IN SEARCH OF ‘BANGSA MALAYSIA’: POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN MULTIENTHIC MALAYSIA

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I. Introduction

When we discuss identity-related problems today, such as multiculturalism, it is so easy for us to immediately adopt, what I call, the “cultural analysis” approach, emphasising the so-called cultural differences and uniqueness, mostly constructed or perceived, and elaborating painfully over the “events of realpolitik” generated by these circumstances, violent or otherwise. We moan over them helplessly, be it about human right violation or ethnic cleansing. Then we offer our “academic” analyses, which often function more to soothe ourselves than to change anything remotely related to the real problem. As a result, contemporary discussions on ‘national identity’ issues have become overly ‘cultural and political’ in nature, both in the academic and non-academic sphere. In a sense, it has become rather parochial, if blinkered, exercise.

I prefer to locate the theme national identity, hence multiculturalism, in a wider socio-logcal context, one which perhaps would be relevant as well as helpful to us to begin to understand the experience of multiethnic societies in the Third World and beyond. As we know, these societies do share many similar historical and structural conditions which have shaped and made them into what they are today. So has the countries within Western Europe, too.

The Western Europe experience has been subjected to detailed conceptual and empirical studies recently. One of the main contributors to this effort has been Zygmunt Bauman. According to Bauman (1988: 811) “post modernity... is an aspect of a fully fledged, viable social system which has come to replace the ‘classical’ modern capitalist society and thus needs to be theorised according to its own terms”. He is essentially referring to the experience of contemporary Western Europe which is undergoing a social transformation similar to the emergence of modern society. If the transformation that brought about modern society is known as “modernization”, the one which Western Europe presently undergoing could be called “postmodernization” (Crook, Pakulski, Waters, 1992: 1-2), which Harvey (1989: 141-72) says emerged in 1973.

By implication what the Third World countries are experiencing currently is a process of social transformation similar to the emergence of the classical capitalist modern society in Europe soon after the advent of the Industrial Revolution. In other words, these countries are still undergoing a “modernization” process, or, put in another way, have embarked on a “modernization project” not dissimilar to the one in Europe. In some sense, the Industrial Revolution is still going on in most of the non-European countries.
However, the “modernization project”, hence the rise of non-European capitalism, has been the result of many historically specific circumstances which in many ways make the non-European experience quite different to that of the European one. For instance, the rise of non-European capitalism, compared to the European one, has been the result of a more complex alliances between the intellegentsia (foreign and local intellectuals and elites of upper and middle classes) and commercial groups (local, comprador and foreign), developed during the colonial period and still surviving in a redefined socio-political scenario of the post-colonial era. This has resulted, for instance, in the dominance of “the political” over “the economic” in the non-European context, particularly in the Third World.

As a consequence, the “modernization project” of Third World countries displays a strong two-part component: one economic and the other political. The struggle for these countries seems to be to find a balance between the two components to allow the modernization project to proceed smoothly. The pattern seems to be as follows.

On the one extreme, for instance, in a country like Sri Lanka, both the economic and the political components of its modernization project are still struggling to find a balance. Any success achieved in the economic sphere in Sri Lanka seems to have been wiped out in no time by the failure in the political sphere. On the other extreme is the case of Singapore. It seems to have managed, after about three decades, to weld both the economic and the political quite well to graduate as an NIC.

Malaysia, as many observers argue, is in a position which is between that of Sri Lanka and Singapore. It has managed to sought out the economic component of its modernization project rather successfully, as its spectacular annual growth rate figures of above 8 per cent in the last five years indicate. Without doubt the Malaysian economy is doing well but not without its in-built difficulties. However, it has been argued that the political difficulties are more serious than the economic ones and they are perceived as the obstacles to Malaysia’s further economic success. In other words, Malaysia’s achievement in its effort to become modernised thus far has been perceived as one-sided, heavily economic in nature, and not matched by similar achievement in the political sphere.

Informed by such a viewpoint as well as concern for the long-term survival of the society, Malaysia’s prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, in 1991, introduced his famous “Vision 2020”, which simply means that in the year 2020 Mahathir wants Malaysia to be an advanced industrial country with an established nation-state, hence a fully modern society. He lists a number of challenges and obstacles that Malaysia has to overcome in order to achieve this “Vision 2020”.

