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Guinea-Bissau: The Inescapable Feeling of Déjà Vu

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Introduction

In Giuseppe di Lampedusa's famous novel *The Leopard* the nephew of the Prince of Salina, Tancredi, urges his uncle, Don Fabrizio Corbera, to change alliances because "if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change". Since its independence, Guinea-Bissau has been faithful to Tancredi's appeals. Indeed, things have changed in order to stay as they were. In other words, despite the first multi-party democratic elections that were held in 1994, the truth was that the substantive political power remained in the hands of the military, and the military was always the tail that wagged the dog in Guinea-Bissau. In order to understand the facts in Guinea-Bissau since 1994, the Armed Forces must always be taken into account, since the epicenter of political instability has always been there. Thus, the Security Sector Reform (SSR) became crucial and unavoidable, if things are meant to change. This is the paradox: the SSR aims to tame the power of the military. But, to be successful, the SSR must guarantee their active cooperation in the process that curtails their effective power.

In the end, as it always happens, there will be losers and winners. The real challenge is to bring along the losers and to make them accept it. Using carrots and sticks,

the international community must convince the losers by peaceful means that, if they look into it more carefully, their defeat is more palatable than they previously thought. So far, it seems that the international community has been unsuccessful in doing so. Given the events of 1 April, when a coup overthrew the Armed Forces Chief and detained the Prime Minister, the combination of rewards and punishment needs be rethought.

In retrospect, it seems that the international community might have ignored relevant warning signs. Although still provisional, this article is a first attempt of making sense of it all. Thus, it aims to review the facts so far and provide a brief prospective analysis regarding the chances of a successful SSR in the future. The first section describes the facts behind the military coup, as well as the domestic and international reactions, as they were expressed in the media. The next section assesses the possible implications of the military coup, namely regarding the future prospects of the SSR process, as well as Guinea-Bissau's commitment to the fight against drug trafficking. The third section provides a few policy recommendations regarding how the international community should react to the events that took place on 1 April. The article ends with a few final remarks. It is commonly agreed that



the coup should not produce rewards and the perpetrators must be told so. Otherwise, the spiral of violence in Guinea-Bissau will never end. How to succeed in breaking this cycle of political and military instability, though, is the million-dollar question.

2010: The Turning Point

Just two days before the storm, on 30 March, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) praised Guinea-Bissau for its efforts to return to constitutional order after the tragic assassinations that took place in February 2009. The AU's PSC "note[d] the measures taken (...) regarding good governance, the fight against impunity and drug trafficking (...) and the creation of conditions conducive to the restoration of lasting peace, security and political stability".¹ Earlier, on 5 March, Joseph Mutaboba, the Representative of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, and Head of the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS), said that 2010 could be a turning point for Guinea-Bissau. In other words, Mutaboba emphasized that 2010 offered Guinea-Bissau an unprecedented window of opportunity that should not be missed.² In his latest report, dated from February, Ban Ki-moon expressed that he was "encouraged by President [Malam Bacai] Sanhá's and the Government's efforts to consolidate peace and promote stability in Guinea-Bissau".³

Guinea-Bissau seemed to be back on track, although some rumors circulated of ongoing internal instability affecting the upper echelons of the military. Aware of this,

the High Military Council issued a statement reaffirming that the Armed Forces were alert against any internal or external factors that could jeopardize the country's stability, while at the same time renewing their commitment to a successful SSR. The statement shows that the rumors were taken seriously enough, but the truth is that no one predicted an insurrection. Indeed, the trend went in the opposite direction. On 22 March, during an official

visit to Portugal, Vice Admiral José Zamora Induta, the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, stated that the implementation of the SSR program should be launched briefly. Thus, hard choices would have to be taken in the following months, namely reducing the number of troops, therefore affecting the balance of power within the Armed Forces, as well as the equilibrium among different personal loyalties. Yet, at this stage, everything seemed calm enough. Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Júnior, while in Lisbon, was already thinking about the donors' roundtable planned for October, centered not only on the SSR, but also covering drug trafficking, organized crime and economic development.

