

PROSPECTS FOR A REAL DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN ALGERIA: FACTS AND CHALLENGES

آفاق التحول الديمقراطي الحقيقي في الجزائر: حقائق وتحديات

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to provide a cursory perspective on the Algerian democratic transition that mirrored the previous setback from social, economic and political angles. It assesses Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rule and analyzes the underlying reasons that triggered the massive demonstrations since February 2019. By shedding lights on the past social upheavals fueled by unemployment, housing crisis and deep social disintegration, the article explains how Boutaklika's government, which challenges a genuine democratic shift, failed to overcome people's mounting resentment and meet its aspirations for long-term. It also proceeds to put forward ideas for possible alternatives regarding the prospects for a peaceful democratic switch based on consensual dialogues, social justice, and equality.

Key words: democratic transition, Abdelaziz Boutaflika, social upheavals, massive demonstrations, challenges

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة لتقديم منظور سريع للانتقال الديمقراطي الجزائري والذي يعكس النكسة السابقة من زوايا اجتماعية، اقتصادية وسياسية وكذا تقييم لحكم عبد العزيز بوتفليقة وتحليل الأسباب الكامنة وراء المظاهرات الحاشدة منذ فبراير 2019، من خلال تسليط الضوء على الاضطرابات الاجتماعية الأخيرة التي غذتها البطالة وأزمة الإسكان والتفكك الاجتماعي العميق. كما يوضح المقال كيف أن حكومة بوتفليقة، والتي تتعارض مع التحول الديمقراطي الحقيقي، فشلت في التغلب على استياء الشعب المتزايد وتلبية تطلعاته على المدى الطويل. تحاول الدراسة أيضا طرح أفكار لبدائل ممكنة تتعلق بآفاق تحول ديمقراطي سلمي مبني على اسس الحوار التوافقي، العدالة الاجتماعية والمساواة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحول الديمقراطي، عبد العزيز بوتفليقة، اضطرابات اجتماعية، مظاهرات حاشدة، تحديات

Introduction:

Freed from upsurges and revolutions that enfolded the Arab Middle East and North Africa in the late 2011, Algerian government has witnessed considerable lengths to uplift an image of stability, particularly in a country undergoing profound social and political upheavals. Outlined basically for international outlet, the recent aspect of this proclivity is clearly manifested by the country's parliamentary elections. Proclaimed by the government as Algeria's "freest ever" (Al-Jazeera, 2012), the pooling was envisaged to renovate a shape of legitimacy to the political practicability given that the new parliament is supposed to enact a set of constitutional reforms pledged by the executive branch starting from 2011. Portrayed as a "test of Algeria's credibility" (Reuters/Al-Arabiya, 2012), by different Algerian presidents such as Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the election results usually mystified most of Algerians as the country's ruling party always wins lion's share of seats in the parliament; therefore, clobbering the majority that envisions Islamist parties to win elections in North Africa since the rise of the Arab Spring.

Amidst all of these incidents, Algeria has appeared as an 'exception' across the MENA region, and while the late elections have been distorted by rife pretensions of fraud, their results have potentially reinforced the government's control on power thus securing its total domination over the country's reform initiatives.

Bouteflika's much blustered promises of reformations, disclosed in the burst of the Arab Spring and superficially aimed at "consolidating democracy" in the country, have been interpreted by Algerian politicians and people as another stratagem planned to strengthen the regime continuity along diffusing the perception that the government is undertaking steps toward political reform to the

international community . Algerian parties' objection, most of which have opposed the election results and thereafter broke away the parliament's opening session , consider that such reforms will lead to series of alleged changes that can match neither the country's ambivalences nor the inveterate ambitions of the Algerian elites who have long well ruled Algeria, even often from behind the military and political scenes since the independence.

From the outset of the Arab Spring, the government's covenants of political reforms have yet to be proceeded by Algeria's rulers. While stability has henceforth far predominated, Algeria's deep challenges in the social, political and economic domains soberly raise hues and cries over the prospective continuity of the Algerian regime. By scrutinizing the Algerian government's intended promises of reform and parliamentary elections, this paper research raises the following issue:

How can the Algeria government pave the path to a real democratic transition?