It is quite clear that, to him, the number one challenge within the Malaysian modernization project is the political one, that is, the creation of a Bangsa Malaysia, or a united Malaysian nation. This challenge is the greater and critical one compared to the economic challenge of sustaining the current level of economic growth in Malaysia’s effort to become modern.

This paper is an attempt to examine briefly what constitutes this political challenge, or at least parts of it, hence dealing essentially with the political component of Malaysia’s modernization project, namely, its attempt at nation-building and creating a national identity, its effort to deal with multiethnicity and multiculturalism, and its ambition of establishing a united Malaysian nation.

Previous analysis on nation-building in Malaysia has been framed mainly in the context
of the “plural society” paradigm (von Vorys 1975, Means 1991) and discussions inevitably revolve around the fact that Malaysia needs good ethnic relations because this would guarantee a stable future for the country. There is a glimpse of a “prophet of doom” syndrome in this approach. But those who have used the “political economy” paradigm (Brennan 1982) or “cultural studies” approach (Lof Kok Wah 1991) seems to share the same syndrome, too.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the central empirical focus of research and analysis on nation-building, national identity and multiculturalism in Malaysia has been mainly on the issue of “Malay dominance” or “Malay hegemony”. Public discussion, either in the mass media or at the everyday level, on the same topic has also centred around the issue of Malay hegemony, some for and some against Malay hegemony (Kua Kia Soong 1990).

What seemed to be left out, muted or marginalised in most of the public and academic discussion and analysis has been the “minority voices”, be it within the Malays and the larger bumiputera (lit. son of the soil or indigenous) community or amongst the Chinese and Indians. Perhaps this is owing to some political constraints which exist in Malaysia, some of which are institutional in nature while others self-imposed. The end result is that, in Malaysia, these “minority voices” are not articulated to the full or simply ignored.

The younger generation from the various ethnic groups have become increasingly ignorant of one another's political position and ideological stance, both in terms of their history as well as contemporary concerns. It could be said, therefore, that the political space for a genuine informed inter-ethnic dialogue has shrunk considerably, which, arguably, is to the long-term disadvantage of nation-building in Malaysia. In place of this dialogue, discourse about nation-building in Malaysia has been solely informed by stereotypes and prejudices very much negative in substance and nature.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the “minority voices” have often been amplified abroad by concerned scholars and others. But again, understandably, the manner in which they have been presented abroad has been mainly as a respond to or a critique of the Malay dominance, even by the so-called radical Marxist scholars, whose Marxisant approach seemed to be heavily ethnicised (Brennan 1982, Hing Ai Yun 1985 and Fatimah Halim [psuedonym of Hing Ai Yun] 1981). In a sense, therefore, the “minority voices” remain muted and locked within the unresolved national identity context in Malaysia.

This paper proposes to survey these different minority voices in relation to nation-building and national identity construction in Malaysia and show that despite the dominance of a particular nation-state paradigm or “official nationalism” there exists a host of equally influential alternative nation-state paradigms being worked out at various levels informing the realpolitik in Malaysia. In the context of Malaysian social studies as well as general public discourse in Malaysia, this has never been attempted seriously before. Therefore, what I present here is not only for academic consumption but also for the consumption of ordinary Malaysians, non-academics mainly, from all ethnic groups.

II. Malaysia's 'Modernization Project' and Its Search for a Nation

By emphasising the fact that Malaysia needs to create a united Malaysian nation, or Bangsa Malaysia, as an important imperative for Malaysia to finally achieve the status of a modern society, the prime minister has implied that thus far Malaysia could be said to have
existed as a state without a nation or still in search of a nation. Simply put what Malaysia wants to create is really a “state-nation” rather than a “nation-state”.

Perhaps, sociologically speaking, it is more accurate to say that Malaysia, in the broad economic sense, is a coherent variant of a capitalist entity, or state, but in the political and ideological sense, it is still searching for a parallel coherence because there exists a competing notions of “nations of intent” within the populace. In some ways, it is not unlike the African situation which has been complicated by “tribal nationalism” and described by Olorunsola (1972) as “one state, many nationalisms”, or it shares similarities with the Papua New Guinea case of “micro nationalisms” (May 1978).

