petitioner is the Municipal Treasurer of Ubay, Bohol. Private respondent Bernardino Teloren is a businessman engaged in the business of selling construction materials under the trade name Lava Marketing and Construction Supply. He regularly transacted business with the Municipality of Ubay, Bohol.

On 4 December 1996, the Sangguniang Bayan of Ubay, Bohol, invited private respondent to appear before the Sanggunian in aid of legislation. He was shown seven checks which were issued by the Municipality of Ubay in favor of Lava Marketing and Construction Supply and drawn against the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) as payment for construction materials purchased by the municipality. The particulars of the aforesaid checks are as follows, to wit:

Check No. Date of Issue Amount

1) Check No. 046000 17 January 1996 P23,280.00

2) Check No. 020601 17 January 1996 P23,280.00

3) Check No. 020617 18 January 1996 P22,067.50

4) Check No. 081406 9 May 1996 P24,317.90

5) Check No. 081408 9 May 1996 P19,589.15

6) Check No. 081407 9 May 1996 P24,317.90

7) Check No. 081409 9 May 1996 P 9,726.51

TOTAL P 146,578.96[5]

The checks appeared to have been encashed by private respondent as borne by his signatures appearing at the back thereof. However, private respondent refuted the genuineness of his signatures, disclaimed his encashment of the checks, and alleged that the Municipality of Ubay has yet to pay him. Instead, he averred that his signatures on the checks were forged by petitioner who as Municipal Treasurer had custody of the same.

Hence, on 21 August 1997, a criminal as well as an administrative complaint[6] was filed against petitioner before the Office of the Ombudsman (Visayas), docketed as OMB-VIS-CRIM-97-0697 and OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536, respectively. It was alleged that the checks which were issued to private respondent as payment by the Municipality of Ubay were never received by him. Rather, they were encashed by petitioner through falsification, to the former's damage and detriment.

In his Answer,[7] petitioner denied the allegations, and by way of an affirmative defense, alleged that the subject checks were already in the hands of private respondent as shown by the disbursement vouchers which covered the issuances of the checks. According to petitioner, such documents bear private respondent's signatures evincing his acknowledgment and acceptance of the payments corresponding to each of the subject checks.

In a Resolution dated 17 February 1999 in OMB-VIS-CRIM-97-0697, the Office of the Ombudsman (Visayas) found probable cause to hold petitioner criminally liable for seven counts of Estafa, and ordered the filing of appropriate informations in court, thus:

> WHEREFORE, finding probable cause to indict the respondent for seven (7) counts of estafa through falsification of commercial documents, penalized under Articles 315 and 172 in relation to Article 48 of the Revised Penal Code, let the corresponding informations be filed with the proper court. [8]

Subsequently, the Office of the Ombudsman (Visayas) through Graft Investigation Officer I Alvin Butch E. Cañares filed seven separate informations[9] for Estafa through Falsification of a Commercial Document (under Article 315[10] of the Revised Penal Code in relation to Article 171[11] of the same Code) against petitioner with the RTC, where they were docketed as Crim. Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531.

Meanwhile, on 26 March 1999, the Office of the Ombudsman (Visayas) issued a Resolution[12] in OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536, finding petitioner guilty of grave misconduct. The Ombudsman found that there was substantial evidence to establish petitioner's complicity in the approval and release of the checks. The Ombudsman was of the conclusion that petitioner was the last person to have encashed and obtained the amounts covered therein. As a result, petitioner was meted the penalty of dismissal from service and forfeiture of all benefits.[13]

Unconvinced, petitioner sought reconsideration of the Ombudsman's Resolution of 26 March 1999 in OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536, but the same was denied on 15 March 2000.[14]

Hence, petitioner filed before the Court of Appeals a Petition for Review, under Rule 43 of the Rules of Court, to assail the Ombudsman's ruling in OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536. This was docketed as CA-G.R. SP No. 59124.

On 22 October 2001, the Court of Appeals rendered a Decision[15] in CA-G.R. SP No. 59124, granting the Petition for Review and absolving petitioner of administrative culpability in OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536. Thus:

> WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant petition for review is herby GRANTED. The assailed Resolution and Order of the Ombudsman, dated March 26, 1999 and March 15, 2000, respectively, are hereby SET ASIDE. In lieu thereof, Judgment is hereby rendered, ABSOLVING the petitioner from the administrative charges filed against him, and DISMISSING the respondent's complaint.[16]

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The Court of Appeals found that substantial evidence was wanting to establish petitioner's participation in the alleged fraudulent encashment of the subject checks. A contrario, it held that petitioner adequately explained why his signatures were affixed on the subject checks. It hypothesized:

> [P]etitioner had sufficiently explained the appearance of his signatures on the subject seven (7) checks, as representatives of the respondent would come to him, after he had issued the payment[s] [in the form of] checks, and [had] ask[ed] that he rediscount the said checks. He would then deposit [the] amounts in the municipality's [account] [with] the Development Bank of the Philippines. Naturally, his signature would appear at the back of the checks, and so would the signature of the respondent's representative, which is what appears upon due perusal of the subject checks x x x.[17]

In fine, the Court of Appeals opined that the evidence demonstrates that the private respondent had received the subject checks.[18] They were already in his hands and control when the alleged unlawful acts of the petitioner occurred.[19]

The Office of the Ombudsman (Visayas) filed a Motion for Reconsideration thereon, but the appellate court did not depart from its assailed ruling.[20] It filed before this Court a Petition for Review under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court, docketed as G.R. No. 151066, but the same was dismissed for non-compliance with the rule on the reglementary period to file the petition.[21]

Subsequently, on 5 November 2001, petitioner filed with the RTC a Motion to Dismiss[22] Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531. He grounded his Motion on the dismissal by the Court of Appeals of OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536, the administrative case filed against him. He averred that if private respondent failed to adduce substantial evidence to hold him administratively liable, with greater reason will private respondent and the prosecution fail to prove beyond reasonable doubt his guilt in the criminal cases. Under the circumstances, petitioner claimed that the prosecution cannot therefore approximate the quantum of evidence needed to convict him in Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531.

On 10 April 2002, the RTC rendered an Order in Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531 denying petitioner's Motion to Dismiss. It ratiocinated that the earlier dismissal of the administrative case is not legally tantamount to the absence of criminal liability. Thus:

> The Ombudsman Prosecutor, invoking the Supreme Court rulings in Tan v. Comelec, 237 SCRA 353 and in Paredes, Jr. v. Sandiganbayan, 252 SCRA 641, argued that the investigation then being conducted by the Office of the Ombudsman (Visayas) on the criminal case for Malversation thru Falsification of Public Documents, on the one hand, and its administrative adjudication [of] the administrative charge for Dishonesty were entirely independent proceedings; the results in one could not conclude the other and therefore the dismissal of the administrative case does not necessarily foreclose the matter of possible liability, if warranted, of the accused in the criminal case.
>
> In Ceferino Paredes, Jr. v. Sandiganbayan, the Supreme Court ruled:
>
> "That one thing is administrative liability. Quite another thing is the criminal liability for the same act. Our determination of the administrative liability for falsification of public documents is in no way conclusive of his lack of criminal liability (underlined for emphasis)."[23]

The RTC disposed:

> WHEREFORE, finding the Ombudsman Prosecutor's argument, supported as it is by the aforecited Supreme Court rulings to be tenable and noting further the manifestation from the private prosecutor that in this criminal case the prosecution will adduce evidence that it had failed to adduce in the administrative case, this Court resolves to deny the [petitioner]'s motion to dismiss, notwithstanding the information given the Court by the

> [petitioner] in its supplement to the motion to dismiss that the Supreme Court had denied [respondent's] motion for extension to file before the Supreme Court his petition for review on certiorari (of the assailed judgment of the Court of Appeals).[24]

Unfazed, petitioner sought reconsideration of the 10 April 2002 Order by way of an Omnibus Motion.[25] On 11 June 2002, the RTC denied the same.[26] The trial court emphasized the independent nature of the preliminary investigation conducted by the Office of the Ombudsman (Visayas) on the criminal charges against petitioner from that of the administrative adjudication made by the same Office on the administrative charge also against petitioner. Otherwise stated, it was the opinion of the trial court that the dismissal of the administrative case against petitioner did not necessarily preclude the possibility that petitioner would be found criminally liable in the criminal cases against him, if such can be proven beyond reasonable doubt during the trial.[27]

Petitioner thereafter sought recourse before the Court of Appeals via a Petition for Certiorari, under Rule 65 of the Rules of Court, docketed as CA-G.R. SP No. 71928, to annul the 10 April 2002 and the 11 June 2002 Orders of the RTC in Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531.

The Court of Appeals was not persuaded. It rendered a Decision dated 15 October 2004, the dispositive portion of which reads:

> WHEREFORE, the petition is DISMISSED. Accordingly, the April 10, 2002 Order of the Regional Trial Court of Talibon, Bohol, Branch 52 as well as its June 11, 2002 Order, are AFFIRMED.[28]

Petitioner moved for the reconsideration of the Decision, but it was denied for lack of merit by the appellate court in a Resolution dated 20 July 2005.

