

## ETHNIC-BASED PARTY SYSTEMS, CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY, AND POLITICAL TRANSITION IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL TRANSITION IN ETHIOPIA

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### Abstract

According to David Easton, “Politics involves change; and the political world is a world of flux, tensions, and transitions” (Miftah, 2019: 1). Ethiopia’s history of political transition fits the conceptualization of politics as changes and the political world as a world of flux. Political transition in Ethiopia has been dominantly tragic. Atse Tewodros II’s political career ended in the tragedy of Meqdela (1868), Atse Yohannes IV’s reign culminated in the ‘Good Friday in Metema’ (1889), while Menelik’s political career ended peacefully, and that of his successor, Iyasu, ended in tragedy before his actual coronation (1916). The emperor was overthrown in a coup in 1974, and Mengistu’s regime came to an end when he fled the country for Zimbabwe (1991). (Miftah, 2019) Thus far, revolutions, peasant upheavals, and military coup d’états have been political instruments of regime change in Ethiopia. What is missing in the Ethiopian experience of transition so far is the changing of governments through elections. This article discusses the challenges and opportunities for a political transition in Ethiopia using comparative data analysis and various presentation methods.

### Keywords

*Africa, Ethiopia, election, political transition*

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## 1. Conceptualizing political transition

There are different ways of defining political transition. It can be defined as an act and a process of change from one form of government to another form, which focuses on human rights, the rule of law, and the empowerment of people to ensure that their choices, voices, and will are heard (Miftah, 2019). The concept of political transition appeared in the early 1980s in connection with the political development affecting countries in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Asia, and some African countries, where the collapse of many authoritarian regimes was underway. The concept became more popular in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was portrayed effectively by Huntington as the third wave of democratization.

The political transition doctrine assumes that any country in which there is a shift away from the authoritarian regime is a country in transition to democracy. According to this paradigm, the modes of political transition can be achieved through reforms, compromises, and overthrows (Appiah-Thompson, 2018). Three sequential phases help build democratization. These are opening, breakthrough, and consolidation. These are also termed as the durations of democratic transition that are difficult to predict for sure (Alihodžić et al., 2018).

The opening phase refers to certain activities that mark the beginning of the transition itself and coincides mostly with a reformist move by the incumbent government. The breakthrough phase coincides with the total collapse of the old government and the establishment of a new and democratic government due to different paths, such as conducting an election, enacting a new constitution, the establishment of new democratic institutions, and so on. The last phase, that of consolidation, is the stage where democracy is shaped and materialized through the implementation of state reforms, holding periodic elections, and supporting the flourishing of civil society and the whole society's life according to the new democratic rule of the game. This paradigm, however, denies the importance of the specific structural factors of the countries in affecting the outcomes of the transition to democracy. These structural factors are economic conditions, historical factors, institutional legacies, the ethnic character of the population, and other social and cultural scenarios. This situation had given rise to the scholars' use of the concept of political transition until when the concept faced huge critics by scholars in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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The era of the 1990s brought an array of efforts that tried to combine the structural as well as the agency-related aspects by studying the drivers of democratic transitions (Alihodžić et al., 2018). By the early years of the 1990s, it became clear that only a limited number of countries had succeeded in establishing consolidated and functioning democratic regimes in Africa, Latin America, and Asia; and many of the new regimes that started the transition process have become stuck in transition. These countries have immersed in a new practice of “combining a rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy with essentially [...] authoritarian traits” (Menocal et al., 2008: 29). The result was the proliferation of electoral authoritarianism. This invited scholarly attention to a shift from the study of democratization to the origins, designs, and outcomes of multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes (Helimann and Croissant, 2018: 3).

## **2. Political parties in Africa**

The history of party formation in Africa relates to colonialism and anti-colonial liberation movements (Wondwosen, 2008). The aim of the party system in Africa between the 1970s and the mid-1980s was to achieve the twin goals of national unity and economic development. Widespread poverty and poor economic and social circumstances limited democratization efforts (Miftah, 2019).

