Multicultural Politics in Indonesia: Dialogue and *Gotong Royong*

By

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Abstract

This paper traces some the difficulties of the Indonesian struggle to construct a multicultural, pluralist, and tolerant society to the inadequacies of both liberal and communitarian forms of multicultural politics and the resulting failure to discursively construct a consensus on the limits of tolerance. This paper further argues that the indigenous Indonesian social ideal of *gotong royong*, together with Rorty’s rejection of metaphysical justifications, provide an attractive point of departure for an Indonesian dialogue aimed at constructing a consensus of the limits of tolerance.

Preface

Violence against the minority is a concerning social fact in Indonesia. The coexistence aspired by the Indonesian founding fathers is described in the preamble of the Indonesian 1945 Constitution as peaceful, prosperous, democratic and intelligent. This constitution emerged from a political consensus forged by Indonesian founding fathers such as Soekarno, Hatta, and Agus Salim. This political consensus, however, was largely established in a heated debate between a Nationalist group led by Soekarno and an Islamist group led by K.H. Agus Salim. The Islamist group initially proposed Islam as the state foundation by arguing that Islam is universal and tolerant. The Nationalist group rejected the proposal arguing that a new Indonesia must be based on non-sectarian principles which are pluralistic enough to accommodate different ethnic and religious groups. A compromise finally emerged that included monotheism as one among five principles, along with humanity, nationalism, democracy and social justice as core political values.

Theses core values, named ‘Pancasila’ (Five Principles), are firmly embodied in 1945 constitution preamble. In the aftermath of Dutch colonialism, Indonesia chooses to pursue a multicultural society that is pluralistic and tolerant of the various ethnic and religious groups in Indonesia. In this way, Indonesia committed itself to dialogue among diverse groups as the fundamental method of achieving political consensus on difficult social issues. The reality, sixty-five years later, is that Indonesia is endlessly torn by violence and intolerance directed at the minority. In 2009, SETARA Institute (a human rights protection group) reported 200 violations of freedom of religion/belief. Ten provinces were recorded to have the highest
level of violations, i.e. West Java (57 incidents), Jakarta (38 incidents), East Java (23 incidents), Banten (10 incidents), West Nusa Tenggara (9 incidents), South Sumatera, Central Java, and Bali (each 8 incidents), followed by South Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara (each 7 incidents). Despite the progressive ideals embodied in the political consensus underlying the Indonesian constitution the attempt to develop a tolerant multicultural politics in Indonesia has proved difficult.

At least some of the difficulty to establish a more peaceful and tolerant society can be traced to inadequate philosophical understandings of multicultural politics and the resulting failure to establish the limits of tolerance in an open and non-ideological dialogue. In the first part of this paper I will distinguish between two forms of multicultural politics that are shaped and informed by liberal and by communitarian political ideology. I shall argue that liberal forms of multicultural politics fail to recognize cultural communities as having an important cultural standing and that communitarian forms of multicultural politics are subject to the extremism of a politics of identity. In both cases the result is the easy justification of violence and intolerance due to the inability to construct a consensus on the limits of tolerance. In the second part of this paper I will locate the Indonesian roots of the commitment to pluralism and tolerance in the indigenous social ideal of gotong royong. The third part of the paper will argue that social ideal of gotong royong provides a pragmatic and non-ideological framework for discursively constructing a consensus on the limits of tolerance. Specifically, I will argue that the social ideal of gotong royong, together with Richard Rorty’s rejection of metaphysical justifications on the limits of tolerance along with his emphasis on irony and contingency, offer a way forward for Indonesia to construct a consensus on the limits of tolerance necessary for a peaceful and multicultural society.

**Liberal and Communitarian Versions of Multicultural Politics**

In general, multiculturalism is about the recognition and respect for differences. The liberal form of multicultural politics recognizes only individual differences and places the individual as ontologically prior to the community. In Liberalism the individual is conceived as an abstract being who chooses her own conception of the good regardless of her cultural embeddedness. On this view, culture, as a social unit, is never recognized. Culture tends to be perceived as an individual's choice rather than a structural span where individuals are embedded. This political blind spot is caused by a euphoria in the liberal democratic ideology that glorifies individuals and ignores communities.

