

The Hirak as New Soft Power Asset for Algeria

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Received: 29/11/2022

Accepted: 25/12/2022

Abstract

Despite its enormous assets and soft power potentialities, Algeria remains incoherently unexplored and unexploited. For this reason, it is criticised by all segments of society for the lack of dynamic action, pro-action and interaction. Still mired in a stifling bureaucracy, cumbersome administrative procedures and ‘a "corrupted" democracy’, the country has been struggling to find its way and emerge as a potential regional power. It seems the legacy of the one-party system is still an obstacle although attempts are being made to catch up with a new political approach based on democracy, social justice and press freedom.

However, the advent of the Hirak or social protest movement as a source of optimism and hope, has ignited the birth of a new dynamic spirit. This article focuses on the impact of the Hirak as a potential soft power asset that will gradually enable the country to get rid of its rigid governance, ineffective structures and institutional policies that have led to political deadlock and crisis.

By advocating a potentially fundamental peaceful and civilised approach, the Hirak forced the system to introduce substantial political changes, leading to the elimination and imprisonment of some political and military figures that were part of the old 'gang'. It then led to a series of concrete measures: the adoption of a new judicial system, the fight against corruption and the organisation of presidential, parliamentary and local elections. Most notable is the defence of true social justice, rule of law and order, freedom of the press and the alternative to power as key commitments promised by President Abdelmajid Tebboune during the 2019 election campaign.

Keywords: Hirak, social movement, media, politics, democracy

Introduction

Algeria's social protest movement described as the Hirak; Arabic name, began on Friday 22 February 2019, days after some fervent and overzealous supporters of the aging, ailing and deceased president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, announced his candidacy for another fifth term. The peaceful protests had forced the military leadership to urgently insist on Bouteflika's removal from office which took place on 2 April 2019. By early May 2019, a significant number of personalities close to the deposed administration had been arrested. The protesters did not return home, and many vowed to stay until the underlying power structure in Algeria changes and its notorious and corrupt ruling elite is expelled from power.

However, when asked what prompted the protesters to take to the streets in Algeria and what their main grievances were, the experts replied that there was no immediate trigger for the insurgency. The experts considered that the immediate trigger for the protests was inevitably the announcement on 10 February 2019 that former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999-2019) would run for a fifth term. The Hirak is also the result of an accumulation of grievances towards the political system; it had evolved from the interests of Algerian society and the mismanagement of state resources by this system, especially after the president's stroke in 2013. Algerian citizens have frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with the political system through exit and expression strategies. But most protests have gone unnoticed, with demonstrators blocking intersections, burning tyres and demanding that the authorities fulfil promises made by the central government but not implemented by local officials.

Ultimately, the social protest movement reached its peak of desperation and broke out on 22 February 2019. It had won the admiration of the whole world, including citizens of the major powers who expressed their support for the peaceful nature of the marches. This social uprising quickly became a soft power asset; many Algerians are still proud of it and are committed to promoting it internationally. Because of the inevitability of the peaceful and civilised nature of the movement, it unleashed dormant forces in society and subsequently opened up new hopes and unexpected avenues for the further democratisation of the country. In practice, the social protest movement has led to several advances in the areas of rule of law and order, social justice and press freedom. However, in order to preserve these gains, it is in great need of being valorised and of bringing together all the factors that guarantee its success and

continuity. It also needs to be protected against destructive and obstructive hidden forces that are still operating in an unscrupulous manner.

Algeria Kept away from Arab Spring

Throughout the world, analysts et experts still wonder why Algeria has not been engulfed by ‘the "Arab" Spring’ phenomenon that swept through Arab countries, including its neighbours; Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in 2011. What were the reasons that have left the country out of ‘the "Arab" Spring’ and how can we explain the reluctance and lack of enthusiasm of Algerians to join the movement? Surely, there are some credible factors that support the so called ‘Algeria's "enigmatic" position’.