Hence, the present Petition where petitioner imputes grave abuse of discretion on the part of the Court of Appeals in issuing the questioned Decision of 15 October 2004 and the Resolution of 20 July 2005 in CA-G.R. SP No. 71928.

Petitioner rehashes before this Court the argument that he buttressed before the court a quo and the appellate court.

The kernel of his contention is that the continuation of the criminal proceedings against him in Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531 is an exercise in futility; hence, these cases must be dismissed. He argues that as his liability in the administrative case against him was not established by substantial evidence, so will his criminal case necessarily fall, demanding as it does, a heavier quantum of proof, i.e., proof beyond reasonable doubt.

Clearly, the instant Petition must fail.

It is indeed a fundamental principle of administrative law that administrative cases are independent from criminal actions for the same act or omission.[29] Thus, an absolution from a criminal charge is not a bar to an administrative prosecution, or vice versa.[30] One thing is administrative liability;[31] quite another thing is the criminal liability for the same act.[32]

Verily, the fact that the required quantum of proof[33] was not adduced to hold petitioner administratively liable for falsification, forgery, malversation, grave dishonesty, and conduct unbecoming of a public officer in OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536 does not ipso facto mean that Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531 filed against petitioner for Estafa through Falsification of a Commercial Document before the RTC should be dismissed. The failure to adduce substantial evidence against petitioner in the former is not a ground for the dismissal of the latter. These two cases are separate and distinct; hence, independent from each other.
First, the quantum of evidence required in an administrative case is less than that required in a criminal case.[34]

Criminal and administrative proceedings may involve similar operative facts; but each requires a different quantum of evidence. Administrative cases require only substantial evidence, or such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.[35] In contrast, in Criminal Case Nos. 99-525 to 99-531, respondents are required to proffer proof beyond reasonable doubt to secure petitioner's conviction. Rule 133 of the Revised Rules on Evidence provides:

> Sec. 2. Proof beyond reasonable doubt. - In a criminal case, the accused is entitled to an acquittal, unless his guilt is shown beyond reasonable doubt. Proof beyond reasonable doubt does not mean such a degree of proof as, excluding possibility of error, produces absolute certainty. Moral certainty only is required, or that degree of proof which produces conviction in an unprejudiced mind.

Thus, considering the difference in the quantum of evidence, as well as the procedure followed and the sanctions imposed in criminal and administrative proceedings, the findings and conclusions in one should not necessarily be binding on the other.[36] Notably, the evidence presented in the administrative case may not necessarily be the same evidence to be presented in the criminal cases. The prosecution is certainly not precluded from adducing additional evidence to discharge the burden of proof required in the criminal cases. Significantly, the prosecution had manifested that it would present testimonial evidence which was not presented in the administrative case.

Second, it is well settled that a single act may offend against two or more distinct and related provisions of law, or that the same act may give rise to criminal as well as administrative liability.[37] As such, they may be prosecuted simultaneously or one after another, so long as they do not place the accused in double jeopardy of being punished for the same offense.[38]

In the instant case, we find once again an occasion to apply the foregoing rule, and with more reason, as petitioner does not herein place at issue the question of double jeopardy. The independent character of OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536 from Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531 cannot be more obvious. The facts are telling. The former is an administrative charge of dishonesty constituting grave misconduct against petitioner. This sprung from his alleged fraudulent encashment of the subject checks. On the other hand, the latter involved seven separate criminal charges against petitioner for the crimes of Estafa through Falsification of a Commercial Document as defined and penalized under the Revised Penal Code, in relation to Article 171[39] of the same Code. In these cases, the prosecution seeks to establish the gravamen of Estafa through Falsification of a Commercial Document and to show that the petitioner committed the aforesaid crimes by taking advantage of his official position. Hence, the seven separate Informations filed against petitioner, corresponding to the seven checks, criminally charges petitioner in the following tenor, thus:

> That on or about the 17[th] day of January, 1996, and for sometime subsequent thereto, at the Municipality of Ubay, Province of Bohol, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, [petitioner], a public officer, being the Municipal Treasurer of the Municipality of Ubay, Bohol, in such capacity and committing the offense in relation to office, taking advantage of his official position, with deliberate intent, with intent to defraud and falsify, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously falsify a Commercial Document, consisting of a Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) Checks bearing No. xxx, Tagbilaran Branch, in the amount of xxx, payable to [private respondent], by affixing a signature at the back of the said check, thus making it appear therein that the said check was signed and endorsed by [private respondent] or his representative, thereby counterfeiting or feigning the signature of [private respondent] and causing it to appear that persons participated in an act, when they did not in fact so participate, when in truth and in fact, as accused very well know that [private respondent] did not affix his signature on said check, nor endorsed the same nor did he give authority to any representative to sign and endorse said check, and that such was only a scheme for herein accused to be able to get hold of the amount of xxx as once the said check was falsified, herein [petitioner] encashed the same and once in possession of the amount of xxx, with deliberate intent, with intent [to] gain, did, then, and there willfully, unlawfully, and feloniously appropriate, take, misappropriate,

