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Middle East Brief

April 2016
No. 98

Egypt's 2015 Parliamentary Elections: A Prelude to Stability?

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Between October and December 2015, Egypt held a two-phase parliamentary election. This was the first parliamentary election held since mass protests against Mohamed Morsi's presidency led to his ouster in the summer of 2013 and brought into power a former military officer, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. After ongoing unrest and a multitude of elections processes, the 2015 parliamentary elections were conceived of as the final step in el-Sisi's roadmap to restore stability to Egypt. The goal was for Egypt to return to a multi-party system akin to the one President Sadat established in 1976.

The 2015 elections were hotly contested, however, both within and outside Egypt. Islamists and members of civil society alike opposed them, arguing that they were a farce—a mere formality designed to give a facade of credibility to a despotic regime. Foreign commentators were equally critical. *The Washington Post*, for example, described the elections process as more of a "political circus than a step on the path to democracy."[1]

By contrast, for many other Egyptians the 2015 parliamentary elections, together with el-Sisi's election as President in 2014, represented the completion of institutional rebuilding, the formation of a full and functioning government, and the fulfillment of el-Sisi's promise of stability. This Brief will examine whether this proved to be so.

Will the parliament elected in 2015 mark the beginnings of stability in Egypt, or will it turn out, when it fails or is dissolved, to have been just another chapter in the "sustainable instability"[2] that has been said to characterize the el-Sisi regime?

The Lead-up to the 2015 Elections

Since the uprising that ended Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year rule, Egyptians have been living virtually without a parliament. The longest a parliament has lasted in the past five years was six months. That parliament held its first session in January 2012 and was dissolved by the Supreme Constitutional Court in June of the same year. President Morsi attempted to restore this parliament's legitimacy, but the Supreme Court's ruling on the matter prevented that from happening.

By 2013, Morsi was struggling to maintain his control over Egypt. In June a second revolution occurred, and Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government was overthrown. Shortly thereafter, in July, Egypt's political elite accepted el-Sisi's roadmap, according to which parliamentary elections were to take place in March 2015. The Supreme Constitutional Court objected to parts of the elections law, however, leading el-Sisi to form a commission to address the Court's concerns.

The elections were accordingly postponed until the fall of 2015, when they took place in two stages: Fourteen provinces voted over the course of two days in October, and thirteen provinces subsequently voted over two days in November. In the end, voters elected 448 representatives in single-seat districts as well as 120 representatives among those who ran on party lists. A total of 5,420 candidates ran for these seats, 417 of whom (or 8 percent) were women. President el-Sisi later appointed 28 additional members, making the total number of members in Egypt's new parliament 596.

The 2015 Elections: Sources of Controversy

At the heart of the 2015 elections controversy was the specific law enacted to govern those elections. The Ad-Dostor (Constitution) party, the Al-Karama (Dignity) party, the Popular Socialist Alliance, the Popular Current, and Egypt's Liberty party: All opposed the law on the grounds that it would not lead to just representation in Parliament, and that the process adopted constituted a setback for the possibilities of a democratic transition in Egypt. These critics maintained that the law provided an opportunity for the wealthy and powerful members of the elite to use their resources to manipulate the outcome, as well as for tribal and clannish politics to gain prominence.

The Free Egyptians party, the Reform and Development party, and the Tagammu Unionist, Progressive, and Nationalist parties, however, all argued the opposite. They asserted that the single-seat electoral system would ensure that the state was run by civilian rather than military institutions and would prevent the rise of "extremists" (referring to the Muslim Brotherhood). The law, they maintained, created a direct relationship between the candidates and the voters, enabled a better understanding of the candidates' programs, and guaranteed a balanced representation in the Parliament of Egypt's various political forces.

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Yet an important feature of the recent parliamentary elections was that voting at the ballots was free and secure. Egypt's ruling elite did not interfere in the process, and security forces ensured the safety of election sites without using their power to threaten voters. This was not enough, however, to ensure a truly egalitarian elections process.