In short, everything seemed to be going according to the plan, when out of the blue a military coup took place on 1 April. Although the Armed Forces were alert against potential destabilizing threats, as the High Military Council stated earlier, the truth was that the crisis caught everyone by surprise. For example, immersed on their daily routines, on that day Carlos Gomes Júnior and José Zamora Induta had full agendas.

The coup was carried out with surgical precision, aiming only to neutralize a selected list of targets. Thus, besides Gomes Júnior, just a few dozen people were arrested, mainly military staff, among them Zamora Induta and his allies, such as the head of the Information and Military Security Division (i.e. military counter-intelligence), Samba Djaló. The reason why President Malam Bacai Sanhá was not arrested is a mystery. As far as it is known at this stage, Sanhá was not involved in the coup. However, his political behavior allows some room for speculation. Confronted with the coup, Sanhá's reaction was to downplay the events, rather than

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1 "AU hails Guinea-Bissau's efforts towards stability" (*Agence France-Presse*, 30 March 2010).

2 "Relative stability, growing world attention signal potential turning point, top United Nations official in Guinea-Bissau tells Security Council" (*United Nations*, Security Council, SC/9874, 5 March 2010).

3 "Report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in that country" (*United Nations*, Security Council, S/2010/106, 26 February 2010).



appealing to the insurrectionists to respect the constitutional order.

The coup was headed by Armed Forces Deputy Chief of General Staff Major General António Indjai, together with Rear Admiral José Américo Bubo Na Tchuto, the former Navy Chief, who had returned to Bissau from exile in Gambia in December 2009, and since then was under the shelter of UNIOGBIS. In hindsight, it emerges

that in the last few months Bubo Na Tchuto used the UNIOGBIS headquarters as his own operational base. From there, with free reign and under the perfect safe heaven, it seems that he co-prepared the coup.

Domestic and international reactions were immediate. In Bissau, crowds gathered spontaneously near the government headquarters expressing support for Gomes Júnior. Elsewhere, bilateral and multilateral reactions were also heard. Portugal – on its own behalf and in its capacity as Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) President – “condemn[ed] the incidents in Bissau, and repudiate[d] any attempt to alter the constitutional order (...) [and] call[ed] for the involvement of all Guinean state institutions in order to achieve an immediate return to constitutional normality”.⁴ Brazil, France and the U.S. followed

a similar line, and the same happened with the AU, the European Union (EU), and the UN. The chairperson of the AU Commission, Jean Ping, urged Guinea-Bissau “to abstain from any actions that would destabilize the normal functioning of democratically elected institutions”. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, Catherine Ashton, stated that “the EU calls for the immediate cessation of irresponsible behaviors and for the full respect of the elementary democratic rules”. Ashton “condemn[ed] in the strongest terms the measures taken in Guinea-Bissau by some elements of the Armed Forces”, and concluded that “the stabilization of Guinea-Bissau through a peaceful and democratic process remains crucial”. The UN Secretary-General spokesperson, Martin Nesirky, stated that Ban Ki-moon “call[ed] on the military and political leadership of Guinea-Bissau to resolve differ-

ences by peaceful means and to maintain constitutional order and ensure respect for the rule of law”.

Only the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) played a different tune, at least partially. According to the director of the Political Affairs Department of the ECOWAS, Abdel-Fatau Musah, the events in Bissau could not be described as a military coup, but only as a mutiny and indiscipline: ECOWAS “feel[s] that

[it was a] mutiny. [It was] indiscipline on the part of the military”.⁵ Although condemning the events, ECOWAS abstained from calling for the immediate return to constitutional order.

According to earlier statements by Bubo Na Tchuto, Gomes Júnior and Zamora Induta would face trial due to their “crimes committed against the people”. However, perhaps as a consequence of the spontaneous popular support that immediately arose for Gomes Júnior, events will take a different path. After being arrested by the coup perpetrators, a few hours later Gomes Júnior was placed under a discreet house arrest and later on released. Formally, at least, he still remains Prime Minister. It remains to be seen for how long and under which circumstances. Only time will tell how current events have affected his substantive political power.