To answer this question, the following sub-questions can be asked:

1. What are the main obstacles for a genuine democratic transition?
2. How does the Algerian regime, dominated an autocratic governmental system, hinder the process of democracy?
3. Why did the Algerian people, losing hope to meet its aspirations, protest against Bouteflika's rule?
4. What are the possible alternatives for a peaceful and a real democratic shift?

1. An overview of the Algerian government:

After the independence, the National Liberation Front (FLN) has preponderantly dominated the Algerian government. The FLN ideology is mainly shaped by Arab nationalism, socialism, anti-colonial discourses, and Islam since most of its rulers have long served as military officials. Relishing more historical credibility because

of its leading role in the Algerian revolution, the FLN governed the country as a single party until the introduction of a multi-party system late 1989. Following a crucial period of direct military rule under a state of emergency in the 1990's coup, the Democratic National Rally (RND), a new emerging political party, gained the 1997 legislative elections. Thereafter, both the FLN and RND constantly procured legislative majorities in votes out of a coalition known as the Presidential Alliance. This Alliance is fostered by business elites who benefited from Bouteflika's tenure in establishing a strong foundation of wealth (Oumansour, 2019).

2. Controversy over reforms in Algeria:

Many of Algerians had hoped 2012 to be a watershed in the country's history; a year to mirror Algeria's past, present and future, to learn from late events and to start drawing a path towards a serious appeal of the country's unclear democracy between 1988 and 1992. Nevertheless, recent incidents demonstrate the opposite tendency since the government's agenda of reform has been directed to a top-down way that leaves little room for a truly broad-based national dialogue for change. Similar to Tunisia and Morocco, Algeria encounters a set of problems such as heightened rates of unemployment, profound social and economic challenges, an interminable lack of housing and a deep-seated crisis of legitimacy affecting the country's public institutions.

Though Algeria has been capable to draw on its substantial financial reserves to appease the population's most critical socioeconomic emergencies, such short-term steps can only hope to defer the country's perpetual crisis. Unless these crisis are solved with a logical and inclusive process of reform, Algeria is threatened to descend into anarchy and instability; a renewed scenario akin to the country's 'black decade' during the 1990s, and which could thus engender negative outcomes for Algeria and all the Mediterranean countries .

Algeria's democratic facet may have triggered the primary impulse for change that has propagated in all the region at the outset of 2011, and while the country's ruling elites are conscious that the recent situation cannot be for a long-run, little real efforts have emerged aiming at handling Algeria's ingrained troubles in the political, economic and social realms. The unstable scales of public spending, an economy totally dependent on oil exportation, a growing number of youngster and deprived population, and increasing levels of popular disillusionment all do not bode for a pretty future.

At the wake of Arab Spring, the Algerian government has performed a cautious balancing act that combines aspects of sustainability with certain and hesitant openings for change (Andrea, 2012). As widespread popular riots spread from Tunisia to Egypt in January 2011, Algeria witnesses just four days of violent protests driving many to pretend that Algeria would be the next North African country to be menaced by the Arab Spring. However, January upsurges were widely detached from political aims as they were basically localized grievances related to the rise of food prices, shortage of housing and the apparent government's carelessness towards the increasing socioeconomic tensions facing large swaths of the population (Entelis, 2011). These early challenges were however followed, in February and March, by endeavors to frame a social movement for change embracing a series of opposition parties, human rights organizations, civil society associations, and independent trade unions under a larger group called the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (Coordination National pour le Changement et la Démocratie – CNCD).

Established in late January to imitate similar riots movements in Tunisia and Egypt, the CNCD group succeeded in adopting the first manifestation in the capital Algiers on February 12th, but the protest was severely cubed by the authorities

who deployed nearly 30,000 policemen across the city (BBC,2011). Consequently, the manifestation did not entice more protesters and the gathering soon surrendered to internal opposition causing it to split into two opponent factions; henceforth, further sapping its national appeal (Yahia,2012). Impulsive outbreaks of popular outrage pointed particular symbols linked to the ruling elites have nevertheless persisted on a frequent basis throughout 2011. Between January and late June 2011, the media reported more than 2777 riot control operations conducted by the police throughout the country (Mouna, 2011)

As analyzed by most Algerian specialists, riots, strikes and participation have long been “a regular feature of Algerian political life” (Yahia, 2012). All may evince the fact that behind the alleged atmosphere of stability, cherished by the government, lays an growing disappointed population which has lost trust in the country politics and is instead interpreted to vehement street riots as the only solution to extract localized privileges from the government (Roberts, 2011).