What is this concept of Bangsa Malaysia that Mahathir proposes? The concept could mean “nation-state” as well as “national identity”. Qualitatively, this concept, as argued by some Malay intellectual bureaucrats (Rustam A. Sani 1991), is different from the “Malaysian Malaysia” concept proposed by Lee Kuan Yew during the formation of Malaysia in 1963. If Lee Kuan Yew’s “Malaysian Malaysia” argues for a nation-state in which everyone, irrespective of race, colour and creed, enjoys equal status, Mahathir’s Bangsa Malaysia argues for a nation-state in which the constitutionally recognised Malay special position retained.

It could be said, therefore, that the shaping of the political agenda of Malaysia’s modernization project, as outlined by Mahathir, is contextualised within the existing legal-bureaucratic structures, namely, the Malaysian constitution and the federalist nature of the state. The Lee Kuan Yew’s “Malaysian Malaysia” agenda, on the other hand, demands a total constitutional reform and perhaps the formation of an “absolutist” unitary state, such as the one in Singapore, which, according to many analysts, has not really been a “Singaporean Singapore” one (Li 1990).

Since it is most unlikely that a total constitutional reform would take place in Malaysia, which, in turn, could result in the dismantling of the federalist state and the formation of a unitary state in its place, does it mean ordinary Malaysians of various ethnic backgrounds do not have or cannot entertain their own notions of nation of intent? Can’t they voice their political vision of the kind of Malaysia they would like to live in? If they do, are these notions simply wishful thinking? Have they been articulated and worked out in practical forms? These are the questions which I shall try to answer in the next section of this paper.

III. Malaysia: Competing Notions of ‘Nation of Intent’

As it stands, Malaysia has all the features of a modern democratic dependent capitalist state. It has a constitution, respects the rule of law and the concept of citizenship, recognises and staunchly guards its territory, has a bona fide government, and conducts relatively free elections at regular intervals. With its booming economy it has more than enough funds not only to finance massive developmental projects but also to staunch or write-off massive leaks, diplomatically called “economic mismanagement”, in the system. In the Hobbesian sense, the Malaysian state is working well as “an artificial animal”. As long as the economy prospers, as it has for the last decade, the state survives.

But Mahathir clearly indicates that having a strong and active Malaysian state and a thriving economy cannot really guarantee the state’s continued survival because it could be easily dismantled by centrifugal forces, particularly ethnic disunity. Therefore Mahathir
believes that there is strong rationale for Malaysians to persevere with the effort to create a united Malaysian nation, or Bangsa Malaysia, despite unsuccessful efforts in the last two decades (Rustam 1991). In his mind, this is simply one of the better ways to avoid the rise of dismantling tendencies which threaten the state. In my view, he is expressing his concept of Malaysia as both “a state of stable tension” and “a state in stable tension”. (An elaboration of these terms is found in, Shamsul 1991).

The lack of success in the government’s “national integration program” for the last two decades or so does not mean that Malaysians have no notion of their national identity (Smith 1991). On the contrary, if we study its history, Malaysia is never short of nationalist movements or “imagined communities”, a concept introduced by Ben Anderson (1991). But when we talk about “nation”, “national identity” and “nation-building” in Malaysia we immediately confront a major problem which is simultaneously political and academic.

Because of the delicate demographic balance that exists between ethnic groups in Malaysia and the dominance of one of these ethnic groups, namely the Malays, at the political level, other ethnic communities aspire, first, to defuse or to free themselves of Malay political dominance and then to create its own version of Malaysia, even if it is only a Utopia (Smith 1984, Krishnan Kumar 1991).

In other words, each of these ethnic groups has not only an “imagined community” to motivate them in their “communal struggle” but also their own implementable “nation of intent” framework (Rustam 1976, 1975, and for African cases see, Olorunsolo 1972). This framework is essentially a framework of ideas and actions ready to be implemented when the opportunity arises, say, when a particular ethnic group, through electoral political victory, comes to rule the national, federal government or a particular negeri, or provincial, government. This is not an uncommon event in Malaysia’s post-colonial history (Means 1991).