The absence of acknowledgement of cultural community can, however, signal a green light for violence against minority. The relation between mainstream
Islam and Ahmadiyah is a clear example. Ahmadiyah devotees are frequently subject to violent attacks from Islamic Fundamentalists. While the liberal understanding of multicultural politics offers protection to individual rights it does not hinder assault on a community. Community or group rights cannot be protected by reducing the issue to individual rights. For this reason, the framework of liberal-multicultural politics is not an adequate foundation for the construction of a consensus concerning the limits of tolerance.

Multiculturalism is not merely about individual differences and identities but also about culturally embedded differences and identities. Liberalism, however, conceives of the differences and identities championed by multiculturalism as differences which are created by individual choices. Culturally embedded differences are not recognized within the framework of liberal multiculturalism. It is the individual and not the community who holds authority of claiming cultural differences. On the other hand, communitarianism holds that the community has a certain degree of authority and is patterned or structured in a system of meaning or interpretation that is historically inherited.

While the individual is indeed an important subject to be recognized and legally protected, a more adequate form of multicultural politics is a communitarian-democratic politics that acknowledges cultural groups or communities as legal and moral subjects. In this version of multicultural politics the individual is recognized as culturally embedded. This form of communitarian multicultural politics not only acknowledges legal or moral equivalence per person but also the right of the people to differ in accentuating their cultural identity.

An adequate form of multiculturalism involves recognition of social plurality, and its multiple forms, as well as the normative response of protection and tolerance towards that plurality. Indonesian society is composed of cultural and sub-cultural groups with different beliefs from the majority. Relations in Islam-Christianity, Islam-Hindu, Islam-Buddha are several examples of political relations between the majority and the minority. However, a hidden minority can also subsist within a majority in the form of a different sub-culture such as the relation between mainstream Islam and Ahmadiyah. Forasmuch, an exact understanding of the forms of plurality in a multicultural society is essential.

Bhikhu Parekh (2000) distinguished plurality into three: subcultural plurality, perspectival plurality, and communal plurality. Subcultural plurality arises when

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1 Ahmadiyah (Arabic: أحمدية, Urdu: أحمدیہ) is an Islamic religious movement founded in India near the end of the 19th century, originating with the life and teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), who claimed to have fulfilled the prophecies about the world reformer of the end times, who was to herald the Eschaton as predicted in the traditions of various world religions and bring about the final triumph of Islam as per Islamic prophecy. Followers of Ahmadiyah, while recognized and respected in some countries, are still considered heretics which taint the purity of Islamic teaching in Indonesia. [Source: Wikipedia entry on “Ahmadiyya.”]
members of a community share the same culture but at the same time pursue different ways of life within the community. The Ahmadiyah sect, for instance, shares the Islamic culture of the Islam mainstream, but creates its own tradition within that culture. Next is perspectival plurality. This form of plurality enfolds when members of a community launches extreme criticism at a fundamental principle or value in a dominant culture and attempts to newly reconstruct it. The feminists, for instance, attack patriarchal bias in the institution of marriage. The Hizbut Tahrir\(^2\) group attacks secular bias in the dominant democratic culture today. Environmental activists that grasp the Deep Ecology principle reject the anthropocentric bias that nests in our attitude toward nature. Such groups are not subcultures as they stand in opposition to one or more fundamental principles of the dominant culture and strive to politically transform it.

The third is communal plurality. The modern society continues to accommodate various autonomous and organized communities that live their lives according to their own principles and values. In United States, Jewish, Gypsies, and Amish immigrants, for instance, still hold on to their traditions in the new territories that they reside in. Autonomous communities can also be in the form of cultural groups that are culturally concentrated, such as the Basques and Catalans in Spain, the Scots and Welsh in Great Britain, and the Quebecois in Canada. In Central Java, especially near Blora, we know the Samin people as a community that holds on to the combination of Hindu-Dharma, Syiwa-Buddha, and Syeh Siti Jenar. The emergence of Saminism or Samin teaching was triggered by Dutch colonialism in Central Java especially district of Blora. Saminism revitalized teachings from three major spiritual traditions and converted them into political and physical struggle against Dutch colonialism and capitalistic way of life introduced by the Dutch.