Thus, historically, the country has always stood out as a country known for the stubbornness and uniqueness of its government policies (Balibar 1997). The country has been described as a ‘leader that has shown the way for many third world states to fight for independence and freedom while defending their human and civil rights’. Furthermore, Algeria, which was among the 'victims' of the revolutions in Eastern Europe in the 1990s due to its close ties with the former socialist countries, experienced its first social unrest on 5 October 1988. They were seen as a profound expression of the desperation, anger and frustration of citizens after years of economic deprivation that had been advanced by the single party, the National Liberation Front (FLN), since it came to power in 1962. These riots were the first signal that triggered a series of political and economic reforms; defined as a unique experience in the Arab world, which paved the way for a new constitution allowing a multi-party political system and the publication of the private press in 1990 (Yahia 2021).

In the Algerian context, the Arab Spring concept was rejected because of its series of ambiguities and inaccuracies. Further, the changes in the country does not come very often from outside and its citizens have not waited until 2011 to proclaim multiparty and press freedom. Experiences of freedom are deeply rooted in society and any social movement originates within society and is not imposed from outside. While the Western media has by all means imposed it on the international news agenda and had its impact in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Algeria seemed to have its own unique political model and the authorities took a series of measures to "contain any contamination". Is this country an exception? Specialists do not believe in the existence of this notion but admit that the Algerian has a unique but different mentality, no one can

know when and how he gets agitated because he is not ‘a "follower" person’ (Yahia 2021). Today, the country offers an exceptional image of stability and comfort, but once again, this can only be an illusion because no one can predict what will happen in the future if a substantial and profound change is not initiated. In sum, the Hirak is an expression of Algerians' feelings of uniqueness, stubbornness and determination to protest against any form of authoritarian politics.

Peaceful, Friendly Spirit

During the first weeks of February and March 2019, protesters had become accustomed to the Hirak movement despite the government's decision to ban demonstrations through series of constitutional reforms. This provision requires citizens to declare the holding of sits in or demonstrations by submitting the necessary information to law enforcement. Previously, Algerians had to apply for a demonstration permit. The freedoms of peaceful assembly and demonstration are guaranteed and can be exercised by means of a simple declaration. The law sets the conditions and modalities for their exercise as stipulated in the constitution. Thus, the advent of the Hirak marked a change in the way the authorities dealt with it; by abolishing the authorisation regime, specific to dictatorships, and moving to a declarative regime, specific to democracies.

From the first weeks, the Hirak initiated a peaceful and friendly approach, denying the adoption of attitudes of provocation or violence. It remains alive and deeply civilised compared to previous events such as riots of October 1988 and April 1990. However in 2019, the regime of simply declaring protest and demonstration is seen as an act of obstruction, it is even considered a systematic operation to incriminate and obstruct Hirak’s protesters. But, lawyers continued to challenge these measures by calling for the abolition of all illegal decrees that hinder freedom of press, expression, opinion and demonstration. Finally, they called for the establishment of the rule of law, a democratic regime and the achievement of country's economic sovereignty (Benali 2021). The authorities themselves realised that the Hirak of 2019 is completely different in its essence and spirit and ultimately instructed ‘surprisingly’ security forces to protect protesters from all acts of violence or any intrusion (Mebtoul 2020).

Fraternity and Cohesion

22 February is celebrated as the National day of fraternity and cohesion between the people and their army for democracy, in tribute to the people and their army who initiated the Hirak that was admired the world over and during which, despite its scale, not a drop of blood was shed. In application of the measures taken by the newly elected president Abdelmadjid-Tebboune, 59 detainees (for acts related to the use of social networks or committed during rallies) have been released until 25 February 2021. In the spirit and logic the Hirak, the fight against corruption has brought relief to Algerians who despaired that one day their justice system would tackle the untouchable persons, who, in order to enrich themselves, were guilty of criminal acts that undermined the country's economy and social balance. Thus, some political figures opposed to the Hirak, persist in trying to provoke clashes at rallies from abroad and create disorder that no one wants in Algeria. The security services and the police in particular have taken steps to deal with possible disturbances of public order and to prevent provocations against participants in rallies. Values of respect for the laws of the republic, the institutions of the state and the Algerian people are a fundamental rule that is binding on all.

The Hirak has attracted many more people because the majority of those who made up the first one were together with those who have never participated in any demonstration. There are more of them than think, have decided not to hinder the action of the public authorities in the construction of the new Algeria (Bensaad 2020). Algerians do not want to follow 'the "activists" to the end', coming from identity currents where certain fractions are irreducibly opposed to each other, an unnatural alliance of circumstance that does not manage to hide its contradictions behind all slogans. Despite the attempts at destabilization that have not been lacking for many months, fuelled furiously on social networks and by some overseas media driven by opinion manipulators who use lies, the Algerian state has demonstrated capacities of resilience unsuspected by its enemies, in conditions made more complex by the outbreak of the Corona virus epidemic (Mebtoul 2020).

