

WHY EGYPT OVERTHREW AND PAKISTAN OBEYED: COMPARING PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN EGYPT AND PAKISTAN

Original Article

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative analysis between the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 and civilian protests against the military on May 9th 2023 in Pakistan. It aims to explore how protests in Egypt led to the dismantlement of a military dictatorship, while Pakistani protests with similar goals failed to generate impact. Although both unrests were rooted in public dissatisfaction against military establishments, the outcomes of their communal remonstration are visibly diverged. This study outlines the parameters of “success” of the said protests, that were able to impact and or displace military leadership in power. Through an examination of the protest sentiment, the organisational structure, leadership dynamics and the state sanctioned repression strategies—including but not limited to the control of state and private media and the use of judicial power—this paper argues that Egypt’s success was facilitated by youth-led mobilisation, sustained collective outrage, and strategic planning. In contrast, the Pakistani protests suffered from weak organisation, political polarisation, higher protest costs for older participants, and a well-resourced, economically autonomous military establishment with extensive judicial authority. By drawing on existing theories of mobilisation and protest failure, this paper concludes that subtle structural and social differences—rather than the presence or absence of anger—accounted for the disparate outcomes of these two seemingly parallel movements.

Keywords: military dictatorship, protests, revolution.

INTRODUCTION

Military crackdowns have been a consistent way to shut down protests over the course of history. From the Persian Empire in the year 499 BCE, to modern day Egypt, and Pakistan, they have proven to do so, either effectively, or counter-productively.

The Arab Spring protests in Egypt in 2011 have been widely studied, and are well accounted for by participants and social scientists alike. A group of protestors were able to put an end to a 30 year long military dictatorship under Hosni Mubarak, despite attempts to shut down their efforts. The protestors were also able to achieve this goal in a remarkable span of 16 days.

The immediate success of this protest then raises questions about why the same baseline set of events were unable to generate success in other countries, namely Pakistan. In 2023, although Pakistan was not under direct military rule, the arrest of the PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaaf, a political party in Pakistan) leader, and former Prime Minister Imran Khan triggered protests against the military, whom people believed was responsible for his arrest. The arrest was on the basis of the Al Qadir Trust Case¹. An impromptu protest then began at the Corp Commanders house, which quickly turned into a riot. Protesting continued over the next few days, however, forces were able to shut it down. Because the set of events in both regions were broadly similar, I presume the differing consequence to be a result of the differing protest sentiment, alongside the structural differences within each ruling body.

Definition of “Success”

It is simple to define successful protesting in Egypt as the point at which Hosni Mubarak stepped down from power.

Defining what success would have looked like in Pakistan, on the other hand, is complex. This is because the level of organisation at the first protest that occurred still remains unknown, i.e it is unknown whether or not the protestors had a set united goal. Every party involved (the military, the protestors, and the PTI party) holds a different opinion about what the intention behind the protest was, all of which will be elaborated further in this paper. Without knowing what the goal of the movement was, it is difficult to define what would have been considered “success”.

For this reason, in the context of both Egypt and Pakistan, the definition of success is what can be clearly determined despite the controversy surrounding the 9th May protests. It is a fact that both protests were against an establishment in a position of power. The reasonable measure of success then becomes the extent to which both parties were able to bring a negative impact on those in position of power.

Events of the Revolution in Egypt

Although the protests in Tahrir Square, which are usually considered to be the main part of the revolution, began on the 25th of January, the roots of the movement began earlier. The trigger itself was a video of a police brutality incident circulated on social media, showing the murder of a man, Khaled Said. The armed forces responded to this claiming that his death was a consequence of drug abuse. A Facebook page entitled “We are all Khaled Said” was then created, calling for a silent protest. The protestors came out on the streets of Alexandria, standing peacefully in silence, however, this was shut down by force. A protest was organised online to take place on the 25th of January, National Police Day. It gathered an estimate of 250,000 people, mostly young¹. According to an anonymous admin of the Facebook page, it called for “a revolution against poverty, torture, and injustice”². On the 25th of January 2011, a series of uprisings began. The government used water cannons and tear gas in an attempt to suppress them, however, this instigated the protestors further³. Internet access was restricted, a 6pm curfew was imposed, however, they persevered, eventually turning violent as they faced further repression. On the 31st of January, the Egyptian military made the decision to avoid using force on the protestors, in respect to the “legitimate rights of people”⁴. During this time, the Egyptian economy had taken a hit, particularly when the tourism industry (one

¹ “What Happened during Egypt’s January 25 Revolution?” Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 25 Jan. 2023, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/25/what-happened-during-egypts-january-25-revolution.