3. Hurdles to democracy:

3.1. Traditional despotic rule:

The Algerian governmental system is a constitutional presidential within bicameral legislation. Its Political power is totally led by the army and intelligence services, and consolidated by unclear circles of unelected governors generally referred to as “Le Pouvoir” (McAllister, 2013). Though Multi-party ruled officially the country starting from 1989, Algeria remains in fact a model of ‘liberalized autocracy’, a political system characterized by authoritarian structures with democratic features that allow for its survival (Martínez, 2016).

Algerian Elections are ordinarily characterized by fraud and intransparency, and most polling processes are not reliable (Freedom House, 2019), since both the judicial branch and the administration are completely dependent on each others,

blocking these institutions to check and balance different roles (Lahouari, 2019). Since newspapers rely extremely on state agencies to report and advertise, self-censorship is common and lawful fabrications are generally adopted to avoid reporting on debatable problems, making press freedom biased and partial (Freedom House, 2019). Opponent groups work within unclear and fragmented political environment. To protect its rule, the system patronizes to co-optation, quell and divide-and-rule techniques that curb new figures and opposition groups from appearing (Oumansour, 2019).

Despite the fact that ethnic-based political parties and religious ones are forbidden, the regime permitted the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in 1989. After the terrorist period, the government only allowed some parties, such as moderate Islamists. The ultimate aim was to curtail further objection (Yahia & Zoubir, 2016). This disordered and fragmented political system made most Algerians to lose confidence in formal official institutions, leading into decreasing voter proportions.

In the election of 2017, only a slight percentage 12% of the electorate voted for the legislatives. Perceiving political parties as ineffective, Algerians have mistrusted them and expressed therefore their rights through manifestations and violent riots. At the close of the black decade till 2019, most of Algerian riots were basically local and linked to certain socio-economic concerns, such as shortage of housing and unemployment (McAllister, 2013). Throughout Bouteflika's reign, the government has calmed down such protests either through the distribution of rent or police intervention. Although emergency in place since 1992 was revoked in 2011, the state has stopped protests in Algiers after Kabylia objectors filled the streets of the capital to ask for cultural rights in June 2001.

3.2. Barriers to a sustainable economic prosperity:

The Algerian economy is a rentier system centralized on hydrocarbons revenues, fundamentally dominated by the state-owned company Sonatrach. In 2014, oil and gas contributed to 30% of the overall domestic product, 60% of the country's revenues, and 97% of whole exports, making economic development strongly dependent on oil world markets (International Crisis Group, 2018). In the past 20 years, Algeria has outlaid huge sums of oil revenue to improve subsidies, finance infrastructure and sponsor social projects to avoid turmoil. Nevertheless, these measures have not improved people's purchasing power or offered permanent employment for the youth (IRIS, 2019). Alternatively, the country is enduring severe economic recession, a widespread of informal service sector, a decrease in productivity and unemployment (World Bank Data). The 1990's economic liberalization, under an International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment plan and large infrastructure projects in the mid-2000s, have granted more opportunities for rent-seeking, and the government provided contracts, loans and privileges to businessmen on the basis of political loyalty instead of efficiency. Vested profits between entrepreneurs elites and the government engender a reciprocal willingness to protect the present situation (Werenfels, 2010).

Economic depravity, corruption and patronage led to resentment among Algerians who have been experiencing bad living condition. However, since 1999 the government had tried to alleviate popular discontent through oil rent distribution. Nevertheless, the 2014 severe fall in international oil prices relatively stripped the government of its major mechanism to buy social peace. Since the state turned to its foreign exchange reserves, it decreased the country's spending and supported an expansionary monetary policy to finance its budget. The resulting inflation affected deprived households and stimulated popular anti-government mobilization (Lahouari, 2017).