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> misapply, embezzle and convert to his own personal use and benefit said amount of xxx, Philippine Currency, despite demands made upon him to account for said amount, he has failed to do so, to the damage and prejudice of [private respondent].[40]

As it is, the dismissal of the administrative case against petitioner cannot be implored as basis for the dismissal of the criminal complaints filed against him.

In Paredes, Jr. v. Sandiganbayan, Second Division,[41] we pronounced:

> As we have held in Tan v. Comelec, the dismissal of an administrative case does not necessarily bar the filing of a criminal prosecution for the same or similar acts which were the subject of the administrative complaint.
>
> Petitioner's assertion that private respondent Alterado has resorted to forum-shopping is unacceptable. The investigation then being conducted by the Ombudsman on the criminal case for falsification and violation of the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act, on the one hand, and the inquiry into the administrative charges by the COMELEC, on the other hand, are entirely independent proceedings. Neither would the results in one conclude the other. Thus an absolution from a criminal charge is not a bar to an administrative prosecution (Office of the Court Administrator v. Enriquez, 218 SCRA 1) or vice versa. (Emphasis supplied.)

Conversely, we have also ruled that the dismissal of the criminal case is not per se a bar to administrative sanctions[42] when called for by the malfeasance, misfeasance or nonfeasance of a public officer.[43] To paraphrase, dismissal of the criminal case does not foreclose administrative action involving the same facts.[44]

Finally, we agree with the People that the ground raised by petitioner, which is the dismissal of his administrative case, does not per se exonerate the criminal action. As aptly cited, Article 89 of the Revised Penal Code, which provides the manner in which criminal liability is totally extinguished, does not contemplate the case of the petitioner, thus:

> ART. 89. How criminal liability is totally extinguished. – Criminal liability is totally extinguished:
>
> - By the death of the convict, as to the personal penalties; and as to pecuniary penalties, liability therefor is extinguished only when the death of the offender occurs before final judgment.
>
> - By service of the sentence.
>
> - By amnesty, which completely extinguishes the penalty and all its effects.
>
> - By absolute pardon.
>
> - By prescription of the crime.
>
> - By prescription of the penalty.
>
> - By the marriage of the offended woman, as provided in article 344 of this Code.

Evidently, the right of the prosecution to present evidence as it finds necessary and relevant to prove petitioner's guilt beyond reasonable doubt in Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531 must be respected. The aforesaid cases must be allowed to proceed notwithstanding the dismissal of the administrative case filed against the petitioner in OMB-VIS-ADM-97-0536.

WHEREFORE, the Petition is DENIED. The Regional Trial Court, Branch 52 of Talibon, Bohol, is ORDERED to proceed with dispatch in resolving Criminal Cases Nos. 99-525 to 99-531. Costs against petitioner.

SO ORDERED.

Ynares-Santiago, (Chairperson), and Austria-Martinez, JJ., concur.
Nachura, J., no part.

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[1] Penned by former Associate Justice Elvi John S. Asuncion with Associate Justices Isaias P. Dicdican and Ramon M. Bato, Jr., concurring; rollo, pp. 207-211.

[2] Penned by Associate Justice Ramon M. Bato, Jr. with Associate Justices Isaias P. Dicdican and Vicente L. Yap, concurring; id. at 226.

[3] Penned by Presiding Judge Irma Zita V. Masamayor; id. at 143-144.

[4] Id. at 171-178.

[5] Id. at 35.

[6] Records, pp. 2-3.

[7] Id. at 9-12.

[8] Rollo, pp. 62-65; penned by Graft Investigation Officer I Alvin Butch E. Cañares with the recommending approval of Graft Investigation Officer III Virginia Palanca-Santiago and Deputy Ombudsman for the Visayas Arturo C. Mojica.

[9] Id. at 79-99.

[10] Article 315 of the Revised Penal Code punishes the act of swindling or estafa.