World's Admiration

The protest movement, which has won the admiration of the world, including citizens of the United States of America, who have expressed their support for the peaceful marches during the peaceful nature of the movement, is what makes it a soft power that we are proud of and promote internationally. Because of the inevitability of its peaceful nature, the social protest movement

has released all the dormant forces in society and opened up new hopes for it and other unexpected avenues (Kemache 2020).

Today, the movement has achieved remarkable results in terms of the rule of law and social justice and, because of these achievements; it is in great need of being enhanced by providing political and social factors that guarantee its success, continuity and protection from destructive action. In fact, the desired change lies in the integration of vital energies into political work and its embodiment in a progressive and democratic manner, which is supposed to be accelerated by the national group and the existing elites in the arena through the production of values and concepts (Kessar 2021). The latter allow for the construction of a political culture and the endowment of society with hopes, ambitions and noble goals, which are supposed to be organised through political practices and steer it away from all negative politics (Mesloub 2020).

Hirak, Public and Social Media

Although the social protest movement has won the admiration of the global media, the Washington Post (Tharoor 2019) has published a series of articles. They are part of relationships of hegemony and domination (colonial and post-colonial), which they try to prolong. They also serve current economic and geopolitical interests. The decoding of these discourses is a prerequisite for anyone who wants to understand the issues and challenges facing Algeria. This essay takes a critical look at media propaganda aimed at distorting Algerian reality. In turn, it highlights the interest of the Algerian authorities in the 4th generation war - including media manipulation - aimed at destabilising states that do not fit into the logic of neo-colonial and imperialist powers and lobbies.

However, at the national level, there was hesitation, mainly from the public media, which was actually at the mercy of the authorities, who abused their status and positions, making a series of attempts to undermine the Hirak and distort the truth. Private media and social media were the main ammunition to offer support and wide coverage of the events (Zaghlami 2019).

Social media have now highlighted the role of social platforms in the manifestation of what the scholar Guy Debord called the 'spectacle' in his seminal book, *The Society of the Spectacle*. The latter is understood as a social relationship between people that is mediated by images (Debord 1967). Indeed, the media is generally used as an instrument of distraction and is manifested through the use of advertising, cinema and news. Thus, social media have come

to embody the commoditisation of life, where personal life becomes entertainment that others can consume and actively use as a basis for value production. Furthermore, the rise of influencer culture has perpetuated this notion and in recent years influencers have amassed thousands and sometimes millions of followers and companies. While the use of social media influencers to promote the soft power of these authoritarian regimes has not yet proven successful (Parks 2019), it does call into question how the spectacle of soft power can continue to develop in the realms of the digital space. The use of influence marketing to advance soft power is a demonstration of the blurred lines of the spectacle between entertainment, information and politics.

In the Algerian context, social media are seen as an alternative option to 'the "cosmetic" and "hypothetical " media pluralism'. Thus, for example, the Face Book platform, which has more than 60% of followers in the country, has become the main source of information and has a strong influence on public consumption and on the agenda of traditional media. During the Hirak, influencers and opinion leaders used social media as privileged tools to disseminate information about the actions, activities and programmes of the social protest movements, as well as to express opinions and views on the political and social situation (Kedidir 2020). As mentioned, the public media under the strict control of the authorities were not allowed to offer spaces and platforms to the social movement, the protesters use the social media sites and platform to express themselves and influence the course of events. Ultimately, social media, as an unexpected opportunity, has become another form of soft power asset, allowing Algerian citizens to demonstrate, speak their minds and demand more openness, social justice, democracy and a fair and equitable political system. Thus, the combination of peaceful protests on the streets and pressures from social media users compelled the authorities to accept most of their demands and pledge to implement them (Hamdi 2021).