The imported nature of democratization in the 1980s made many African political parties follow structures that resembled those of the established democracies. Yet the internal activities and dynamics of operation of most African parties reflect the experiences and practices of the African parties and not those of the West. The study of Salih (2005) on the nature of African political parties identified prevailing cleavages of ethnicity, language, religion, and regional affiliation used by political parties for the mobilization of their supporters. In addition to these, other structural factors are important for partisanship in Africa, such as interests and ideologies. That is partly why, despite their ethnic orientation, most political parties in Africa generally use a party name that reflects ideological orientation such as socialist, social democratic, liberal, and conservative, and refrain from using the name of a particular group or ethnicity as a party name, except for in the case of Ethiopia and Lesotho (Miftah, 2019).

### ***2.1. Ethnic parties in Africa***

Socio-economic conditions and political history are other factors that have affected party politics in Africa. African societies are alien to the Eurocentric concept of civil society or the development of civic culture. What has been practiced for centuries in Africa is a vertical relationship among the different “bands” or tribal groups (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). In the absence of associations that mobilize ideas and people towards a common goal, the introduction of liberal democratic practices, during the post-independence period, by external powers failed to deliver any results in democratization.

In most African countries ethnic parties are rare, while ‘ethnic congress parties’ are the most common ones. The fundamental reason for the existence of many ethnic congress parties in Africa is the highly fragmented nature of ethnic groups, thus these parties are practically incapable of forming a single majority in the parliament, making coalition formation less likely to be a pragmatic alternative. It is also argued that the lack of class divisions and the absence of a strong civil society, in many of these countries, have predestined African political parties to be established along identity lines (Salih, 2005).

## ***2.2. The ethnic political party system and democracy***

According to the study made by Saideman et al. (2002), ethnic parties are formed in response to the government’s domination and the marginalization of certain identity groups. And due to the presence of authoritarian governments and governments that do not respond to the demands of different ethnic groups, ethnic conflicts have become common in many developing countries and countries in transition. It is not surprising that ethnic conflicts have become the primary sources of war and the death of human beings in the last 50 years.

The consequences of such trends and compelling evidence have been recorded by different research and policy outlets counting the highest numbers of human death, and it can be seen that the discussion of the ethnic party system is characterized by the prevalence of problems caused by the ethnicization of political systems. Scholars have indicated that the politicization of ethnic differences creates instability. For example, Norris (2003) argues against ethnic party systems saying that countries where ethnically-based political parties dominate “are prone to conflict, exacerbating existing ethnic divisions” (Norris et al., 2003: 3). Others also consider ethnic division one of the causes of the weakness of political parties in Africa (Nikiwane, 2000).

According to Chandra and Humphreys (2002), countries where ethnic-based parties dominate the quality of democracy are likely to suffer. The presence of ethnic, religious, and regional parties leads to ethnic conflicts and wars. For instance, many contemporary African states ban particularistic and ethnocentric parties for several reasons to avoid wars and conflicts that arise from the ethnicization of politics (Miftah, 2019). Today, more than twenty African countries legally ban particularistic ethnic-religious parties.

## **3. Party politics in Ethiopia**

The Ethiopian experience of democratization along with a flourishing civil society and the process of building a genuine multi-party system is at an infant stage (Miftah, 2019). This has to do with the prevalence of an authoritarian culture and an obvious lack of civic culture. Ethiopia’s political environment makes it difficult for a genuine political party system to emerge especially during the monarchic or the military regimes. In May 1991, when the EPRDF came into power, it promised the local as well as the international community to uphold democratic transition and

open up the political space for a multi-party democracy. However, Ethiopia under the EPRDF's 28-year rule failed to organize the first successful democratic election despite its ostensible effort to undertake a series of elections.

### ***3.1. Legalizing post-1991 ethnic parties and the consequences of the process***

The EPRDF government introduced ethnicity as a political instrument when coming into power in May 1991 (Semir, 2018). It also designed the country's administrative structure based on ethnically-designated regional states. Thus, ethnic-based political parties mushroomed in Ethiopia because the EPRDF, an ethnic-based party, favored the formation of political parties along ethnic lines and tacitly discouraged pan-Ethiopian parties (Merera, 2011). This period marked a historical juncture for the advent of multi-party politics in Ethiopia (Miftah, 2019).