The three types of plurality mentioned above often intersect with one another and share the same character. For example, we can categorize the Samin people as a form of perspectival plurality (critical towards the feudal culture) as well as communal. However, Parekh (2000) is sure that the three can still be analytically distinguished. The subcultural plurality that is embedded in the culture of togetherness attempts to give way to possibilities and plurality. Subcultural challenge towards the dominant culture is limited in the scope that it is articulated in the vocabulary of the dominant culture, such as autonomy and personal choice. Perspectival plurality is more radical and comprehensive compared to subculture plurality making it not easily accommodated.

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\(^2\) Hizb ut-Tahrir (Arabic: حزب التحرير; English: Party of Liberation) is an international pan-Islamic political organisation whose goal is for all Muslim countries to unify as an Islamic state or caliphate ruled by Islamic law and with caliph head of state elected by Muslims. [Source: Wikipedia entry on “Hizb ut-Tahrir.”]
While it seems clear that the liberal form of multicultural politics cannot adequately recognize and protect the many varities of plurality present in contemporary Indonesia, communitarian forms of multicultural politics face their own difficulties and limitations. Too often, the communitarian form of multicultural politics tends to opt for the equal recognition and protection of all communities and their distinctive cultural beliefs. The danger is that some communities are tied to intolerant belief systems and subject to the extremism of a politics of identity which, too often, encourages traditional forms of violence toward other cultures.

In his *Making Democracy Work* (1993) Robert Putnam argues that voluntary associations can serve as social capital that contribute to democracy. Social capital refers to features of social organization such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam, 1993: 167). For Putnam, democracy requires an informal politics based on a civil society which promotes the public good and political participation. On the contrary, in the case of Indonesian community, sociologist Robert Hefner argues that social capital generated by voluntary associations has been used to promote racism, chauvinism, and even violence. (Hefner, 2001: 9).

As we have seen, Indonesia’s civil society is not homogeneous but rather torn by ethnicity, language, belief, gender and ideology. Such conditions allow the social capital hidden in various voluntary associations to be used by sectarian to assault the minority and thus undermining the multi-cultural goals of cooperation and solidarity amongst different groups. Hefner argues that there is a great dilemma in actuating multicultural politics within society where sectarianism and fundamentalism still prevail (Hefner, 2001: 10). Political recognition of group right enacted by communitarian multicultural politics can be used by sectarian or fundamentalist groups to solidify their intolerant identity. This fact, in the end, can fail the entire multiculturalism project itself. Failure in multicultural politics has the potency to breed violence, especially violence against the minority.

**Indonesian Politics of Tolerance—The Need for Dialogue**

Indonesia has a long history of religious tolerance. During the 17th-18th century there was a mutually enriching dialogue between Islamic teaching and the *Kejawan* or Javanese belief system (pre-Islamic religion adopted by Javanese people as one of the major ethnic group in Indonesia). In terms of literature, many Javanese poets made use of the wisdom of Islamic mysticism to Islamize the ancient literature from the period of Hinduism. They wrote many beautiful poems about mystical teaching, including Wedhatama, Wulangreh, Serat Centini, Wirid Hidayat Jati, and Paramayoga.
Many Javanese poets thought that Islamic mysticism can enrich and perfect the culture of the ancients. What is so extraordinary about these poets is their openness, adaptability, and flexibility toward other cultural elements. This openness to difference and plurality cannot be found in pesantren's religious teaching. The strict orthodoxy of pesantren culture, based on Imam Al-Gazali’s religious teaching, is used to purify Islam from the infiltration of Javanese belief system. The openness of the Javanese poets had made the integration of their indigenous religion and Islam possible. They have opened the bridge between those two belief systems within the context of esoteric teaching.

The politics of tolerance in Indonesia is informed by its past and its more struggle for independence. As a multi-ethnic and religious nation, Indonesia struggled to escape colonialism by trying to integrate diverse cultures and religions into united political entity. Boedi Oetomo, an organization founded by Javanese medical students, began the project of nation-building in 1908. While founded by Javanese, Boedi Oetomo consists of diverse ethnic groups which declare themselves as member of one nation. The Boedi Oetomo’s declaration, today, is known as the National Awakening Day. The organization, however, still had a sectarian bias. Its statutes actually stated that its goal was to promote Javanese culture. It was, therefore, not yet a fully nationalist organization which respected the diversity of cultures. After Boedi Oetomo, there were several other self-proclaimed nationalist organizations still strongly influenced by traditional ethnoreligious allegiances.