Article 25 of the elections law, which prescribes allowable expenses for advertising, allots candidates for single-seat districts EGP 500,000 (roughly $63,800), plus another EGP 200,000 in cases of runoff elections. For lists, permissible expenditures ranged from EGP 2.5 million to EGP 7.5 million, depending on how many seats would be won by the lists, which could range from 15 to 45. Based on these allotments, total permissible expenditures for campaigning were estimated at EGP 2.7 billion—though in reality, the majority of candidates, particularly businessmen, spent far more than the permitted sums. The Arab Union for Fighting Economic Crimes estimated that total expenditures amounted to EGP 20 billion.[3] And in reality, money was used not only for advertising purposes but also to bribe voters.

Although the Supreme Committee of Elections ran the electoral process according to the law, it took a position of "negative neutrality" regarding violations in the vicinity of the electoral posts. Press reports indicated that forbidden propaganda, including the raising of banners and the distribution of leaflets, had occurred within such areas, along with bribery of voters. However, Councilor Ayman Abbas, the head of the Committee, recognized only 2 percent of complaints as constituting violations of the law. Thus, out of 16,702 charges, only 337 were transferred to the public prosecutor for adjudication.[4] Moreover, the Committee refrained from using many legal tools at its disposal to control the space for advertisements and bribery outside the election areas.

The Low Turnout and Its Implications

Despite the broad representation and the large number of candidates, voter turnout for the 2015 parliamentary elections was notably low, totaling 28.3 percent of eligible voters. The question is: Why? What accounts for the decision by most Egyptians to refrain from voting in these elections? One possibility is that the decision by most Egyptians to not vote was in effect a vote of no confidence in the el-Sisi administration—or, worse, in the Egyptian political system itself.

Indeed, it may be that the decision of voters to stay home was less a verdict regarding el-Sisi's performance and more a judgment of the ineffectiveness and irrelevance of politics in today's Egypt. Proponents of this view argue that Egypt is sliding back to even greater repression than was experienced during the years preceding the January 2011 revolution, that public debate is now more proscribed than had been the case in the last decade of the Mubarak era, and that the banning of Muslim Brotherhood participation in the elections limited the real choices offered the Egyptian voter. The result, according to this thinking, was that by late 2015, the hope that "politics is back," which was widely expressed in the immediate aftermath of the January 2011 revolution, had vanished, leading Egyptians to conclude that nothing would change regardless of whom they cast their vote for. So: Why bother (voting)?

A different interpretation of the low turnout is that rather than feeling hopeless about the political process, Egyptians felt by late 2015 that given the country's gradual emergence from three years of chaos and the return of stability and social

order, it was not imperative for them to participate. In this view, it was not hopelessness but belief that the country was finally moving in the right direction that resulted in Egyptians feeling that they did not have to vote. Proponents of this view also point out that the assertion that Islamists were banned from the most recent elections, thereby limiting the choices available to the Egyptian voter, is not entirely accurate. Although the Muslim Brotherhood was not allowed to participate, the Salafist Nour Party *did* compete, meaning that the choice was not confined to pro-government parties.

It should also be noted that even when Egyptians think that their vote matters, they are more inclined to participate in presidential rather than parliamentary elections. Believing that what Parliament does is less likely to have a significant impact on security, the economy, or everyday life issues, Egyptians have historically been less likely to vote in parliamentary elections than in presidential ones.

Egypt's high illiteracy and poverty rates may also help explain the low turnout. Twenty-seven percent of Egyptians are illiterate, and 26.3 percent live in poverty.[5] It is quite likely that they found the very complex legal system governing the 2015 elections too difficult a hurdle to tackle.

Finally, Egypt's media helped generate a negative popular attitude toward the elections. Between commentators debating trivial matters, such as whether a belly dancer should be an eligible candidate, and other voices arguing that any elected parliament would be short-lived, media content contributed to the creation of a negative atmosphere surrounding the elections.

Some have argued that Egyptian youth have become especially apathetic with respect to the political process since the June 2013 revolution, and that this also contributed to the low turnout in the recent elections. Yet, the evidence suggests that, although there is a grain of truth in this assertion, the relative participation of youth as a segment of the population did not differ much from that of the majority of Egyptians. In fact, six million voters aged 18–40 participated in the 2015 elections. Moreover, younger candidates (under 35 years old) won 54 parliamentary seats, or 9 percent of the total.

What Was New in 2015?