But this juncture was manipulated by the incumbent government to serve its hidden agenda of ruling Ethiopia under the authoritarian model. The government worked to establish a system that favored the development of a vanguard party at the cost of multi-party politics. For example, according to Merera Gudina (2011), most of the parties invited to participate in the transition process of the 1990s were lacking organizational capacity and experience other than merely claiming that they represented ethnic groups. These were the parties that lacked the minimum experience required for mobilizing their communities and constituencies for political causes before the 1991 conference (Merera, 2011: 688). The logical consequence of this was that newly forged parties in the post-1991 period lacked the capacity and willingness to either challenge or critically support the EPRDF government in policy matters and regarding the sociological problems that the country faced (Abbink, 2000: 154).

In Ethiopia, the primordial ethnic criteria used for party formation complicated and negatively affected the possibility of forming a strong political party at the regional as well as the national level. This newly introduced ethnic criteria for party formation and the support given for this endeavor by the incumbent government made everyone capable of founding his or her party. The result was the mushrooming of infant politi-

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cal parties, of which number was estimated up to forty. This played two roles in favor of the EPRDF government in its early years of governance. First, the large number of political parties contributed to the good image of the TPLF/EPRDF and legitimized their acceptance by the national and the international donor community. Secondly, relating to the first statement and contrary to the expectations of the locals as well as the international community, EPRDF leaders used this image as a cover-up for their work against any kind of move towards the development of a genuine party system in Ethiopia (Miftah, 2019).

The result of this was that Ethiopia was to be categorized as a state in meltdown status where the quality of political institutions eroded over time. “The cases of Ethiopia and Zimbabwe show that real threats of being ousted from power through democratic elections can result in a ‘meltdown’ of democratic institutions and a reversion to authoritarian forms of leadership” (Rakner et al., 2007: 20). There are many accounts of the failed election efforts in Ethiopia throughout the two and half decades of the TPLF-led EPRDF leadership (Mattes and Mulu, 2016; Rynes, 2019).

#### **4. Challenges and prospects for a political transition in Ethiopia**

Following the sudden death of the ex-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, by the year 2012, the International Crisis Group (ICG) anticipated the possibility of a political vacuum and a transition to be initiated in Ethiopia and made recommendations to the international community playing a significant role in preparing and shaping the process of a possible transition. The recommendations forwarded by the ICG were the following: the government of Ethiopia should open the political space, end repressive measures, and produce a clear roadmap of the EPRDF to divide power into key areas to “lead to an all-inclusive, peaceful transition, resulting in free and fair elections within a fixed time; helping to revive the political opposition’s ability to represent its constituencies, in both Ethiopia and the diaspora” (International Crisis Group, 2012). The following seven years, after these recommendations had been released, proved to be a period of instability, authoritarianism, the repression of civil society, and the closing of information outlets, which were totally against any of the indicators marking the opening up and the readiness for starting a journey towards a political transition. That is why, partly in his August 2019 podcast, Knopf mentioned that “rules and norms for a peaceful transfer of power in Ethiopia are underdeveloped” (Rynes, 2019).

A key indicator and one of the core activities during transitional politics have been to focus on transition elections because, as Helimann and Croissant (2018) state, “The end of the ‘third wave’ of democratization and the proliferation of electoral authoritarianism has sparked a shift in scholarly attention from the study of democratization to the origins, designs, and outcomes of multiparty elections in authoritarian regimes” (Helimann and Croissant, 2018: 3). Commenting on this relation, Verjee and Knopf (2019) mention that whether Ethiopia can achieve a successful, free, and fair election process by the upcoming Ethiopian elections in 2020 is a very important issue, the answer of which determines the propensity towards a peaceful political transition or the return of state repression and authoritarian rule (Rynes, 2019).