The future of Zamora Induta is still uncertain. Induta, like Djaló, remains detained by the coup perpetrators. By now it is clear that his days as the Armed Forces Chief of Staff are done. However, it remains to be seen what the future holds for him. Will he face trial, as stated earlier? Will he seek asylum? Will he simply be released?

Besides those above, several more questions remain unanswered thus far. Will the international community call for the immediate return to constitutional order without using carrots and sticks if necessary? Will Indjai be allowed to remain as the Armed Forces Deputy Chief of General Staff, or moved to some similar post? And will Bubo Na Tchuto be allowed to reenter the Armed Forces? Will the international community make clear that nothing may happen to Zamora Induta? Will the donors’ conference be delayed? Will the SSR process suffer further setbacks? Above all, is the worst of

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4 “MFA’s Communiqué on the situation in Guinea-Bissau” (*Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros*, 1 April 2010).

5 “ECOWAS puts Guinea-Bissau military on guard” (*ECOWAS*, Press Release 48, 1 April 2010).



the storm over, or is this just the early stage of more violence and political instability?

If the past tell us something about the future, then prospects might not look good.

Everyone Wants to Become What They Can Never Become

In a press conference, on 2 April, Indjai's Chief of Staff, Major Dabana Walna, explained that Induta wanted to "establish a private Army".⁶ As evidence, Walna said that Induta had 30 AKM rifles and several grenade launchers, among other ammunitions, in his house. Assuming that this is true, one does not establish a private Army just by having a few dozen guns and munitions. Moreover, Induta did not need to establish a private Army outside the military structure. Indeed, as the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, he could do it within the military hierarchy. Here, perhaps, there is a clue much more relevant to explore. As mentioned above, Zamora Induta stated on 22 March that the implementation of the SSR program should be launched briefly and, in less than 15 days, a military coup took place, perpetrated by Indjai and Bubo Na Tchuto.

In other words, the coup seems to be a consequence of the SSR's effective implementation. Indeed, has been pointed out elsewhere, by now "the bulk of the needed legislative package ha[d] been drafted and [was] only awaiting approval by the Council of Ministers and subsequently by the National Assembly".⁷ Ironically, it is the SSR, which aims to overcome obstacles to development, democracy and peace, that triggered another round of violence and instability. Joseph Mutaboba emphasizes that the "recurring military intervention in politics is the result of constantly changing alliances". Mutaboba says that "everyone in Guinea-Bissau wants to be the boss. Everyone wants to be a minister. Everyone wants to be an ambassador. Everyone wants to be something. Everyone wants to become what they can never become". Thus, he adds that "there is too

much demand and not enough vacancies in such a small country".⁸

By now, the balance of power within the Armed Forces has changed. No matter what happens to Zamora Induta, he is no longer an effective card in the deck. Since the beginning, the international community seemed prepared to accept Indjai and Bubo Na Tchuto's coup within the military as *fait accompli*. Demanding the re-installment of the constitutional order, as the international community did, is not the same thing as demanding the return to the *status quo ante*. In public, no one demanded the return of Zamora Induta to the post of Armed Forces Chief of General Staff. Moreover, no one demanded the resignation of Indjai from the post of Armed Forces Deputy Chief of General Staff. Finally, Bubo Na Tchuto is still at large despite the fact that allegedly he was involved in another coup attempt in August 2008. As such, the return to the constitutional order, as it was demanded, rewards the leaders of the coup.

However, it remains to be seen what will be the consequences of this episode beyond the realignments of power within the Armed Forces. In particular, it is still unclear what will happen to the SSR. Indjai's lack of enthusiasm for the SSR was a public secret in Guinea-Bissau. The fact that he did not control it certainly was not irrelevant. With Zamora Induta out of the picture, will the SSR continue with the same commitment as in the past?