Hirak and the Elite

The intellectual elite were active and produced texts, articles and documentaries during the Hirak and provided political and moral support to the protesters. However, the intellectual elite worthy of the name is the one that, aware of its advantages, both epistemological and above all economic and social, should be prepared to sacrifice them in order to do what the Algerian state, undermined by a moribund regime, refuses to do; to organise and unify reality and make it viable for the entire Algerian population. Indeed, the

intellectual elite is one only if it exposes itself and puts itself in danger by fighting the enemies of freedom (Neveu 2002). However, the major difficulties are those of people in power without any legitimacy. Due to some dysfunctional and corrupt institutions, its catastrophic political and economic choices are a complete departure from common sense and the public interest.

In sum, the intellectual elite were aware of any populism, as they have often evolved in a reflective environment (Osman 2021). Moreover, they have an advantage when it comes to explaining social and political issues and deconstructing erroneous or flawed belief systems. By advocating values of humility, the Algerian elite have presented itself as an inward-looking quality. Humility is not only that, it is also humility towards others (Parks 2019). The elite have demonstrated intellectual humility. While being aware of his epistemology, the elite did not resent being little heard or misunderstood, did not work to impose its vision on others and even less to despise others because they do not adhere to what he considers to be good belief.

Peaceful and Fraternal Slogans

As we have already mentioned, the whole world expressed its admiration for the Hirak marked by *silmya* (peace) and the slogan *haoua-khaoua* (all brothers) (Oumansour 2019); marches and rallies practically without clashes with the police, despite the provocations of intruders infiltrated into the demonstrators. The whole world witnessed this extraordinary feat, to the credit of Algerians as a whole. From the first days of the Hirak in 2019, the manipulators' illusory hope of creating unrest and clashes with the police was destroyed by the brotherhood between young demonstrators and young police officers (Bensaad 2020).

Moreover, the Hirak was marked by two magnificent slogans: *Djeich chaâb khawa-khawa* (the army and the people are brothers) and *silmiya, silmiya* (peaceful, peaceful), which, from the outset, signified the refusal of any provocation and which, in fact, prevented the intruders from dragging the popular movement along the path of chaos desired by Algeria's enemies (Félix de Meyer 2020). Thus, the permanent concern of all to safeguard the stability of the country motivates the behaviour of Algerians. For them, the stability of the country comes first; it is stability, ensured by the Army-People natural alliance, which allows the development of the country to guarantee a dignified and decent

life for all. Three years after 22 February 2019, it is in a peaceful country that Algerians want to continue on the path that remains to be taken (Bensaïd 2021).

Infiltration, Manipulation and Recuperation

The Hirak protest movement has faced attempts of manipulation, recuperation and infiltration by activists from various national and international non-governmental organisations, the separatist movement of Kabylia (MAK) and militants from the Islamist movement in Algeria. Their objectives are to dislodge the demonstrators, who are mostly honest citizens, who were willing and determined to put an end to the political gang; the so-called *issaba* who over the last twenty years confiscated the country (Belguidoum 2020). Initial Hirak's demonstrators, were those who brought millions of people to the streets of Algerian cities. Mostly composed of honest citizens whose dreams and ambitions are to liberate the country from years of despotism, corruption and social injustice. A study (Bensaïd 2020) highlighted the methods used by these groups to push for more confrontation. After the initial political successes, the number of protesters began to decline inexorably. The change is radical, as are the speeches and writings of these groups (Hill 2020). Attacks, insults and invective against government officials, security forces and the military establishment have become increasingly virulent, and their media, both traditional and online, flood cyberspace with an endless stream of stories that are closer to the 'five principles of war propaganda' than to reasoned political discourse.

The belligerent methods that lead to confrontation are in clear contradiction with the pacifism of the demonstrations that stunned the whole world; however, the hardening of their positions and the refusal of dialogue or participation in the political game risk leading us to a sinister scenario like Libya or Syria. Thus, the opposition movements present in the Hirak that accept democratic rules, do not follow a foreign agenda and do not play with the integrity of Algeria, to develop clear political programmes and participate in the democratic life of our country. However, if these groups believe that they have a solid popular base, they will have no difficulty in getting elected, occupying decision-making positions and drafting laws that ensure Algeria's prosperity.