Although there were aspects of continuity in the 2015 parliamentary elections, particularly the prevalence of independent candidates, there are reasons to believe that these elections were part of a much broader process of change in the Egyptian political system. Some indications of change were:

The absence of a presidential party

Since elections were first held in Egypt in 1866,[6] there has always been a party directly affiliated with the ruler. During the monarchical era (1923–52), it was the Wafd party that was at the center of Egyptian politics. Subsequently, between 1956 and 2011, the National Democratic Party (NDP), which was formally established in 1978, gradually became the majority party.[7] (The NDP was in truth nothing more than an extension of previous similar organizations: the National Union [1956], the Arab Socialist Union [1964], and the Arab Socialist Misr Party [1976].) Similarly, the Freedom and Justice party was the Muslim Brotherhood's affiliate during the movement's 2011–13 rule. But in 2015, for the very first time, there was no such majority party affiliated with the president. And in addition to not having an official party, el-Sisi actively distanced himself from parties that sought to affiliate themselves with *him*, such as the Future of the Homeland party and the Love for Egypt list.[8]

Although there were allegations that the formation of the Love for Egypt list was initiated by Egypt's security services—and that this list was headed by General Sameh Seif Alyazal[9] seemed to lend credibility to these allegations—the coalition of parties making up this list cracked almost as quickly as it was created.

The Wafd party exited the group immediately after the elections, and one of the founders of the coalition, Mostafa Bakry, resigned. The Future of the Homeland party also jumped ship, returning only after it was assured that the coalition would not encroach on the independence of the parties making up the list.

To date the coalition has not acted in unison in the House of Representatives, as the NDP did in previous parliaments. Though the members of the coalition rallied behind the election of Ali Abdel Aal, a professor of constitutional law, as Speaker of the House, they did not vote as a bloc when it came to the election of the Speaker's deputies. Nor did they show unity when the parliament was called upon to approve or reject laws enacted by Adly Mansour (interim president from 2013-14) and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi prior to the parliamentary elections.

The absence of a presidential party also meant no return of the NDP. Prior to the elections, many commentators and activists had taken to describing the Egyptian government as essentially constituting a return to the Mubarak era.

Some analysts have even argued that the political system is actually worse under el-Sisi than it was before 2011. Those who hold such views note the return of Mubarak-era public figures to the media, as well as the release of prisoners who had been affiliated with the Mubarak regime. Based on these observations, some fear that the NDP will once again become the dominant political party, signaling a return to Mubarak-era politics.

But in reality, only about 8 percent of the candidates in these elections were NDP members,[10] and most of them ran independently in single-seat districts. According to some estimates, 86 of the 450 NDP members who ran won seats (not counting the 28 members appointed by the President), most of whom held leadership positions in the party or had held seats in pre-January 2011 parliaments. According to other estimates, 124, or about 21 percent of the 596 seats, are now held by individuals who were in some way affiliated with the NDP.[11] This figure includes the sons or relatives of former NDP members, as well as those who have affiliated themselves with other parties.

Whatever the exact percentage of seats held by individuals with some association with the NDP, it is clear that the party has not won an overwhelming number of seats and will therefore not constitute the majority party. Moreover, since most NDP-affiliated candidates ran independently or under the banners of various other parties, they will not be able to form a coherent bloc in the House of Representatives. Therefore, fears of an NDP return to power have proven unwarranted.

A proliferation of parties

More than 100 political organizations, including political movements and coalitions as well as individual parties, appeared on the Egyptian political scene following the January 25th revolution. The elections of 2015 tested the strength of these political organizations and revealed their actual popularity at the grassroots level. Only nineteen parties won seats in the House of Representatives—and half of these won only one seat.

In order to be competitive in elections, parties selected candidates based on their electability in specific districts, not their commitment to party ideology. In many cases, parties chose popular former members of the NDP in addition to independent candidates. For example, for the Free Egyptians party—one of the largest—to compete for the majority of the seats, it had to create a coalition with a number of other parties.