[11] Article 171. Falsification by public officer, employee or notary or ecclesiastic minister. – The penalty of prision mayor and a fine not to exceed 5,000 pesos shall be imposed upon any public officer, employee, or notary who, taking advantage of his official position, shall falsify a document by committing any of the following acts:

- Counterfeiting or imitating any handwriting, signature or rubric;

- Causing it to appear that persons have participated in any act or proceeding when they did not in fact so participate;

- Attributing to persons who have participated in an act or proceeding statements other than those in fact made by them;

- Making untruthful statements in a narration of facts;

- Altering true dates;

- Making any alteration or intercalation in a genuine document which changes its meaning;

- Issuing in an authenticated form a document purporting to be a copy of an original document when no such original exists, or including in such copy a statement contrary to, or different from that of the genuine original; or

- Intercalating any instrument or note relative to the issuance thereof in a protocol, registry, or official book.

The same penalty shall be imposed upon any ecclesiastical minister who shall commit any of the offenses enumerated in the preceding paragraphs of this article, with respect to any record or document of such character that its falsification may affect the civil status of persons.

[12] Rollo, pp. 66-69.

[13] The dispositive portion of the 26 March 1999 Resolution, reads:

WHEREFORE, finding the respondent guilty of grave misconduct, the penalty of DISMISSAL FROM SERVICE AND FORFEITURE OF ALL BENEFITS is entirely imposed. (Id. at 69.)

[14] Id. at 74.

[15] Penned by Associate Justice Rodrigo V. Cosico with Associate Justices Eubolo G. Verzola and Eliezer R. delos Santos, concurring; id. at 71-77.

[16] Id. at 77.

[17] Id. at 76.

[18] Id.

[19] Id.

[20] Id. at 104.

[21] Id. at 106; 298.

[22] Id. at 108-116.

[23] Id. at 143-144.

[24] Id. at 144.

[25] Id. at 145-151.

[26] Id. at 171-178.

[27] Id. at 176.

[28] Id. at 210.

[29] People v. Judge Toledano, 387 Phil. 957, 964 (2000).

[30] Tan v. Commission on Elections, G.R. No. 112093, 4 October 1994, 237 SCRA 353, 359, citing Office of the Court Administrator v. Enriquez, A.M. No. P-89-290, 29 January 1993, 218 SCRA 1, 10.

[31] Paredes, Jr. v. Sandiganbayan, 322 Phil. 709, 730 (1996).

[32] Id.

[33] In Barillo v. Gervacio, G.R. No. 155088, 31 August 2006, 500 SCRA 561, 572, we said:

Administrative cases are, as a rule, independent from criminal proceedings. The dismissal of a criminal case on the ground of insufficiency of evidence or the acquittal of an accused who is also a respondent in an administrative case does not necessarily foreclose the administrative proceeding nor carry with it relief from administrative liability. This is because unlike in criminal cases which require proof beyond reasonable doubt, the quantum of proof required in administrative proceedings is substantial evidence, defined as such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.

[34] Carlos v. Civil Service Commission, G.R. No. 105293, 7 December 1993, 228 SCRA 262, 266.

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[35] Lumiqued v. Exevea, 346 Phil. 807, 829 (1997); Office of the Court Administrator v. Sumilang, 338 Phil. 28, 38 (1997); Mariano v. Roxas, 434 Phil. 742, 749 (2002).

[36] De la Cruz v. Department of Education, Culture and Sports-Cordillera Administrative Region, 464 Phil. 1033, 1050 (2004), citing Ocampo v. Office of the Ombudsman, G.R. No. 114683, 18 January 2000, 322 SCRA 17, 22.

[37] Paredes, Jr. v. Sandiganbayan, supra note 31.

[38] Id.

[39] Falsification by public officer, employee, notary or ecclesiastic minister.

[40] Rollo, pp. 79-99.

[41] Supra note 31.

[42] In Barillo v. Gervacio, supra note 33 at 573, the Court cited an exception to this rule, which, however, finds no application to the case at bar for salient differences in factual and legal circumstances; hence:

> In Larin v. Executive Secretary [G.R. No. 112745, 16 October 1997, 280 SCRA 713, 728], we held that where the very basis of the administrative case against petitioner is his conviction in the criminal action which was later on set aside by this Court upon a clear and categorical finding that the acts for which he was administratively held liable are not unlawful and irregular, the acquittal of the petitioner in the criminal case necessarily entails the dismissal of the administrative action against him, because in such a case, there is no more basis nor justifiable reason to maintain the administrative suit.

[43] Hipolito v. Mergas, A.M. No. P-90-412, 11 March 1991, 195 SCRA 6, 10; Office of the Court Administrator v. Anquilo, Jr., Adm. Matter No. P-92-701, 8 November 1993, 227 SCRA 492, 495.

[44] De la Cruz v. Department of Education, Culture and Sports-Cordillera Administrative Region, Supra note 36 at 1049.

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