3.3. Political Islam and Islamist fundamentalism :

Algeria's brand of political Islam can be traced back to the revolution, and violent Islamist movements emerged in country in the 1960s with Jihadist ideologies that perceived Islamist combat as a continuity of the independence fighting (Semmouk,2012). In the 1980s, Islamism struggle has become a way to

express the increasing social resentment against the government along of a strong economic stagnation. Additionally, Arabization policy also feasibly pushed the spread of these ideologies and advocated Islamists' mounting popularity in Algerian mosques and universities (Ghanem-Yazbeck, May 2019). Amidst this atmosphere, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), a party devoted to the establishment of Sharia law, rapidly won support, resulting in its success in the 1990 legislative elections.

As a FIS triumph became impending for the 1992 parliamentary elections, the military forces repealed the polling, controlled the government, outlawed the FIS and suppressed its active members (McAllister, 2013). An internal war broke out between the state and different Islamist guerrillas, like the Armed Islamic Group or GIA as the most significant ones, resulting in massacres against civilians (Hafez, 2000).

Later 1999 election, the former president Bouteflika, backed up by a national referendum, accorded amnesty to recalcitrant, and thus Islamist violence decreased. Most FIS and GIA members were authorized to repent, while Islamist groups benefited from political toleration. Other Islamist fighters were caught the following years and few of them escaped to the Northern desert of Mali, resulting to the appearance of new groups that incorporated Jihadi agendas along Tuareg's complaint in the Sahel (Berny-Sèbe, 2013). Following a decrease in Jihadi Violence, the renewal of 2007 attacks proved that the Islamist menace is still existent in Algeria. As a matter of fact, the creation of AQIM in 2006 from the alliance of North African groups, coalesce with Al-Qaeda, marked the emergence of a new set of trans-regional and transnational Jihadi networks in the region (Zeraoui,2012).

While Islamist extremism continues to be a real threat nowadays, most Algerians are against it. For instance, the 2015 elections showed that 69% of Algerians decidedly rejected ISIS (Doha Institute, 2016). Due to Algerians' objection

of Jihad ideology and the effective counter-terrorism operations, the Jihadi terror threat has declined in Algeria lately, inspite of the increasing AQIM's request for perpetual Jihadi movement in the country (Porter, 2019).

3.4. Divergent cultural and regional facets:

Linguistic and cultural splits in Algeria are landmarks even before the French colonization, but were aroused during colonial period which set up a clear division between Arabic-speaking Algerians and francophone Amazigh elites (Werenfels, 2010). After the independence, the Algerian government looked forward to build homogeneous nation based on Arab-Islamic national identity, at the expense of other existing identities that characterize the overall country's cultural structure (Roberts, 2001). As a matter of fact, Algerians of Jewish descent, who exceeded 150,000 after independence, fled the country after the adoption of a Nationality Law in 1963 depriving the right of citizenship to non-Muslims minorities, and most other Jewish quitted after the break out of Arab-Israeli war in 1967. Few of them were obliged to leave after being threaten by Islamists during the 1990's black decade (Perrin, 2014).

Arabization wave resulted in Cultural inequalities, which have created a sentiment of marginalization for Tamazigh people. In Kabylia, the mountainous region of Amazigh population, people have long objected Arabization since independence through Berber fanaticism, a trend that defies the national narrative by encouraging Amazigh and promoting non-Arab identities (Roberts, 2001).

In fact, Kabylia has long been the cradle of different protests, the major ones are the 1980's Berber Spring and the 2001 "Black Spring", during which more than 120 protestors were killed by the government (Allouche, 2017). Since the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) outraged and Amazigh people expressed explicitly their boycotts of the 2002 and 2004 elections, the government began to calm them

down through negotiations (Zeraoui, 2012). The perpetual Amazigh striving witnessed some victories, leading to the avowal of Tamazight dialect as an official Algerian language in 2016 (Allouche, 2017).

Though the Amazigh wave has been widely pushed by the regime, disparities existed and most critics have confirmed to Arabic language supremacy as the official “state language” (L’Humanité, 2016). Apart from cultural inequalities, Algeria is also experiencing regional distinctions. Throughout Algerian presidencies, most of Algerian presidents favored their local regions with considerable bias. While the Eastern regions availed substantially from the president Houari Boumédiène, Bouteflika provided more privileges to his hometown Tlemcen or the West in general.