Also, it remains to be seen what will happen in the fight against drug trafficking. Zamora Induta made it quite clear that, under his

rule, the Armed Forces' involvement in the drug trafficking would not be tolerated. More importantly, the military would be involved in the fight against trafficking, despite the lack of resources and specific know-how. Last February, for example, Zamora Induta confirmed the existence of evidence indicating that drug traffickers were once again using Guinea-Bissau as a base for international drug trafficking. As was pointed out by Antonio L. Mazzitelli, head of the Regional Office for Central and West Africa of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "in September 2008 the

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⁶ Jorge Heitor, "General rebelde pediu desculpa por ter ameaçado matar primeiro-ministro" (*Pública*, 3 March 2010): 10.

⁷ Miguel Girão de Sousa, "The Challenges and Constraints of Security Sector Reform in Guinea-Bissau: A View from the Field" (*Portuguese Journal of International Affairs*, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 2009): 24.

⁸ Scott Stearns, "PM's Arrest Reinforces Need for Security Reform in Guinea-Bissau" (*Voice of America*, 2 April 2010).



drug traffickers had started moving out of Guinea-Bissau". Since then, he noted, no important drug seizures took place. The drug traffickers, he said, "need a certain stability. They don't need a failed state. They need a weak state".⁹ If this is true, then, as Zamora Induta stated, Guinea-Bissau was on the verge of once again being a drug trafficking transit country between Latin America and Europe. Obviously, if this is so, he clashed with powerful interests. The Armed Forces involvement in drug trafficking is widely known. "The army plays a key role in criminal activity. Instead of dedicating themselves to the security of the country, they are dedicating themselves to criminal exploits", emphasizes Corinne Dufka, senior researcher in the Africa Division of the Human Rights Watch.¹⁰ And Bubo Na Tchuto in particular is suspected of being one of the main players in the drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau. "He was very much connected with drug trafficking – smuggling drugs in Guinea-Bissau", says Miguel Martins, journalist in the RFI.¹¹ Thus, Bubo Na Tchuto's return to the main stage is troubling in many ways.

The coup of 1 April is just the latest piece of a puzzle that has been falling into place since 1998. Whether this is just one more piece, or the last one, remains to be seen. Either way, domestic and international variables are evolving regarding Guinea-Bissau. As will be discussed below in greater detail, it seems that Bissau-Guinean citizens are nowadays looking for other attributes when they cast their ballots. Rather than heroes, as far as civilian rule is concerned, it seems that at this stage they are looking for good managers. In parallel, more than ever before the international community seems willing to invest time and effort, and to support Guinea-Bissau in a lengthy way. The problem lies in the Armed Forces.

It is still unclear which trend will prevail. Will the military continue on the same destructive path, or will they embrace the opportunity provided by the SSR and reinvent themselves?

Policy Recommendations

If we look into the last decade, odds do not look good for the Bissau-Guinean people. Indeed, "due to the military's interventions, no elected president since the return to multi-party rule in 1994 has completed the five-year term prescribed in the constitution".¹² From 1998 to 2010, in just twelve years, Guinea-Bissau had four presidents, four acting presidents, and 11 prime ministers (twice Carlos Gomes Júnior). Moreover, the same instability that permeates the civilian rule also pervades the Armed Forces. Rather than democratic institutions, the barrel of a gun has been the ultimate tool to resolve conflicts and establish new – albeit unstable – balances of power. Therefore, if political power does not grow out of the barrel of a gun, as Mao Zedong said several decades ago, it is up to the international community to prove him wrong. Indeed, the AU, CPLP, ECOWAS, EU, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and UN, all together, have relevant carrots and sticks to use if required, and if they are willing to do so. Through bilateral channels, and above all within some of

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the multilateral institutions mentioned above, the Portuguese government must make clear a few points. In the short term:

- The personal safety of Carlos Gomes Júnior is non-negotiable. It must be made clear to Bubo Na Tchuto and Indjai that they will be held responsible – and accountable – for any deaths that might occur.
- The same is true regarding José Zamora Induta, Samba Djaló, as well as all the other military personnel who were arrested on 1 April. Moreover, it should also be

⁹ Adam Nossiter, "Nation in Disarray Holds Few Hopes for Vote" (*New York Times*, 28 June 2009).