For instance, the National Front coalition party has been ruling Malaysia at the federal level since independence in 1957. It has its own “nation of intent” framework. Parti Islam, an opposition Malay party, has now ruled Kelantan state twice in the last four decades. Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), a non-Muslim bumiputera party, formerly a member of the National Front and broke away in 1990 became the first full opposition party to rule Sabah state in the Borneo state’s history (Sabihah 1991). Both Parti Islam and PBS have their own “nation of intent” framework too.

What complicates matters is the fact that within each ethnic group there exist various factions, or aliran, each expressing its own “imagined communities” and “nation of intent”. Therefore, what has existed in Malaysia all this time is a host of “competing nations of intent”. Therefore, amongst the Malays and the wider bumiputera community (including the Kadazans of Sabah and Iban of Sarawak), the Chinese and the Indians, and between them exists a plethora of “nations of intent” often articulated openly in election manifestos or in debates concerning culture, language, literature and religion (Aziz Deraman 1975, Kua Kia Soong 1985, Ungku Maimunah 1991). However, we must also recognise the fact that the “nation of intent” framework which is currently operating in Malaysia is a Malay-based one. What most observers failed to recognise, especially for those who prefer to see Malaysian society as being made up of internally homogenous ethnic blocks, is the fact that the presently dominant framework only represents the version of one of the three nationalist elite groups within Malay society (Roff 1967), called by Chandra Muzaffar (1979) the “administocrats” (see also, Ariffin Omar 1993).
This group organised itself as a political party called the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Historically, its rise to power had the support of the British. The two other Malay nationalist elite groups are the Islamic based one with an “Islamic state” as their “nation of intent” (Funston 1980) and the Malay Left with “Melayu Raya” as their “nation of intent” (Rustam 1976). Both have failed to gain political support nationally. However, Parti Islam, as mentioned above, has succeeded in the State of Kelantan.

Let us trace briefly the general development of UMNO, the content of its “nation of intent” framework, and its implementation. It is UMNO’s version of what Malaysia should be that is currently being propagated vigorously, implemented by the present government and permeating at every level of the society.

Since the end of World War II, we have seen at least four phases of the implementation of the administocrats’ (UMNO’s) “nation of intent” framework, made possible initially by British military and material support.

The first phase was during the reign of Onn Jaafar, UMNO’s first president. His preferred notion of nation was the “nation of plural society”. He adopted a rather “pure liberalist” view, hence his suggestion that UMNO be turned into a multiethnic party. Eventually he had to resign as UMNO’s president when UMNO members rejected his vision. It was perceived by many as abandoning Malay interests. He left UMNO and formed a short-lived multi-ethnic party.

Tunku Abdul Rahman took over the leadership of UMNO from Onn Jaafar hence the beginning of the second phase. He adopted a similar viewpoint to that of Onn Jaafar but stressed the importance of a Malay UMNO, that is retaining UMNO as a communal party, thus emphasising the ethnic interests of the Malays on the one hand, while being civil to other ethnic groups, on the other.

Abdul Razak, when he took over from Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1970, soon after the Kuala Lumpur May 1969 racial riot, still retained that “nation of plural society” ideological framework. He, however, emphasised the primacy of Malay political hegemony which was actually written into an amended constitution and subsequently incorporated openly in public policy and institutions, particularly in the form of the New Economic Policy (NEP), popularly known as the bumiputera policy. Hussein Onn, who succeeded Razak after his death in 1976, adopted the same framework. This constitutes the third phase.

It was not until 1981, when Dr. Mahathir Mohamed took over from Hussein Onn that the framework was modified to suit global changes and Mahathir’s own vision of Malaysia’s future (Harun Derauh & Shafie Nor 1982) as a newly industrialised country (NIC) hence the commencement of the fourth phase, which we are observing now. The pro-Japan “Look East Policy” was born out of this ambition. However, this vision which was later operationalised into policy initiatives in the 1980s did not alter the basics of Razak’s version of a Malay-dominated plural society. Therefore, Mahathir’s contribution was only an addition to the already existing conceptualization, that is, to turn Malaysia into a Malay-dominated NIC.

It is in this historical and ideological context that we should locate Mahathir’s Vision 2020. To my mind, it is really a re-statement, if an up-grading, of his earlier commitment, made in 1981 soon after he became prime minister, to the establishment of Malaysia as a NIC (Jomo 1990, Shamsul 1991). It is also a statement about what is to come after the New Economic Policy, which ended in 1990.