Indeed, President Boutaklika cherished the city with important investment. In addition, he surrounded himself with political figures from Tlemcen, who became imminent and influential during his presidency (Alilat, 2015). By contrast, the Algerian south is enduring harsh political marginalization and experiencing mounting riots since the foundation of the Mouvement des Enfants du Sud pour la Justice (MSJ) in the 2000s, that uprose against unemployment, government’s neglect, regional exclusion and the absence oil jobs for southerners. The South has also witnessed several of internal tensions in 2013 between Amazigh Mouzabites Arabs due to their different cults (International Crisis Group, 2016).

4. An absolute authoritarian: Abdelaziz Bouteflika:

Despite the fact that Algeria is an authoritarian country, it is basically a civilian-run state governed by an independent politician. The former Algerian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, won the election of 1999 as an independent candidate despite being an ex- military general. Generally, The 1999 elections were considered fair and transparent until the night of the elections, when six of seven

nominees withdrew because of mounting claims of the fraudulent elections (Quandt, 2002, p.17).

Bouteflika surly gained, as he was the only candidate left standing. Such claims were not mere allegations as he had 74% of the total vote, but trustful sources have confirmed he received only 30% of the overall elections (Quandt, 2002, p.17). Accordingly, he won the 2004 and 2009 elections as an independent candidate, although his strong relations to the FLN. As honorary chairman of the FLN (Library of Congress, p. 18), yet he run on a platform to end bloodshed of the black decade and return Algeria to imminent place in the world (Evans and Phillips, 2007). He promised to bring back stabilization to Algeria, promote its economy, and boost his reconciliation agenda.

Among Bouteflika's three significant political achievements thus far was introducing peace settlement with Islamists and the political party Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in 1999, which ultimately ended the civil war and reduced terrorism in the country (Diamond, 2008). The second prominent success was the introduction of Peace and National Reconciliation Charter in 2005, granting amnesty to more than 2,000 Algerian rebellious of the 1990s civil war, with the exception for those insurgents who perpetrated crimes against humanity such as mass murder, bombings, and rapes (Algeria Country Report, p. 15). In fact, the charter is problematic since it is not based on truth and reconciliation and did not really scrutinize crimes of the Algerian military. While the military was charged of unlawful imprisonments, using brutal torture and even napalm, the Charter exonerated the military from any transgressions (Kotze and Garica-Rivero, 2006). Even though the government has assigned huge sums of money to families of disappeared victims, they are dissatisfied about the absence of investigations into the military (Algeria Country Report, pg. 15). Since the Charter adoption, political

violence has increased, leading to its condemnation and mistrust by people. The third political realization is cancelling the presidential term limits from two, allowing Bouteflika to run the government again in 2009. At the outset of 2008, Bouteflika put forward a constitutional amendment for the sake of extending presidential terms that were approved by the parliament in November the same year.

Though Bouteflika is not a marionette for the military as he is loved by the population for settling down the civil war irregularities and prompting his amnesty program, he really needed the advocacy of the military regime (Library of Congress, p. 22). As he forgave most the military for criminal deeds of the 1990s, it is common that it had to foster his amendment of presidential terms (Lowi, 2009). Yet Bouteflika shranked the power of the military in politics and did not promote competitive elections (Diamond, 2008), apparently because he believed that Algerian political parties lacked enough power and support to challenge him (Evans and Phillips, 2007).

5. Democratic transition in Algeria:

Since the Algerian independence and the birth of the republic, the exact meaning of “Algerian democracy” has depended on who has defined it. Democratization in Algeria will not be achieved against the will of Algerians; instead, it will be achieved with them.

For Algerian people, manifesting peacefully in February, democracy necessitates the total sweep of regime, including security officials, politicians, and businessmen who dominate the regime, and its replacement by honest independent civilians who can solve people’s frustration through well- implemented socio-political reforms. For the military, Algeria’s major power focus, promoting democracy means preparing elections as soon as possible. Most of Algerians who

objected the election on December 12 realized that the circumstances for a fair and a credible vote are totally absent, and that a real transition period and reforms must be considered first.