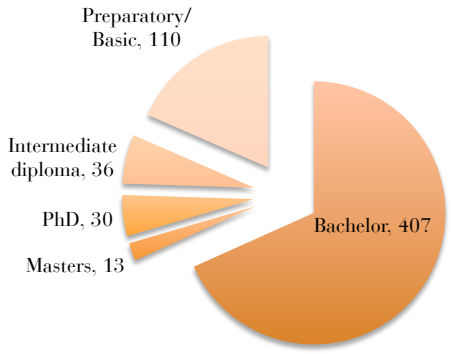
Other parties, including the Future of the Homeland, the Wafd party, the National Movement, the Congress, and the Guardians of the Nation, adopted a similar strategy.

Overall, political parties did much better than expected given the multiplicity of independent candidates, winning 43 percent of the seats. And the parties that won the largest number of seats (Free Egyptians, Future of the Homeland, and the Wafd) are generally liberal, reformist, and supportive of a free market economy. A new mix of politicians was, therefore, bred in these elections.

Better-Educated MPs

The new Egyptian parliament is the most educated assembly in Egypt's modern history. According to the Parliament Observatory of the Regional Center for Strategic Studies in Cairo, 407 MPs (68 percent) hold university degrees. Of these, 13 of the new members of parliament hold MA degrees and some 30 hold PhDs.[12]

Chart 1. MP Educational Background



A surge in women's political participation

Women constituted 55 and 54 percent of voters in the constitutional referendum (January 2014) and presidential elections (May 2014), respectively—their turnout, therefore, surpassing that of men. Until 2015, however, women had fared poorly in the political arena. In the 2011–12 elections cycle, out of 984 female candidates, only 11 won seats, accounting for merely 2.2 percent of Parliament. Because of this, Egypt ranked 116th out of 142 states in the 2014 World Economic Forum Report on the gender gap with respect to women in leadership positions.[13] In contrast, in the 2015 elections, there were 676 female candidates of whom 89 won seats—including 14 appointed by the President, as the constitution required 50 percent of the President's 28 appointees to be female. Overall, women now constitute nearly 15 percent of the new parliament. Table 1 shows the evolution of women's participation in Parliament since 1957—and since the 2011 revolution in particular.

Table 1. Women in Parliament

Year	Seats Held by Women	Total Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats Held by Women
1957	2	350	0.6
1960	6	350	1.7
1964	8	350	2.3
1969	3	350	0.9
1971	8	350	2.3
1976	6	350	1.7
1979	33*	350	9.4
1984	37	448	8.3
1987	14†	448	3.1
1990	7	444	1.6
1995	5	444	1.1
2000	7	444	1.6
2005	4	444	0.9
2010	64 ††	508	12.6
2011/2012	11§	508	2.2
2015	89	596	14.9

*Law 21 for 1979 assigned 30 seats for women.

†The Supreme Constitutional Court annulled the previous law.

††Law 149 assigned 69 seats for women.

§ Law 120 for 2011 annulled the previous law.

** Law 46 for 2014 assigned 56 seats for women in lists, plus 14 to be appointed by the President.

Source: Yousry Aezzbawi, "The Constant Marginalization: Egyptian Women in 2015," *The State of Egypt* (Regional Center for Strategic Studies in Cairo, Issue 13, December 2014), p. 12.

Increasing representation of Copts

Coptic Christians also fared well in the recent elections, performing better than they have since 1924. Twelve Coptic Christians won in single-seat districts dominated by Muslims. One of them, Dr. Samir Ghattas, won the Nasr City seat in the first round of voting. Mona Gaballah, a Coptic Christian female, won in the Manshiat Nasser and Gammalia electoral districts, which have no sizeable Christian population. Coupled with the 24 seats assigned to Copts in the election and the appointment of three additional Copts, the number of Copts in Parliament reached 39, or 6.5 percent of total seats. This figure is proportional to the number of Copts in Egypt's population. Furthermore, throughout the elections, observers noted no anti-Christian propaganda.