Therefore, the present (UMNO) Malay-dominated state is articulating only one version
of potential Malay “nations of intent”. The Islamic aliran has an Islamic state version. Perhaps that’s what we are seeing in Kelantan at present with its hudud law programme. The Malay Left has Melayu Raya as its nation of intent. In bumiputera terms, the Kadazan of Sabah (Loh Kok Wah 1992) and the Dayak of Sarawak (Jayum A. Jawan 1990) each have their own vision of what kind of nation Malaysia should be.

Moreover, the Chinese and the Indians have their own “imagined communities” and “nations of intent”. Since the British period, the Chinese in Malaysia have expressed quite openly, sometimes with violence, the nation they want Malaysia to be. They are by no means united on this score (Leong 1976, Oong Hak Ching 1992).

To compound the problem Malaysian history books, especially those prepared as texts for primary and secondary schools, are heavily vetted by the Ministry of Education as in Japan. Thus only government-endorsed history can be taught in schools. This simply means a history defined by the ruling Malay administocrats (read UMNO) whose version of the nation of intent framework has been the main guideline in the formulation of government policies in the last three decades. According to an analyst, this is reminiscent of the Malay feudal traditions (Sharifah Maznah 1993).

Therefore, most Malaysian schoolchildren have never really understood and appreciated what the Islamic aliran has to say, what the Malay Left is struggling for, and most of what the Chinese, the Indians, the Kadazans, and the Dayaks have to say. They have to wait until they are at the university before they could discover these facts of life, as it were.

They were never taught exactly what was the role of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and its Malay regiment and its vision of an independent Malayan nation without the British and the monarchy (Cheah Boon Keng 1979). All that they know is that the communists or insurgents, they are officially called, were “baddies” who killed people. In post-colonial Malaysia the notion of “Malaysian Malaysia” is yet another example of the “nation of intent” framework introduced and propogated by Lee Kuan Yew on behalf of the Chinese. It was later adopted by the Democratic Action Party (DAP) of Malaysia as its “nation of intent” framework. In some sense the University Merdeka issue has to be seen and understood in this “competing nations of intent” paradigm (Aliran 1979).

In more recent times there has been talk of “Kadazan nationalism” in Sabah and “Dayakism” in Sarawak. Of course, in the context of Sabah and Sarawak, the situation is further complicated by a number of factors, namely, the federal-state relationship, the intra-bumiputera nature of the problem, religion, and of course the economy.

The emergence of these “imagined communities” and “nations of intent” amongst the various ethnic groups in Malaysia and also within each of them has something to do partly with the construction of homogenized ethnic categories for purposes of Census taking exercises conducted by the colonial government (Hirschman 1986, 1987). These began in 1871 in the Straits Settlements. The spread of education and increased literacy amongst the populace were relevant factors to be considered here. But according to Ben Anderson, without print capitalism as a a major catalyst, nationalism cannot come about. Only through the production and distribution of printed materials can the shared sense of common homeland and destiny, so crucial in the construction of “imagined communities”, be felt by the nationalists.

In the context of Malaysia, the simplistic argument amongst some historians and political scientists is that historically only the Malays have had “nationalism” because they had a common homeland, called Tanah Melayu (lit. Land of the Malays), and shared a feeling of
common destiny articulated through a common language, culture, and religion. The aliens (British, Chinese, Indians, and Others) were seen as birds of passage because they had their own homelands where they anchored their shared feelings of common destiny.

This is a clear misreading of "nationalism" as a concept and praxis. The concept does not prescribe that any form of "nationalism" has to have first a physical homeland to be legitimately called as such. In his seminal work, now considered a classic, the late Kedourie (1993 [original 1960]), argues, in a Kantian mould, that nationalism is about emancipation and self-determination, or in his words, "nationalism is, in the first place, a method of the right determination of the will" (Kedourie 1993: 76) and the rest is shaped by and around such will.

But the Second World War and the events that followed soon afterwards, particularly the failed Malayan Union (1946) project of the British and, later, the formulation and implementation of the Federation of Malaya (1948), created for the non-Malays an atmosphere conducive to the development of a desire to establish a nation in which they would receive equal treatment, have access to all opportunities based on the principle of equality of opportunity and of meritocracy (Lau 1991).