² “My Arab Spring: Egypt’s Silent Protest.” Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 25 Jan. 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/25/my-arab-spring-egypts-silent-protest>.

³ Ghonim, Wael. “Inside the Egyptian Revolution.” Wael Ghonim: Inside the Egyptian Revolution | TED Talk, TED, Mar. 2011 https://www.ted.com/talks/wael_ghonim_inside_the_egyptian_revolution?subtitle=en

⁴ “Egypt Protests: Army Rules out the Use of Force.” BBC News, BBC, 31 Jan. 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12330169>

of the country's most important industries) lost its revenue, due to a lack of tourism caused by the revolution. On the 11th of February Mubarak stepped down from power, and Egyptians were allowed to form a democratic government.

Events of the Uprising in Pakistan

In April 2022, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted over a no confidence vote by the parliament. At the time, Khan spoke of this as a plot by the opposition party, and foreign countries such as the US⁵. He later claimed that the military had a role to play in it. Not too long before his arrest, he also made a statement claiming that a senior military officer was plotting to kill him.⁶ On the same day, Khan was arrested by rangers over the Al Qadir Trust Case.⁷ His arrest triggered mass protests on the 9th of May 2023, mostly centred in the city of Lahore. Groups began to gather outside the military corp commander's house in protest. The protests quickly turned into riots, with a raid on the commander's house, and violence between the police forces and the people. Over the next few days, the use of tear gas and water cannons became common, and PTI leaders were being arrested. Protestors were being arrested, and interrogated. Many political leaders and influential figures mentioned being blackmailed, raided, searched, or threatened. Journalists went missing, and people were being kidnapped. Soon after all this turmoil, the protests died down. The military labelled the 9th of May as "The Black day", and declared the movement to be a planned attack by the PTI party and Imran Khan, or "riyaasat ke khilaaf saazish" (conspiracy against the state).



Figure 1 and 2: Posters put up in Lahore on 9th May 2024

Military violence, and strict orders only seemed to anger the protests in Egypt more, as per the accounts of figures such as Wael Ghonim⁸. In Pakistan, however, after a crackdown, and restrictions, the movement died down with no tangible outcome. Imran Khan was not

⁵ Davies, Simon Fraser & Caroline. "Imran Khan: Mass Protests across Pakistan after Ex-Pm Arrest." BBC News, BBC, 9 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65531648>

⁶ "'Listen to Me Carefully': Imran Doubles down on Allegations against Senior Military Official." DAWN.COM, 8 May 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1751767>

⁷ Hussain, Abid. "What Is Al-Qadir Trust Case for Which Imran Khan Was Arrested?" Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, 12 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/9/what-is-al-qadir-trust-case-under-which-imran-khan-is-arrested>

⁸ Ghonim, Wael. "Inside the Egyptian Revolution." Wael Ghonim: Inside the Egyptian Revolution | TED Talk, TED, Mar. 2011 https://www.ted.com/talks/wael_ghonim_inside_the_egyptian_revolution?subtitle=en

released, and the 9th of May was labelled “The Black Day” by the military and was called a consequence of a conspiracy against the state.⁹

The difference in this then becomes further jarring when the similarities between the two states, Egypt, and Pakistan are considered. Both protests were triggered by a specific event that positioned them against a ruling body. Both countries also saw their militaries as a source of nationalist pride.¹⁰ This is important because the level of pride associated with the military is proportional to the level of anger generated in the protests. Because the military was given such great prestige, if, in the people’s eyes, they abuse that prestige, I then feel it is safe to assume that the anger generated would be in consideration of the “betrayal”, and misuse of power by the military. The type, and level of rage was therefore similar in both nations.