In case an election is undertaken, the things that will happen after the results are announced or during the result announcement, those that would happen anyway, and the actions that the government could take are unclear for many observers of Ethiopian politics and the electoral aftermath. The assertion of Verjee and Knopf (2019) mentioned above is valid in the case of repression in the post-election political activities that may occur in Ethiopia after 2020. To this end, the former US Ambassador to Ethiopia, Brazeal, reminds us what happened after the EPRDF's surprise loss of the May 2005 elections. So as not to be surprised once again, in the aftermath of the 2005 elections, the EPRDF government resorted to killing, jailing, and exiling the members of the opposition's political parties, and repressed independent media. Concerning this, a 2013 report of Afrobarometer included the following: "A largely dysfunctional civil society has been crippled by draconian legislation enacted in 2009 that has forced several organizations working on issues of human rights, governance, and democracy to close or curtail their activities" (Mattes and Mulu, 2016: 4).

In sum, "Ethiopians are ruled by a former rebel movement that espouses a notion of 'revolutionary democracy' based on top-down principles of democratic centralism. It has won a series of elections, several of them disputed..." (Rynes, 2019). Accordingly, what the aftermath of the 2020 elections would bring was not clear to the ambassador and he said that he could not tell whether the EPRDF had "evolved."

One of the relevant quotes in favor of the possibility and manageability of the 2020 elections is the finding that "the association between the strength of state capacity and the survival of democracy is by now a well-established research field and some quantitative and qualitative studies hint at a positive link between state capacity and autocratic regime stability" (Helimann and Croissant, 2018: 5). But the problem with this assertion in the context of today's Ethiopia is that the current government is less authoritarian and more fragile than it was under the EPRDF on the eve of the 2015 election.

#### ***4.1. Prospects: the winds of change in Ethiopia after 2018***

Ethiopia is obviously in political transition, which attracts the attention of all the Ethiopians as well as the international community. Accordingly, key western countries', like the United States', information platforms and news outlets designate this period of ongoing political change as the year of change in Ethiopia (Rynes, 2019). The current US Ambassador to Ethiopia, Michael Raynor, in his keynote speech to the community of Jigjiga University, said that, in those days, Ethiopia was undertaking a remarkable change. A recent podcast of the Institute of African Studies discussing the change in Ethiopia in 2018-2019 mentioned that "The changes have raised many hopes as well as questions" (Cochrane and Asnake, 2019: 1).

So discussions are ongoing in the political state of affairs in Ethiopia today. As put by Cochrane and Asnake (2019: 1), "As Ethiopia has gained international attention over the last year, many people have been interested to learn more about the changes that have occurred and that continue to occur in Ethiopia."

The most significant achievements and indicators of changes undertaken by Abiy's government since 2018, cited and quoted by academics as well as the diplomatic and the donor community, are an array of activities and policy changes. According to Verjee and Knopf (2019), key observable changes in Ethiopia today include the release of political prisoners numbering hundreds of thousands. To use the words of Cochrane and Asnake (2019), one of the most significant changes observed is the release of almost all political prisoners as now there are no journalists imprisoned in Ethiopia. The unlocking of the "no-peace-no-war" situation between the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea persisted for more than a decade, and the restarting of the relationship was initiated by the government of Abiy Ahmed. The relaxation of the political climate and that of the legal and policy environment helped the civil society function freely (Cochrane and Asnake, 2019). Women's empowerment actions were taken by the government by appointing female candidates to key positions and to the cabinet established by Abiy's government; this included the appointment of the first female head of state, the first female federal attorney general, and the first female president of the national electoral commission.

According to Cochrane and Asnake (2019), in today's Ethiopia, there is a favorable political environment for opposition parties to work. This includes allowing the return of the opposition groups operating abroad to the country. One of the major limitations for which the incumbent government has been criticized by scholars and the observers of the political developments of the EPRDF's Ethiopia relates to the ever-increasing trend of the narrowing of the political space. In this regard, however, the changes that have taken place since 2018 are "dramatic and substantial." Similarly, the majority of the Ethiopian members and organizations of political parties resisting and opposing the government peacefully and by picking up arms for decades within and outside the country returned to their home country, Ethiopia, and are currently struggling to take part in the political developments unfolding in Ethiopia today. "This is a major change in the political history of this country" (Cochrane and Asnake, 2013: 3).