Indonesia’s struggle for independence culminated in the proclamation of independence on August 17, 1945. One day after 17th August proclamation, the Indonesian constitution was legalized with Pancasila (five principles) as its normative basis. Pancasila was meant as a political guarantee for peaceful coexistence among diverse religious and ethnic groups. Soekarno, the first president of Indonesia (from 1945 to 1967), said that Pancasila’s core principle was derived from the Indonesian social ideal of gotong royong. Gotong royong is an indigenous ideal of social life rooted in reciprocity, cooperation, mutual aid, and volunteerism. During the presidency of Soekarno the idea, gotong royong, was officially elevated to a central tenet of Indonesian life. He claimed that Pancasila was not derived from one local tradition but the essence of all traditions in Indonesia.

The principle of gotong royong is widely shared across a variety of ethnic and religious perspectives in Indonesia. Indonesia’s fifth Prime Minister and noted Islamic Scholar, Muhammad Natsir, argued that gotong royong was an ethical principle of Indoneisan social life. In his 1967 book, Falsafah Indonesia, he argued for the uniqueness of Indonesian philosophy in that it was different from both

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3 Pesantren or Pondok Pesantren are Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. According to one popular tradition, the pesantren education system originated from traditional Javanese pondokan; dormitories. [Source: Wikipedia entry on “Pesantren.”]
western and eastern philosophy and that gotong royong was one of its central notions. Muhammad AS Hikam, President of the University of Jababeka in West Java, has recently proposed that gotong royong serve as a framework for the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) movement in Indonesia.

The principle of gotong royong is neither liberal nor communitarian. It does not hinder individual pursuit of goods but makes sure that it is done within the spirit of solidarity to contribute to the welfare of society. The principle of gotong royong neither privileges the individual nor the community but recognizes both as integral to a fulfilling and just society. Gotong Royong enjoys a great deal of respect throughout Indonesian society. This respect cuts across ethnic and religious, rural and urban, and class boundaries. It emerges from Indonesia’s rural traditional of village life and is articulated and defended by Indonesia’s educated elite. As such, it may offer a superior framework of an Indonesian dialogue towards constructing a consensus on the limits of tolerance.

What is lacking in Indonesian multicultural politics is a discursively constructed understanding of tolerance. ‘Tolerance’ as a social value should not be semantically monopolized by the elite. Instead, ‘tolerance’ should be developed by society in an active and collective process. During the Soeharto regime, the second President of Indonesia (from 1967 to 1998) there was no discussion whatsoever about the limits of tolerance. Due to Soeharto totalitarianism, Indonesian people experienced ‘tolerance’ as a state imperative and not something which is rationally developed through discursive mechanism. During the Soeharto regime, there was no discussion whatsoever about the limits of tolerance. Indonesian just didn’t know for sure what should be tolerated and what should not.

After the collapse of Soeharto regime in 1998, there was a revival of religious intolerance which manifest in violence against minorities. There was indeed political turmoil when some Islamic political groups tried to enforce Islam as the state constitutional foundation. Indonesia experienced several instances of religious based terrorism whose sole message was anti-secularism. Those sectarian struggles to overthrow Pancasila, however, were rejected by most Indonesians, including the majority Islamic communities. The culture of tolerance, established as social and political coexistence, could not be torn apart.

In the absence of Soeharto totalitarianism, Indonesia has experienced the growth of violence toward minorities and the growth of a public political discourse of the limits of tolerance. This revival of intolerance and sectarian violence was, at least, partially caused by a long established political correctness policy (SARA). SARA was policy enacted by Indonesian new order regime to prohibit public discussion of Suku (Ethnicity), Agama (Religion), RA (Race) by claiming them as politically sensitive issues.
that prohibited discussion on ethnic, race and religious affairs in the public sphere. Eventually, people became accustomed to solving religious differences by brute force, not argument. Within the domain of public thought, the priority of tolerance in religious faith became an issue. Philosophical ideas on religious beliefs became objects of tolerance in addition to religious beliefs. Currently, contemporary literature on tolerance has opened the gate of tolerance for all beliefs and human activities.