The level of anger was enough to generate success in Egypt, however, in the case of Pakistan, it was not. This paper first brings focus to the strategies deployed to bring about a crackdown on the movement. Here, I discuss factors such as media control, the use of violence, and the use of power. It then discusses nature of each protest, and the level of organisation in both. This includes the sentiment of the protestors involved.

The success of the protest in Egypt has been studied extensively, in terms of all the factors this article aims to focus on. I will therefore be using preexisting theories about Egypt to identify similarities and differences between those, and the situation in Pakistan.

STRATEGIES OF THE CRACKDOWN

The Use of Violence and Repression by the State

The Egyptian military is considered to be the strongest in the Arab World. According to CNN, in 2011 the military troops numbered at 320,000, with a budget at 3.4% of the economy. This consolidated the consistent reports of arrests, kidnappings, and violence over the period of the movement. Reports of human right violations became increasingly frequent, for example the Guardian reports a missing persons case from a woman called Sabah Abdul Fattah, whose son was kidnapped.¹¹ The human rights watch reports bullets being fired at protests in Tahrir Square. Despite the struggles, protests did not immediately diminish. They were able to continue till a point where Mubarak was ousted.

Similar violence took place in Pakistan, in May 2023. The Human rights watch declared the police shootings on the crowd to be “excessive”, while also acknowledging that the protestors’ use of violence on the corp commander’s house was unlawful. Sheikh Imtiaz of the PTI party mentions the use of “tear gas and force” by the police. Reports of kidnappings, and arrests also began to surface in the next few days. The fact that the protests died down after multiple arrests and suppression took place suggests that people had more to lose protesting in the 9th May protests than in Egypt.

A significant factor to this was that the Egyptian protests were youth led, while the 9th May protests had participants of multiple ages. The youth did not dominate the movement, nor did they lead it. Most of the people arrested in Egypt were between ages 18 and 21, while political targets during the 9th May protests were not within any specific age group. Both 75 year old PTI party member Shirin Mazari, and 40 year old Khadija Shah were arrested.

This becomes relevant when considering the fact that the costs of protesting are higher for those that are older, as opposed to the youth.¹² For an older individual, getting arrested would mean not being able to work, hence not earning an income. It would also mean being away from home, and leaving a family unattended. Both of these factors may prevent people from protesting, as there is a risk of being arrested, or kidnapped.

⁹ “‘Black Day’ in Pakistan: How Events of May 9 Last Year Shook the Pak Army.” Business Standard, 9 May 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/black-day-in-pakistan-how-events-of-may-9-last-year-shook-the-pak-army-124050900608_1.html

¹⁰ Khan, Masud Ahmad. “Pakistan Army – A Source of National Pride.” The Nation, The Nation, 25 Sept. 2022, <https://www.nation.com.pk/26-Sep-2022/pakistan-army-a-source-of-national-pride>

¹¹ “Egypt’s Army Took Part in Torture and Killings during Revolution, Report Shows.” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 10 Apr. 2013, www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/10/egypt-army-torture-killings-revolution.

¹² Beyerlein, K., & Hipp, J. (2006). A two-stage model for a two-stage process: How biographical availability matters for social movement mobilization. MOBILIZATION, 11(3), 219-240. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/34t624vt>

The Use of, and Control over Media by the State

On the 27th of January, 2011, access to internet was cut off in Egypt, i.e. the protest organisation that had been taking place online was no longer possible. This is thought to be an attempt on Mubarak's end to shut down the protests. Similar events took place in Pakistan, where restrictions on social media platforms were imposed. Internet services were also always either shut down, or heavily limited, during the days of intense protest.