Table 2. Copts in Parliament

Year	Copts in Elected Seats	Copts in Appointed Seats	Total
1964	1	8	9
1969	2	7	9
1971	3	9	12
1976	-	8	8
1979	4	10	14
1984	4	5	9
1987	6	4	10
1990	1	6	7
1995	-	6	6
2000	3	3	6
2005	1	6	7
2010	4	6	10
2011/2012	7	5	12
2015	36	3	39

Source: Mustafa Elwi, ed., Parliamentary Elections 2000 (Cairo: Faculty of Economics and Political Science, 2000), p. 177, and Report of the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights, p. 6. (in Arabic).*

The absence of violence

In the past, violence has been a staple of Egyptian elections. Candidates used violence against one another; citizens pugnaciously protested election results; and the government itself applied force. In 2005, twelve voters were killed,[14] and in 2010, eight fell victim to elections-related acts of violence.[15] In light of past experience, the expectation was that the 2015 elections would likewise be marked by the use of force—by the regime, by opposition forces, or by terrorist groups.[16] Yet this was not the case, and the parliamentary elections proceeded peacefully this fall.

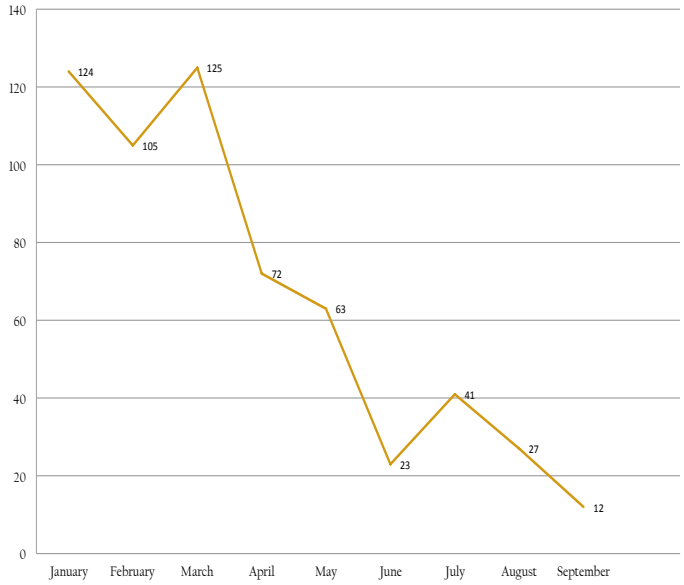
A Road to Stability?

Since the "Lotus Revolution" took place, Egypt has been in search of stability; but the volatility and tumult that have characterized the political system have not allowed for that. The transitional period during which the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ruled the country and what followed as a result of Muslim Brotherhood rule made instability a major feature of Egyptian politics. Not even the events of 2013 brought an end to this turmoil. In fact, terrorism intensified in the aftermath of this second revolution, creating an environment in which neither true political transition nor economic growth was feasible.

The roadmap introduced and subsequently implemented by el-Sisi, however, has put Egypt on a path toward stability. By the time the 2015 parliamentary elections took place, after the constitution was passed in a referendum and the Egyptian people had elected a president, the prospects for stability were greatly enhanced. During the period leading up to those elections, the state successfully faced down terrorism and bolstered the economy. Although terrorist groups such as ISIS have managed to organize attacks in Egypt, the number of terrorist attacks in Egypt declined in the course of 2015. In addition to curbing ISIS in the Sinai, the state succeeded in rolling back the Muslim Brotherhood and curtailing its violent activities in Egypt's heartland.

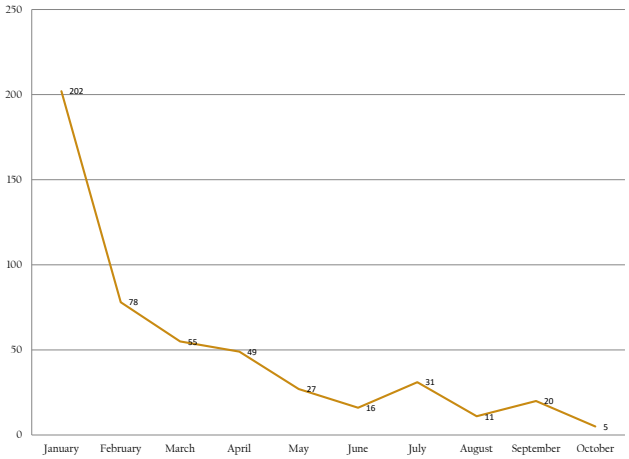
Moreover, the violence experienced in the Sinai is now concentrated largely in one area—the northeastern sector, close to the tunnel-infested Gaza border. Therefore, the number of those affected by the clashes between security forces and terrorists has been low, and is mostly confined to those affiliated with terrorist groups. While government forces continue to combat terrorist groups in this area, other parts of the Sinai have actually flourished. Sharm El Sheikh, for example, saw a 7.5 percent increase in tourism in 2015, bringing hotel and resort occupancy up to 90 percent just before the terrorist act that blew up a Russian civilian plane in December 2015. The growth in the tourism industry up until then had been an economic boon for Egypt, and was employing approximately a third of Sinai residents.