Taking advantage of this salutary and beneficial wave for the country, the democratic NGOs, the separatists of the Kabylia movement and the "offshore" militants of the Islamist movement, financed and trained by foreigners (Jabi

2020), sought to undermine the peaceful and civilised spirit that animated the social protest movement. However, the Hirak's figures were omnipresent on social networks and regularly invited on media platforms, and each of their statements echoed in cyberspace, creating impact on their supporters.

Disillusion and Disenchantment

From the beginning, some demonstrators gradually distanced themselves from the popular citizen movement. Their enthusiasm of the first months was replaced by doubt and scepticism, and they ended up deserting the Friday marches. *Liberté*; the French name of freedom gave them the floor to explain their disenchantment (Acherchouf 2021). Faced with demonstrators in the streets, Algerian government shows no sign of concession, by following its logic and quietly pursuing its roadmap. However, protesters appear to have no longer bothered the government, whose agenda is to prepare a series of political and economic reforms, starting with the titling of the presidential elections (Amrouche 2021).

The balance of power is not in favour of the Hirak because the formidable insurrection of 22 February 2019 missed a crucial stage of organisation. The popular movement has been reduced to a "popular mass" where all antagonisms clash and mix. There is really everything in it and without a real structure for the Hirak, it will not go far. Even the public authorities are aware that without a clear organisation, they will not be able to influence the course of events. Thus, without organisation and structuring, the citizens' movement of 22 February 2019 will go nowhere (Balla 2019) The Hirak is treading water and this popular movement will not achieve its objectives if it continues in the same way. Thousands march once a week, chanting anti-system slogans in the streets of Algiers and elsewhere in the country, and then go home empty-handed and quiet in the evening (Rachidi 2021).

There is less room for civic debate and the feeling of nihilism that is taking hold in the ranks of the Hirak is worrying. The absence of self-criticism and debate on the failure to bring about a real alternative to the system is detrimental to the future of the social protest movement. This is also why the change for which millions of Algerians came out on 22 February has not yet materialised. The government is amorphous, out of step with the aspirations of our beautiful revolution. The Hirak is crossed by multiple currents. It is a large platform where several ideologies coexist, but instead of reducing this

movement to currents that everything separates, we must, on the contrary, perceive the positive sign of a great diversity (Ghanem 2020). The arrival of the so-called "deprived" popular strata is due to the socio-economic crisis in which the country is mired.

The social protest movement essentially maintains its primary demands, which are clearly stated: change of the system, independence of the judiciary and the construction of the rule of law. On the other hand, attempts at manipulation and recuperation exist, as is the case in any popular movement in the world, but they should not be overdone (Serres 2021). However, it is exaggerated to say that the Hirak is open to the four winds or subject to all kinds of manipulation. This is an insult to the intelligence of Algerians. Although the popular movement has seen its ranks shrink somewhat, it is still vital and dynamic, since the only balance of power against the authorities is imposed by the street (Boubekeur 2020). The Hirak keeps its breath, as a whole, it is still there, lively and sparkling and raises the profile of the protester; out of breath. The movement is an extraordinary field of struggle, a great open-air platform where all Algerians are represented, with their diversity, unlike those who seem to be won over by resignation and doubt. Instead of crying manipulation, the demonstrators would do better to fight for their ideas and ideals by taking the field. This organisation is capable of capitalising on all the synergies within the Hirak and giving them a clear and relevant political content for their political demands.

Blessed and Original Hirak

In the end, the social protest movement produced tangible results and despite several attempts of infiltration and manipulation. The newly president Abdelmajid Tebboune elected on 12 December 2019, had taken a series of crucial decisions; one date to remember is the 12 June 2021 as key one in Algeria's post-22 February 2019 history. In fact, for the first time in its short history, the country had experienced its first legislative elections without the vertical instructions and transversal connivances of the past. After a long-awaited vote, it had finally taken place as scheduled and marked the end of an institutional amputation that had lasted for at least twenty years (Hawthorne 2019). Many political parties took part in the vote in order to gauge their weight on the political scene, others preferred to boycott while another opted to abstain. After all, these are the rules of the democratic game (Bensaad 2019).