¹⁰ Fran Blandy, "Guinea-Bissau: more instability in cocaine hotspot" (*Agence France-Presse*, 3 April 2010).

¹¹ "President says no coup, PM under house arrest" (*RFI*, 2 April 2010).

¹² "Guinea-Bissau: Beyond Rule of the Gun" (*International Crisis Group, Africa Briefing No. 61*, 25 June 2009): 7.



emphasized that anyone that has been arrested during the coup must be granted permission to leave Guinea-Bissau if he seeks asylum abroad.

- Even if allowing a transitional period, António Indjai must resign as soon as politically possible. After the coup, he cannot continue as the Armed Forces Deputy Chief of General Staff, or promoted to Chief of General Staff.

- José Américo Bubo Na Tchuto must not be reinstated into the Armed Forces. His readmission and, perhaps, his appointment as the new Armed Forces Chief of General Staff would be a reward to a leading military coup perpetrator of Guinea-Bissau. Again, if accepted, the international community would show that in fact crime does pay.

- Over and over again, it should be made clear to all relevant Bissau-Guinean political and military players that the international community is united and speaks with one voice. And the message could not be clearer: the constitutional order must be safeguarded. This is non-negotiable. Any other outcome will not be acceptable.

- Last but not least, while awaiting further developments regarding the issues above, it should be made clear that the donors' conference, planned for the second semester of 2010, will be delayed *sine die*. Equally important, it must be made clear that other bilateral and multilateral aid programs underway could be suspended.

As far as the medium and long term is concerned, the following points should also be conveyed to the Bissau-Guinean political and military players:

- Accountability is impossible if the Armed Forces are not under civilian control. A democratic regime will always be unstable if the military threaten to overturn electoral results, or to overthrow civilian governments.¹³ Thus, it must be made clear that the SSR process must continue according to plan. Although it may be adjusted, the SSR is a non-negotiable condition for further aid and economic support.

From 1998 to 2010, Guinea-Bissau had four presidents, four acting presidents, and 11 prime ministers. Moreover, the same instability that permeates the civilian rule also pervades the Armed Forces. Rather than democratic institutions, the barrel of a gun has been the ultimate tool to resolve conflicts and establish new – albeit unstable – balances of power.

- The disrupting influence of drug trafficking in weak states is widely known. The shadow of a narco-state in Guinea-Bissau was gone and should not be allowed to return. Thus, the fight against drug trafficking must continue. The international community should act accordingly if a lack of commitment in the fight against drug trafficking is perceived.

- The consolidation of the democratic regime is the end goal. A return to an authoritarian regime is not a valid option. Likewise, a democratic *façade* when, in fact, the

substantive power continues to be in the military barracks, is not an option either. The cycle of military coups and bloodshed that has been ongoing since 1998 must end. A line must be drawn; from now on, whoever crosses it will pay the price.

- The Failed States Index places the country under “alert” as 27th out of 177 states. Guinea-Bissau is in the top of those highly vulnerable to state failure. Therefore, any disruptive behavior from the political and military leaderships that sinks the country further down the path towards a failed state will not be tolerated.

- The UNDP Human Development Index ranks Guinea-Bissau as 173rd out of 182 countries. The life expectancy at birth is 47.5 years, and the adult literacy rate is 64.6%. Guinea-Bissau's GDP *per capita* of US\$477 is one of the lowest in the world. Thus, any political and military decisions that imperil economic development should also be totally unacceptable.

All channels possible should transmit the messages above: bi-

lateral, multilateral, military to military, civilian to civilian, political, diplomatic, economic, domestic, external channels, among others. If possible, pressure should be conveyed face-to-face. Indeed, the president of the ECOWAS Commission, Ambassador James Victor Gbeho, went immediately to Guinea-Bissau. There, together with Jean Ping, he pointed out once again that the reinstatement of the constitutional order is non-negotiable. Ironically, he had to fly to Bissau as soon as he could when, just a few days earlier, on 30 March, he was saying that the “era of coups [was] over” in West Africa.