The way both movements dealt with the issue however, was significantly different. The Egyptian protestors developed tactics to work around the new circumstances. Their ability to do so was a testament to the level of organisation in the movement generally, which will be elaborated on further in this article. According to Aljazeera's sources, Hackers were able to reverse the effects of the government servers. Furthermore, protestors held up signs indicating the next protest locations, to alert everyone despite the fact that they were not able to do so on social media.¹³

In Pakistan, internet and popular social media platforms were shut down in attempt to contain the protests. PTI, the party organising the protestors has always relied on platforms such as twitter and Instagram to get their message out. The party makes use of posts to call for protest.¹⁴ This then made a social media ban an ideal way for the government to prevent the protest spread. Although many protestors resorted to strategies such as connecting to VPN's, the overall communication was not as organised, nor was it as effective as in Egypt. There was no system employed in the country to alert citizens on what alternative protest locations were. This is likely due to their spontaneous nature, and lack of centralised organisation, unlike the movement in Egypt, which had established centralised organisation with parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This organisation brought in support for the cause as well.¹⁵ People in Pakistan were therefore unable to carry out an effective, popular protest with a similar number of people as those that attended before.

The Use of Other Strategies

On a comparative, it can be argued that the Pakistani military was better equipped to handle a revolution than the Egyptian military. Although the Egyptian military was strong, as aforementioned, to other factors that diminished the impact of its strength. These factors can look like multiple things, such as how the Egyptian military rule was more blatantly autocratic as opposed to the suspected political influence in Pakistan, which is more indirect.

Pakistan's last military coup was in 1999, which also led to its last direct military rule. Today, although the military is involved in the country's political framework, the dynamics have significantly shifted. The Pakistani military has established itself through a strong economic system, as well as a series of judicial policies giving them more power.¹⁶ For instance, Pakistani civilians can be tried under military courts. This gives the military power over arrests and sentences. After the 9th May riots, a total of 103 civilians were tried under military courts.¹⁷

Additionally, the Egyptian military was at a disadvantage due to their reliance on tourism funds. The tourism industry is Egypt's primary source of income, and was affected during the revolution. In 2011, particularly during the days of the uprising, the country's tourism significantly declined.¹⁸ This reduced their revenue, which is suspected to have contributed to the military's decision to not use force on the protestors.¹⁹ This connects to a larger inherent difference between the military capacities of the two states. Mubarak's rule was a direct military formed government, i.e. all state responsibilities, and economic downfalls fell directly on them. A fall in Egypt's tourism

¹³ "Arab Spring Anniversary: When Egypt Cut the Internet." Al Jazeera, January 25, 2016.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/1/25/arab-spring-anniversary-when-egypt-cut-the-internet>

¹⁴ Goldbaum, Christina. "The Rise, and Fall, and Rise Again of Imran Khan." The New York Times, February 11, 2024.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/11/world/asia/pakistan-imran-khan-social-media-elections.html>

¹⁵ Laub, Zachary. "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood." Council on Foreign Relations, Council on Foreign Relations, 15 Aug. 2019, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood.

¹⁶ Muneer, Sania. "Cause and Effect: The Factors That Make Pakistan's Military a Political Force." orfonline.org, February 28, 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/cause-and-effect-the-factors-that-make-pakistans-military-a-political-force>

¹⁷ Bhatti, Haseeb. "May 9 Riots: SC Suspends Verdict Nullifying Military Trials of Civilians Pending Final Ruling." DAWN.COM, December 13, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1797503>.

¹⁸ Fayed, Shaimaa. "Egypt 2011 Tourism Revenues Seen down by a Third | Reuters." Reuters.com, December 13, 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/egypt-2011-tourism-revenues-seen-down-by-a-third-idUSLNE7BC038/>

¹⁹ Kirkpatrick, David D. "Egypt Crisis: Army Says It Won't Use Force on Protesters." NDTV.com, February 1, 2011. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/egypt-crisis-army-says-it-wont-use-force-on-protesters-446502>.

revenue would leave Mubarak's government directly responsible for the repercussions. This may be why the decision to stop violence was taken; in order to help the protests die down.