The broadening of such objects of tolerance stimulated discussions on the limits of tolerance. The accepted limits of tolerance shifted from “disturbance against public order” to discussion on whether beliefs justifying such disturbance should be tolerated. While the act of suicidal bombing cannot be tolerated, the question of the tolerance of its justification, a particular religious belief, was debated. Some contemporary tolerance thinkers strongly state that another justification to limit tolerance is tolerance itself. We cannot tolerate a belief that is hostile against tolerance itself, because then it would be a self-defeating argument (an argument that denies itself). (Van Der Burg, 1998: 235)

**Dialogue and the Limits of Tolerance**

Indonesians need to collectively construct a consensus of the limits of tolerance within the context of their own culture and traditions. The social ideal of gotong royong seems well suited as a framework of Indonesian reflection of the limits of tolerance. The emphasis on a pragmatic and non-ideological approach to community building based on cooperation, reciprocity, and volunteerism seems to be a promising alternative to the ideologies of liberalism and communitarianism. The pragmatic and non-ideological ideal of gotong royong further seems to fit with philosopher Richard Rorty’s rejection of any metaphysical justifications on the limits of tolerance. For Rorty, metaphysical justifications involve objective, a-historical, and universal absolutes such as the teaching of Christianity charitas, human rights, or historical dialectics.

Rorty argued that the limits of tolerance should be based on the notion of the liberal ironist. This notion consists of two concepts: liberal and ironist. A liberal person is one who fights against cruelty and upholds social justice. An ironist person is one who fights against cruelty and injustice but acknowledges the absence of a metaphysical foundation for the fight. Liberal Ironists do not find a reason for the care directed at suffering but are confident that they can identify suffering when it occurs (Rorty, 1993: 93).

Rorty contrasts the liberal ironist with two other types of people: liberal metaphysicians and non-liberal ironists. Liberal metaphysicians are those who use foundational metaphysical concepts, such as ‘human rights’ to resolve issues of cruelty and social injustice. Liberal metaphysicians believe that a reduction in cruelty
will occur when human rights is acknowledged and upheld as non-negotiable political absolutes. Non-liberal ironists are those who care about a meaningful personal life (autonomous, religious) but stammer in responding to cruelty and social injustice. Liberal ironist brings down the wall between these two types of people by merging them and at the same time resolving them.

Rorty’s idea on liberal irony delivers a clear political message: “Absolutism gives birth to intolerance, contingency produces tolerance.” Cruel acts, according to Rorty, are merely a material manifestation of a belief that is immune to challenge and critique. The enemy of tolerance then is not only an act of cruelty as such but absolutism in belief. Rorty’s philosophy is an advice for liberal metaphysicians or non-liberal ironists to embrace liberal ironists. Multicultural politics for Rorty is a form of mass conversion of sectarian people into liberal ironists. Absolutism/sectarianism is then beyond the limit of tolerance for those who yearn to live in our civilized democratic community.

When the attitude of gotong royong is broadened from the village to the nation such absolutism/sectarianism becomes contrary to the cooperative spirit of gotong royong and beyond the limits of tolerance. However, the limits of tolerance must be institutionalized through a dialogically constructed consensus of public opinion. In that context, I see that there are two forms of absolutism/sectarianism expressions that need to be scrutinized further. First of all, the nature of absolute-sectarian beliefs. These beliefs, whether individual or collective, do not become an issue when they reside in a personal and closed sphere. Issues arise when the belief is collectively organized and promoted in the public sphere. Personal belief itself should not be subject to prohibition but a publicly organized system of beliefs that actively threatens public safety lies beyond the limits of tolerance. Religious and other absolutist groups who promote violence against the minority are not proper subjects of multicultural politics but objects of law enforcement. Their violent behavior must be considered as contrary to the spirit of gotong royong and as criminal acts.