In a perspective to adapt and adopt the Hirak, President Tebboune called it “Moubarek”, the Arabic name for the blessed and “Assil” the Arabic name of original social movement that succeeded in removing former Bouteflika's 'authoritarian regime' and rejecting it out of hand. It is the result of a peaceful struggle waged by millions of Algerians for many months (Samai-Haddadi 2019). Afterwards, all parties involved in the social movement had reached a popular consensus that was more than a concept. They agreed on the fundamentals and united around a progressive and peaceful change, a virtuous equation that would give birth to the first stammering of an effective democracy in spirit and in fact (Kessar 2021).

The Hirak as an Uncommon Therapy

In addition to the political and sociological analysis of the social protest movement carried out by certain researchers and experts, another study developed by Nadia Kacha (Benfodil 2021) took an original psychoanalytical approach to it. She found that although the Hirak has now disappeared from the public arena, it continues to inhabit the collective memory. Moreover, it is regularly invoked and, above all, continues to feed the work of multidisciplinary researchers, and to be dissected from every angle. Thus, the famous "ritual of Friday" which has scandalized during the year 2019 the social life, offering a formidable moment of civic communion, has been scrutinized. For Algerians, it is important to meet every Friday to feel as strong and proud, regardless of the difference in age, gender and generation. This communion evokes a set of accumulated energies created by the thoughts of people who have a common goal (Samai-Haddadi 2019). It is also a reminder of a succession of traumas experienced by Algerians since colonization and even during independence; however the key level of humiliation was the candidacy of a sick and reduced president for the supreme magistracy. This affront acted as an electroshock and almost brought out the magma of accumulated resentments from the depths. It gave birth to a movement of re-appropriation of the dignity and the pride of the citizens. Thus, waving flags was an act of courage and a need to assert an identity at all costs and to reassure oneself about who one is (Benfodil 2021).

Through its horizontal, leaderless structure and regular gatherings, the Hirak offered itself a huge mothering envelope. It was also able to use different envelopes to experience common sensations. Thus, the first envelope was visual with a colourful crowd wearing the colours of the flag in all its forms, scarves, hats, caps, dresses, T-shirts. The second envelope was a sound with shouts,

chants, slogans and hand clapping. While the tactile envelope, it was expressed by the touch of people, touching each other, for comfort. The sensor envelope appeared with goose bumps when listening to the national anthem and patriotic songs. The last envelope was a speech expressed by endlessly repeated slogans. In fact, the investment of these envelopes had made it possible to use all the potentialities of the group to remake the way of the reconstruction of the identity (Benfodil 2021).

The Hirak had allowed a whole people to heal and reconcile after first weeks of total fusion. It followed a process of differentiation that began to make its way within the Hirak itself, and transformed into a therapeutic group. The scholar recalled the chronological process that allowed her to identify the different stages of therapeutic groups. She went through the moment of mistrust, euphoria, and differentiation with the acceptance of differences and the strength to feel fully Algerian. Finally, the moment of the end of the group has arrived but with the continuity of the external link and the will to preserve this so precious good (Samai-Haddadi 2019).

The Hirak was a founding and structuring social experience, it allowed to renew the destroyed links and to re-inscribe the Algerians in their history (Kacha). This unprecedented experience in the world, has also allowed Algerians to know themselves, to repair themselves, to reweave the links between generations, to find their memory, their roots, their language. In short, the Hirak has put into practice an uncommon therapy, which has allowed a whole people to "heal", to get out of the depressive and repressive climate that was maintained for many years and now it is poised to go towards a new life, new horizons and new projects.

Conclusion

The Hirak or social protest movement is considered as a new soft power asset; it has been a 'blessing' added value for Algeria after years of anarchy, corruption and mismanagement. Its uniqueness and specificity reside in its peaceful, friendly and civilised characteristics. Events of February 2019 and positive outcomes that birthed after several months of demonstrations are a surprising prowess in the country compared to previous protests which witnessed riots and acts of violence. Although, some citizens are still unsatisfied with what have been achieved so far in terms of power sharing, transparency, social justice, press freedom, law and order and fight against corruption,

nevertheless the letter and spirit of the Hirak are deeply enshrined in the minds and hearts of Algerians who persist and continue to ask for more democracy and liberty.

Adopted in the constitution and celebrated as national day, ultimately the Hirak has become an Algerian brand to be protected and promoted. Ultimately, the Hirak should be considered as a new pragmatic and gradual approach towards implementing more social justice, freedom of the press, law and order state, more importantly democratisation of the society and alternance to power.

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