Pakistan's military was at an advantage from this particular perspective, owing to their economic standing. It is considered to be "more progressive than other social segments."²⁰ This is testament to their economic standing, and business investments. The Pakistani military is in charge of many popular companies and corporations, such as those under the Fauji Foundation, and the Shaheen Foundation.²¹ This economic standing puts them at an advantage due to the fact that they earn independent of the military budget allocated from the state budget as well. Egypt's military's economic involvement only flourished after Abdel Fatah- al Sisi came into power, years after the revolution first took place.²² The economic standing of the Pakistani military helped them withstand the uprising, in terms of funding elements of the crackdown, specifically the force used on the protestors, and the trials that took place after. Mubarak's government and military was therefore disadvantaged when the country's overall economy took a downturn.

THE PROTEST SENTIMENT

The Organisation Levels

The protests in Egypt were, as aforementioned, planned on social media. Although Khaled Saids death was a trigger point for the protests, they were well planned and organised on Facebook before any mobilisation took place. The first protest held was a silent stand, owing to the fact that people would be too fearful for different kind of protest, right at the beginning. This organisational detail ended up contributing to future success, particularly after the silent stand was shut down by the police.²³ The shutdown triggered further anger towards the regime, which then mobilised more people to protest. In Pakistan, on the other hand, the first day of protest turned to a riot. This makes it difficult to decipher whether or not the first bit of violence came from the protestors, or from the police. This is important because it allows the government, and the police to claim that their crackdown was in defence only. The forces were therefore able to justify their repression for a longer period of time, by releasing statements clarifying the violence was only in defence. Secondly, immediate violence at the first protest may have also driven away any new protestors considering joining. This would then overall limit the movement to only those who initially joined. A restricted group of protestors that does not grow becomes an easier target to repress, since a one-time repression will end up being permanent.

Another noteworthy organisational detail is the fact that the protest organisers in Egypt put in the effort to relate to the less wealthy people in their community first. In an interview with CNN, Wael Ghonim, an important figure at the frontlines of the protests said "Our demands are going to be all about what touches people's daily lives", which is why they started by appealing to the poorer communities.²⁴ This showed a protest organisation strategy being effectively and successfully carried out.

Perhaps the largest difference between the two protests was the way they came about. Although both protests were triggered by an event, in Egypt the revolution came about nearly 6 months after Khaled Said's death, yet the title of the Facebook page was "We are all Khaled Said". This showed an extended amount of anger for a long period of time, before protest actually took place. In Pakistan however, Imran Khan was arrested on the 9th of May, and the protests began on that day. This raises questions about the difference in the level of passion protestors had for each, and whether or not protests still would have taken place in Pakistan if organisation had occurred for 6 months. Zeynep Tufekci's theory "easier to mobilize does not mean easier to achieve gains", becomes relevant here; as the moral panic created after Imran Khans arrest garnered immediate mass support.²⁵ Despite the pro-protest sentiment, the movement failed. Her theory suggests that the prolonged planning of a protest is the key to creating a united movement identity, with shared aims, and the ability to

²⁰ Ibid 17

²¹ Wasim, Amir. "50 Commercial Entities Being Run by Armed Forces." DAWN.COM, July 21, 2016. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1272211>.

²² "Under Sisi, Firms Owned by Egypt's Military Have Flourished." Reuters.com, May 16, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/egypt-economy-military/>.

²³ Ghonim, Wael. "Inside the Egyptian Revolution." Wael Ghonim: Inside the Egyptian Revolution | TED Talk, TED, Mar. 2011. https://www.ted.com/talks/wael_ghonim_inside_the_egyptian_revolution?subtitle=en

²⁴ "CNN Official Interview: Wael Ghonim 'Welcome to the Egypt Revolution 2.0.'" YouTube, 2011. https://youtu.be/KHAMzARBjgw?si=ZS_Poat1K4ZB69eR.

²⁵ Tufekci, Zeynep. "How the Internet Has Made Social Change Easy to Organise, Hard to Win." TED, youtu.be/Mo2Ai7ESNL8?si=wIXqOyMTxksSNrhe.

make decisions that cater to everyone. This is relevant because the 9th May protests did not have a set of established goals/aims, other than the fact that the protesting population was antiestablishment.