This aspiration to have a nation, which is pre-defined and guided by clear concepts and programmes of operation, I have called the "nation of intent" framework. To the participants, members or followers, of each of these aliran, be they amongst the Malays or non-Malays, these nations of intent and what they constitute are real and must be actively propagated and defended if need be. In this context, the ethnicization of literature in Malaysia has been a logical consequence of such a development, for much of the articulation of the ideas inherent in the nation of intent phenomenon, or the protests against state hegemony, find expression mostly in literary form (Ungku Maimunah 1991).

This situation has given rise to the multiple voices we hear in Malaysia representing the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians, the Kadazans, the Dayaks and so forth; or the Islamic fundamentalists vs. the secularists amongst the Malays or the Chinese-educated vs. the Western-educated amongst the Chinese; and so on.

These voices could be heard and felt most significantly at the grassroots and in the everyday context in Malaysia. While silently accepting the dominant UMNO-sponsored idea of nation of intent as the basis of nation-building and national identity formation in Malaysia, various communal groups in Malaysia have their own notions of nation worked out within which subsequently is appropriated and imbibed by individuals within each of these groups as a framework of daily interactions.

For instance, based on a pilot survey of lower-ranking Malay office workers in a government department which have direct contact daily with the multi-ethnic Malaysian public, I have been made to understand that they favour one ethnic group over the other not simply because they belong to one particular ethnic group but also because they believe what they are doing is "in line with the national policy and fulfilling the national interest". On the other hand, a group of non-Malay clients of the department that I interviewed, who seem to understand and accept the "national policy" imperative, is of the view that they have been often unfairly treated because they are non-Malays. They also express that there is a need for their views of how Malaysia should be, hence how they should be treated, to be incorporated in the "national policy", which they thought the elites within their community have failed to do.

In short, it could be said that at the level of daily inter-ethnic interactions in Malaysia,
a more watered-down and mundane, if individualised, form of the various notions of nation of intent continuously compete for political space, even though at the macro national level it is perceived as has been somewhat resolved. Phenomenologically, this social tendency could be termed, for want of a better term, as "everyday nationalism". Or, is it sufficient to view it as a "everyday form of peddling cultures". (I hope to elaborate on this concept in the near future based on my present research. See also Boulanger 1992.)

V. Conclusion

Framed in the context of the present theme of this conference, namely, "multiculturalism and identity", this paper has tried to do three things.

Firstly, it has re-located the theme "multiculturalism and identity" in a wider sociological context, namely, "the modernization project" of developing countries, like Malaysia, in which, besides the economic program, the political program of nation-building, hence the national identity question, is a part of. This conceptual re-contextualization is necessary in view of the fact that many of debates on "multiculturalism", "nationalism", "national identity" and "nation-building", both within and outside the academe, have been overly "political", and in the Malaysian context it has been examined mostly in the narrow context of ethnic relations.

Secondly, the paper has also described and analysed the origin, content and contemporary situation, especially the contradictions within, of this political program as experienced by Malaysia. The argument has been framed in the context of "one state, many nations" because of the fact that the successful economic program in Malaysia does not necessarily engender a similar success in its political program, in fact there has been plenty of contradictory tendencies within as found in the various notions of nation of intent, hence being seen, particularly by the elites, as putting the future of Malaysia's modernization project in a somewhat doubtful position.

Thirdly, the paper also briefly examines the impact of the competing notions of nation of intent, which has existed in Malaysia for some time now, on ordinary Malaysians, or Malaysians at the grassroots, articulated in a manner that it could be called as "everyday nationalism" which has its origin in the state-sponsored "official nationalism".

From the sociology of knowledge perspective, the overall discussion in this paper have been framed in a set of familiar analytical tools, concepts and categories using Malaysia as an empirical case. A number of other concepts have also emerged, not necessarily new ones, from this discussion such as "everyday nationalism", "everyday form of peddling cultures" as opposed to "official nationalism", which could be helpful for us in this conference to begin to make comparison of our different experiences on "multiculturalism" and "national identity" question and related issues, be it in or outside Asia.

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