#### **4.2. *What are the challenges?***

According to Semir Yusuf Teshale (2018), by observing the changes in Ethiopia today, it is clear that the transition should not be taken for granted since certain factors affect the speed, the direction, and the results of the change observed, and the actors that have the capacity and willingness to alter things for personal or group interests. These are a couple of setbacks that are the results of the nature of change itself vis-à-vis the structural aspects of change brought into reality by a force from the members and leaders of the EPRDF as well as from some critical economic and security concerns (Verjee and Knopf, 2019). As mentioned above, the window of opportunity for political change has been opened in Ethiopia in a usual but a bit bold manner. And this could be taken as part of the continuum of the critical junctures that Ethiopia had had but lost for good in the past due to several political reasons.



So what those lost junctures can tell us is that the beginning of political reforms in Ethiopia does not necessarily imply or lead to a productive and positive political outcome that can practically satisfy the overall population of the country. Given the country's political culture and a pattern that is also discernible today, the possibility of the unwanted to happen is high. All of the three factors below may impede the successful political transition in Ethiopia. The first is the prevailing lack of a well-developed or evolving democratic practice, the second is the dominance of authoritarianism, and the third is the tragic nature of making politics or changing regimes in Ethiopia in the past. These factors may pose challenges to the current political opening and the possible transition to democracy to occur.

#### ***4.3. Some concerns***

The above are some practical concerns and blurred issues that are related to the very nature of transitional politics. For instance, both the opposition parties' activists and commentators on Ethiopian politics raise such concerns as whether it is possible to realize transition through goodwill and leader's charisma alone knowing that despite the prime minister's promise to bridge the transition process in today's Ethiopia, "there is not yet a negotiated road map that could help the transition-to-democracy process" (Rynes, 2019).

Besides, observers also comment that the period of transition is marked by fluidity because of the relaxing of the means of coercion and the provision of measures to protect the rights of citizens. It is also typical of the unfinished nature of transition that mostly the "old guards" and the emerging groups work in tandem. This has been witnessed by scholars analyzing political transitions in emerging democracies. Ethiopia's case is not peculiar. The type of change occurring in Ethiopia is a reform initiated by the authoritarian EPRDF regime. The old political order has not been completely changed and the new political order has not yet been established. There is not even a consultation or a negotiation about the ideology and the structures of the new government. In other words, there is still no political settlement (Cochrane and Asnake, 2019). This lack is the crucial factor and makes the accurate prediction about what is to unfold in Ethiopia's politics in the short term a challenge.

As the change started to manifest, some modifications in managing the security of the federal state as well as the regional ones were made. Yet the return of various political forces, including those who are armed, to the country and the state's key institutions that are built on them and are staffed by ethnic groups who believe in the ideology and serve the interests of the state as well as their respective identity group complicate the task of protecting the state and its citizens. The result can be easily seen as a significant number of Ethiopians have been exposed to various kinds of violence that jeopardize the well-being of citizens (International Crisis Group, 2019). So power vacuum is the number one challenge the state may continue to face, the effect of which may force governments to resort to authoritarianism or, conversely, anarchism that may put the very purpose of the state, sovereignty, and guaranteeing protection to its citizens, at risk (Cochrane and Asnake, 2019).

“High-profile assassinations, inter-communal violence and the question of Sidama statehood have endangered Ethiopia’s transition to a multi-party democracy. [...] But the challenges it faces were laid bare on 22 June when the president of one of the country’s regional states, Amhara, and the Ethiopian military’s chief of staff was assassinated in concurrent events in separate cities. The killings came after inter-communal clashes in more than ten areas in 2018 led almost three million Ethiopians to flee their homes, the world’s largest conflict-related internal displacement in any one country that year” (International Crisis Group, 2019: 1).

#### ***4.4. Ethnic federalism***

Ethiopia’s politics under the EPRDF that formalized ethnicity constitutionally has already created a high level of division and hatred among different groups who have conflicting interests within the state (International Crisis Group, 2009). Unprecedented protests, the continuing opposition, associated violence (beginning especially with the year 2015), killings, and displacements of people in many parts of Ethiopia have put the state at the verge of collapse; yet nothing has changed in this regard, and today it is ethnic-based federalism framed in the EPRDF Constitution that governs all political actions in Ethiopia. This has already brought tension as a certain part of the ANDM group, who plays a key role in the ongoing change, has been repeatedly asserting the limitations of this model in serving their interests and has been demanding a possible amendment. On the contrary, other groups have been warning about any changes in the rule of the game and caution that any alteration to this ethnic model would lead to the total collapse of the state. So the challenge is thus that it is hardly thinkable to achieve the political transition to democracy by using a rule of the game (politicized ethnicity) that is one of the most divisive ones and is contradictory to the basic principles and values of democratization.