The difference in the level of passion can be answered by the state of the Pakistan in the Status Quo, since the 9th of May. The February 2024 election results were considered to be tampered with to put them against PTI candidates. Protests were organised, however attendance at them was low, and was not nearly as much of a threat as the 9th May protests posed to the government. It is however, important to consider the fact that all the other factors previously discussed may have led to people not protesting, after the elections. These factors include the fact that they may not have wanted to risk an arrest, or a threat, as most experienced during the 9th May protests.

These factors did exist in Egypt too, however, the protest sentiment did not go down after arrests and repression. This suggests that the long term buildup of anger was able to generate a larger amount of people willing to protest, as opposed to what an instant reaction to an event that caused moral panic had.

A large reason for the protest success in Egypt then becomes the fact that they were better equipped to handle a movement of this scale.

LEADERSHIP IN THE MOVEMENT

As previously mentioned, the protests in Egypt were focused towards appealing to the common man, in order to foster relatability with the protestors. This can be proven to be successful with the sentiment the protestors carried overall. The protestors constantly emphasise on the level of unity within the movement, and the fact that everyone contributed on an individual level. An anonymous source from Aljazeera said “what made the revolution a success, and what made it work were those invisible citizens whose names we do not even know”.²⁶ This shows the leaderless nature of the revolution. Even the admins of the organising facebook page, “We are all Khaled Said” remained anonymous.

Although the protests in Pakistan were less organised and more sudden, the PTI party used their platform to gather people at protest locations, on the 9th of May and the days that followed. Although the protests were against military involvement in the government (hence the largest protest took place at the corp commanders house), the PTI party being a leading body polarised the protest group. Naturally, those who protested were PTI supporters, even if the end goal, or targeted body, was not PTI’s direct opposition. This is an assumption based on the fact that the moral shock/panic in the country was caused by Imran Khans arrest, i.e those who protested came out in support of Khan, the PTI leader. It is then a valid assumption that the turnout might have been more, if the antiestablishment sentiment did not stem from Khans arrest, and his statements before it. A protest organised by non-politically affiliated civilians may have brought in a greater relatability factor into the movement.

CONCLUSION

The differences in the sentiment of the protestors, combined with the ability, or lack thereof, of the forces, to carry out a successful crackdown greatly contributed to the success of the protest in Egypt, and the failure of it in Pakistan.

I have proven the organisation level of the protestors in Egypt to be significantly higher than that of the protestors in Pakistan. The start of the movement was planned on social media, and the first protest had a significant period of planning before it took place. This, combined with the movement’s plans after the internet shutdown, resulted in the long term success of the movement overall.

Furthermore, the Pakistani military was better equipped to handle a revolution, than Mubarak’s regime was. The Pakistani military was able to gain a certain level of control through judicial law, and economic funding. The tear gas, and water cannons used to suppress the revolution were sustainable over a period of time because the military was able to fund them. They were also able to gain a level of control over the punishment of protestors, through military courts, which civilians were allowed to be tried in. Mubarak’s regime on the other hand, was economically failing due to the dip in tourism. This forced them to sacrifice on some suppression tactics, such as military force.

²⁶ “My Arab Spring: Egypt’s Silent Protest.” Al Jazeera, January 25, 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/25/my-arab-spring-egypts-silent-protest>

The attention to the audience during the Egyptian revolution, as opposed to that in Pakistan, is also notable. As aforementioned, the protests in Pakistan were not youth led, rather they were led by adults with higher costs of protesting (i.e. jobs, family life). The youth did not have as many commitments, nor did they have families, and full time jobs restricting them from protesting. Additionally, the protests in Egypt contained no political polarization, and were targeted towards the common man. The protests in Pakistan were called by the PTI party, which led to only PTI and Imran Khan Supporters protesting. This weakened the turnout of the movement.

These factors combined, led to a successful protest on one part, and an unsuccessful one on the other hand. These strikingly similar movements had subtle structural differences that led to one's success, and another one's failure.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Amani Almas Rashid*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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