The military and its supporters portrayed Algerian protesters as enemies of the country's development, and such an assumption is intended to legitimize the suppression on many of the Hirak's prominent figures. No real strides toward democratization can be proceeded if the military keeps on dominating politics. Military presence is malicious to civil society. In fact, it disproves popular democratic needs as well as Articles 7 and 8 of the Constitution, which specify that sovereignty lies exclusively with the people and; thus, they have the final word to appoint their governors. As the military's politicians deviate this sovereignty, Algerians regard the election as a guarantor rather than a democracy of abuses from the constant elite, who have used their status to run after their personal interests to the detriment of country's welfare.

Stemming from the government as an evidence of its genuine intentions for reform, many have doubted the true impulses, confirming Algeria's old tactic of divide and rule to entice considerable turnout so as to give fairness and credibility to the elections results. One of the fundamental causes of Algeria's failure to escalate an inclusive and genuine process of reform is that of corruption and factionalism that are still prevailing within Algeria's opposition parties and civil society organizations.

6. The fall of Bouteflika's rule: the Hirak:

Considering Bouteflika's removal as a deficient victory as it has become quite obvious that the politics would be under the hands of the former elite, popular riots pursued, opposing Abdelkader Bensalah's appointment as interim president. The protesters' mounting doubts persisted even after the arrestations of prominent

officials, businessmen and some old regime figures, such as Said (Bouteflika's brother) and Sellal (the ex-prime minister), for the sake to eradicate corruption. Most of Algerians considered such detentions as a genuine intention from the head of the army Ahmed Gaid to safeguard of the transition (Ayari, 2019).

As the preparation of the 4 of July elections failed, they were postponed for the 12 of December because of the absence of valid candidates. Such an environment resulted in a real political vacuum, due to the end of the constitutional interim president's mandate at that time. In 2019, five candidates, all followers of Boutaflika's regime, competed for November presidency. (Al Jazeera, 2019). While Algerians still demanded a real constitutional reforms along the reinforcement of the rule of law before the elections, the government heightened their repression on 83 protesters, accusing them of menacing 'national unity' for waving the Amazigh flag (Guenanfa,2019).

Amidst these controversial conditions, the 12 December elections resulted in the victory of the former Algerian prime minister Abdelmajid Tebboune with the majority of 58.14 % of votes. After his victory, President Tebboune gave the Hirak a new feature based on a dialogue to "build a new Algeria" (Algeria's New President Promises to Tackle Corruption,2019), promising to build a strong economy far from hydrocarbon revenues and to satisfy youth's socio-economic demands through greater inclusive opportunities in politics.

The death of Gaid Salah, as an outstanding political and military man advocating Tebboune as a presidential candidate, was considered as another challenge for his new government. In such a crucial period, President Tebboune has to cooperate with the new head of the army Said Chengriha to overcome the ambivalences of the Algerian crisis (Alexander, 2019).

Conclusion:

Algeria is making a slow, uneven, and flawed transition from a military-dominated state toward democracy. Corruption and social upheaval are the major harbingers for such a transition. Thus, the government has to ponder for real headway to realize the ambitions of its deprived people, trace clear roadmap for socio-economic shift, and open a dialogue to consolidate mutual confidence along glorifying the Hirak's demands. Undoubtedly, through genuine intentions from the government and the assistance of several external actors, modest progress toward democratization can be attained.

It is time to muffle the voice of the military, the most significant political force since independence, and to propel civil decision-making based on modernization and professionalism. With heightened civic peace and the new president's promises, there has been a trend toward more effective civilian control. Factual steps should be undertaken to liberalize the economy to catalyze sustainable investment and development, which in turn engender potential social changes, and presumably a cultural shift toward democracy.

It is compulsory to free political detainees and clear constraints over freedom of associations and expression to build a strong infrastructure for actual negotiations with the Hirak. Ovely, nurturing the aspirations with the Hirak ideals will institutionalize a prototypical model of democracy. For less opacity and arbitrariness, decision makers have to look forward to promote transparency within itself and public funds, and enhance state communication to the public. To combat the widespread of corruption, the transitional government should take measures to fight irregularities through continuous inspections and enact genuine legislative reforms, rather than opting for court trials that are viewed as politicized. It high time the new government backed up the private sector and businesses, ameliorated

social opportunities for youth, nourished the economy along subsidies system reforms.

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