Next off, let us consider speech as a potentially violent act. While we rarely identify acts of speech as actions against the law, impacts of some speech acts are not less fatal than physical actions. Speech is action. The philosopher, J. L. Austin, (1962) distinguished acts of illocutionary speech and acts of perlocutionary speech. Acts of illocutionary speech are not merely about saying a line of words but also saying it in context, condition, and with certain intention (Searle, 1999: 24-25). A groom that says his vow in front of his future wife is not only speaking words but is binding himself with his future wife in front of the headman. The same vows when said in the middle of a restaurant do not mean anything because the situation and the context does not support it. Acts of illocutionary speech consist of ‘delivering,’ ‘asking,’ ‘ordering,’ ‘promising.’ A religious leader citing a verse supporting violence against a minority during a sermon can be said to have
performed an act of illocutionary speech. Acts of illocutionary speech that have real impacts on actions, thoughts and the beliefs of other people are called acts of perlocutionary speech (Searle, 1999: 25). When a person proposes an argument, he or she is trying to convince another person. When a person asks for help, he or she is trying to make another person do something for him or her. When someone provides information, he or she could be in the middle of enlightening, inspiring or awakening another person. A religious leader who delivers sermons that cause people to hate the minority can be said to have done an act of perlocutionary speech. A hate speech given by a religious leader is a dangerous act. Categorizing hate speech as an unlawful act is a preventive form of multicultural politics and can be justified (within an Indonesian dialogue) by appealing to the shared social value of gotong royong.

**Conclusion**

By examining the Indonesian effort to develop a pluralist and tolerant society we can see that multicultural politics is subject to two potential difficulties that threaten the success of the multicultural project. The first is that multicultural politics is subject to the inherent blind spots in both liberal and communitarian ideology. Liberal versions of multicultural politics fail to recognize the cultural community as a legal and moral subject. Legal protection to individuals does not hinder an assault on minority since the issue is not individual but group right. Group differences are not the result of individual choice. They are culturally embedded differences. We cannot protect group right by merely individual protection. Violence against minority groups such as Ahmadiyah in Indonesia, for instance, cannot be solved by reducing the issue into individual rights. The issue is actually violation against group right to practice its own belief which is culturally embedded.

As we have seen, communitarian forms of multicultural politics which acknowledge cultural groups or communities as legal and moral subjects are, however, subject to the extremism of a politics of identity which, too often, encourages traditional forms of violence toward other cultures. The emphasis on group right and group identity, encouraged by communitarian multicultural politics, can be used by sectarian or fundamentalist groups to solidify their intolerant identity. A closed, sectarian community will endanger social coexistence due to its intolerance toward the Other.

The second is the failure to clearly articulate the limits of tolerance through a discursively constructed consensus on the limits of tolerance. We fail to formulate discursively limit of tolerance as in what circumstance we must not tolerate the intolerance. We cannot say anything about the intolerant behavior against the minority since there is no discursively constructed form of tolerance and its limits. The intolerant beliefs of a community who promotes violence
against the other can be protected and defended by appealing to the very idea of
tolerance. As a result, there is no consensus in Indonesia that can be used to
condemn violence against communities such as Ahmadiyah. Any dialogue capable
of adequately constructing a general consensus on the limits of tolerance within
Indonesia must be informed by a shared framework of values which have arisen
within Indonesian culture and history and enjoy substantial respect across the
various Indonesian communities. The Indonesian social ideal of gotong rotong
seems well suited for that framework of shared values.

Rorty has also reminded us that the refusal to recognize contingency within
our belief systems, while endorsing an a-historical absolutism, can give birth to
violence and injustice. Our multicultural politics must take strong measures against
intolerant acts, whether they are speech or physical acts. Those acts which
threatens public safety must be subjected to impartial law enforcement.
Nonetheless, what should be regarded as intolerant acts must be put into public
discussion before they are decided as intolerant. The discussion should also
concern whether protection against cultural rights could be sacrificed when that
right is used to destroy social! coexistence altogether. Borrowing Rorty ideas on the
limits of tolerance, the project to save multiculturalism could be one in two ways:
first, cultivation a political consensus which censures sectarian groups that have
been proven to repeatedly conduct violence against the minority; second,
categorizing the hate speech as an unlawful act. In the end, multicultural politics is
essential to minimize violence by promoting intolerance to the intolerable.

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