But others should act with similar urgency. As soon as possible, the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Luís

13 See Jendayi Frazer, “Conceptualizing Civil-Military Relations During Democratic Transition” (*Africa Today*, Vol. 42, No. 1-2, 1995): 39-48.



Amado, or the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Co-operation, João Gomes Cravinho, should visit Bissau and meet all the major players.¹⁴ While assessing *in loco* the situation, he should express to those involved in the military coup, as well as all other relevant players, the views of the Portuguese government. In other words, like Gbeho and Ping, he should emphasize that the events on 1 April were not just an internal military affair. In fact, it was a serious disruption of the constitutional order, something that will not be tolerated any longer.

Conclusion

Guinea-Bissau does not require the military intervention of an international peace-keeping force led by the AU or UN. As far as it is known, there is no credible threat of civil war, or any sort of imminent clash between military factions. Indeed, the coup on 1 April took place without any sort of armed resistance, and without any shots fired. Moreover, an international peace-keeping force would solve nothing and, perhaps, would raise new problems. What Guinea-Bissau really needs to find is “a way forward” and time, as well as political and financial commitment from the international community.¹⁵ In other words, it needs the international community to be willing to use carrots, as well as sticks, within a credible long term strategy. The Bissau-Guinean military must perceive that, this time, the international community really means it, and is putting money where its mouth is. Things will have to change in Guinea-Bissau, not because it is desired that they stay as they were, like Tancredi in Lampedusa’s novel, but precisely because a real change in the *status quo* is wanted. The international community did not miss the fact that on 1 April hundreds of citizens gathered spontaneously to express support for Gomes Júnior and repudiate the coup per-

petrated by Bubo Na Tchuto and Indjai. This public reaction – besides confirming that the Prime Minister’s popularity remains untouched since the 2008 legislative elections – can only be understood as a source of hope for the international community. Indeed, the population seems thirsty for change, real and substantive change, and tired of decades of political and military misrule. As was pointed out by one recent report from the International Crisis Group, “Carlos Gomes Júnior represents a new generation of politicians with the capacity to provide effective leadership. (...) The huge popularity garnered by Carlos Gomes Júnior during the 2008 legislative elections appears to show that (...) the electorate

is more interested in a political leader’s potential to be a good manager than in his past role in the liberation war”.¹⁶ Thus, it is this window of opportunity that should not be wasted. Rather, it should be seized to overturn the cycle of misrule and violence, neglect and corruption that has been going on for too long.

The IMF stresses the importance of “promoting good governance in all its aspects, including by ensuring the rule of law, improving the efficiency and accountability of the public sector, and tackling corruption, as essential elements of a framework within which economies can prosper”.¹⁷ Portugal, together with the international community, should promote the fulfillment of this paradigm, rather than abandoning the Bissau-Guineans. More than ever,

support must be given to the political and military players favorable to the principles of good governance, for until now, good governance in Guinea-Bissau has been as rare as water in the desert.

As soon as possible, Luís Amado, or João Gomes Cravinho, should visit Bissau and meet all the major players. While assessing *in loco* the situation, he should express to those involved in the military coup, as well as all other relevant players, the views of the Portuguese government.

14 Luís Amado and his Angolan counterpart, Assunção dos Anjos were meant to have visited Bissau on 3 April. However, since the constitutional order was not yet guaranteed, the trip was cancelled. See “Guiné-Bissau: MNE luso e MIREX angolano cancelam deslocação a Bissau” (*Bissau Digital/PNN*, 3 April 2010).

15 See Kai Thaler, “Avoiding the Abyss: Finding a Way Forward in Guinea-Bissau” (*Portuguese Journal of International Affairs*, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 2009): 3-14.

16 More than an electoral success for PAIGC in the November 2008 legislative elections, it was a personal victory for Carlos Gomes Júnior. See “Guinea-Bissau: Building a Real Stability Pact” (*International Crisis Group, Africa Briefing No. 57*, 29 January 2009): 6.

17 “Communiqué of the Interim Committee of the Board of Governors of the International Monetary Fund” (*International Monetary Fund, Press Release Number 96/49*, 20 September 1996).



Source: United Nations.

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