#### ***4.5. Different groups***

In a country with people of conflicting interests and cleavages such as ethnicity, race, religion, culture, and territory as well as past wounds, the biggest challenge to the government in transition would also be providing a cohesive and all-inclusive leadership that satisfies these diverse groups’ needs and aspirations (Cochrane and Asnake, 2019: 3). As mentioned above, the government called all opposition parties and militant groups that had been militarily challenging the government to enter the country to peacefully manage their differences. Yet the limitations of this invitation are the following: it is meant mostly for those who fled the country and it has to be followed by bilateral discussions. It lacks any clear-cut negotiation points and the involvement of a third party that could help solve possible disagreements between the government and these groups.

#### ***4.6. Economic challenges and the youth bulge***

According to many observers of Ethiopian politics today, the peculiar path through which the economy achieving significant growth over the past decade has been man-

aged may be threatened due to transitional politics. Logically, the change has brought about an alteration in how the economy is managed, who manages it, and how the supply and demand sides of the market are regulated. This altering may lead to an economic slowdown. On top of this is the demographic factor of today's Ethiopia. The country has been shaken by upheavals, partly due to the high number of youth, reaching up to 70 percent of the total population, demanding jobs and financial security. The same force that hastens change may be a source of grievance that the government should wisely manage. Together with the presence of forces who are against the change to democratization, and who are suffering from what Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) called 'creative destruction,' high levels of youth unemployment are key challenges that may have a daunting effect on the possibility of a peaceful transition in Ethiopia.

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According to many measure systems, such as the Human Development Index, Ethiopia performs the worst with high poverty and vulnerability indexes, a high dependency ratio, and the lowest per capita income. It is a closed subsistence economy with very limited human development and the second largest population of Africa with 70 million young people between the ages of 15 and 39; thus, Ethiopia is already at risk of facing a lot of socio-economic problems emanating from its incapability to guarantee a decent livelihood to its citizens. This is also worse in the light of a generation with a peculiar consumption pattern and an increasing demand for consumable goods. With limited work opportunities and an underdeveloped working culture, the youth has developed unrealistic expectations of what the government should provide them.

## **5. Conclusion**

In his book called *Synergy*, published in November 2019, Nobel Laureate and leader of the transition in Ethiopia, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed commented about the nature of revolutionary democracy: it gave an ideological framework for Ethiopia's government under the EPRDF. According to his argument, revolutionary democracy has a significant problem with democratization. It tends to replace the constitutional design of a multi-party political system with a dominant-party system, creates a narrow political space, and weakens endeavors to build a democratic rule – as it has happened in Ethiopia in the last three decades. The problem of the dominant-party system emanates from the fact that it is designed in a way that it controls the bureaucracy and systematically suppresses or weakens competing political parties.

Accordingly, the good start of the democratization process witnessed in the 1980s was followed by the lack of inclusiveness and a narrowing political space (Abiy, 2019: 30). The subsequent measures undertaken by Abiy's government's recent move of establishing a party, called Prosperity Party, are based on citizenship politics and are ideological. The replacement of the EPRDF's leadership and the involvement of groups previously excluded by the EPRDF's revolutionary ideology, such as pastoralist regions, produce greater hope for the opportunity to move away from suffering from the "vice" of ethnic politics. However, this move is not without challenges. Those groups who have become the victims of 'creative destruction' have already displayed their grievances and are working to negate this process. Whatever the concerns of the authoritarian and extractive groups, who are the losers of democratization, may be, it is clear that the country is standing at yet another critical juncture, and the political activities of this moment of change, if they succeeded, would transform the country for good towards democracy and prosperity, a kind of which had never been imagined possible in Africa. ✨

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