Incidence of Armed Violence (Attacks) in Egypt from January to September 2015



Source: "Cairo Index: Measuring Violence in Egypt" (Graph No. 5, Development of Acts of Armed Violence) (Regional Center for Strategic Studies in Cairo, January 17, 2016). *

Muslim Brotherhood Demonstrations from January to October 2015



Source: "Cairo Index 2015: Demonstrations and Protests by the Muslim Brotherhood" (Regional Center for Strategic Studies in Cairo, January 2016, unpublished report).

Economic indicators show that Egypt has been recovering since 2013. Although Egypt has yet to overcome the economic troubles that accompanied its revolutionary upheaval, the IMF, the World Bank, Moody, Fitch, and Standard and Poor's all agree that recovery is underway, and that reports of Egypt's permanent instability and misery are "highly exaggerated."[17] Indeed, Egypt's economic growth rate in 2014–15 was 4.2 percent, compared with 1.6 percent in the two years prior to that.[18] In the first half of 2015 the growth rate was 5.6 percent, compared with 1.2 percent during the first half of 2014.[19]

As we noted, tourism, an industry that for the past several years had been all but decimated by terrorism and political instability, grew in 2014–15; in fact, revenues from this source have reached some $5.5 billion. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in the oil and gas sector has also returned, with British Petroleum investing $12 billion over a period of five years and Eni investing $5 billion over the same period. Siemens, meanwhile, is investing in electricity and infrastructure projects. Other international and Arab investors are likewise investing in major infrastructure projects. Thus, while FDI reached $5.7 billion in 2014–15, Egypt's debt declined from about $45 billion in 2014 to about $40 billion in 2015.[20]

Conclusions

None of the developments discussed in this Brief should mislead anyone into believing that a complete economic recovery or democratic transition is in Egypt's immediate future. The public debt rate remains alarming and reached over EGP 2 trillion in 2014–15 from EGP 1.7 trillion in 2013–14, accounting for 93 percent of Egypt's GDP.[21] The budget deficit is no less disturbing at 10.7 percent of GDP in 2014–2015. Although this is a decrease from the 14 percent rate in 2012–13 (when Mohamed Morsi was President), such a high deficit makes the government's target of reducing the deficit to under 9 percent less a realistic goal than wishful thinking.

The downing of the Russian civilian aircraft over Sinai in October 2015 was a blow that undercut many of the positive developments we have discussed. But the 2015 elections signaled that the country is capable of confronting and overcoming the great difficulties it faces. Now that Egyptian government institutions are finally fully staffed, the prospect of stability and further economic development is greater than at any time since the January 2011 revolution.

Egypt's new parliament is now focused on two missions. First, to ratify laws that were enacted by the country's president in the parliament's absence. And second, to legislate laws that will spur economic growth. Major international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank have conditioned their further assistance to Egypt on the complete implementation of the roadmap. Now that the parliamentary elections have produced a functioning legislature, it is expected that these bodies will deliver on their promise to provide Egypt with some $3.5 billion in additional assistance. In the political realm, not only did the elections enable the convening of a parliament, thus completing the creation of the third arm of government envisaged in the country's constitution; they also gave new life to Egypt's political parties and provided a stage for them to debate major issues. Indeed, the parliament has already rejected a major law enacted by President el-Sisi—the Law of Civil Service—and amended other proposed legislation. Still, it remains to be seen how the new parliament will respond to forthcoming governmental plans and programs and whether or not it will express confidence in the government. New and evolving parliamentary party coalitions will also bear watching. Regardless, the recent parliamentary elections were significant in opening the door to adding a third leg—in addition to the security and economic legs—to enable the restoring of stability to Egypt in the not too distant future.

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