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Politics And Power Management: A Study Of The Defeat Of Umno-National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) In Malaysia's 14th General Election

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ABSTRACT: Setelah Perang Dunia II, kolonialisme Inggris bermaksud mengukuhkan kembali hegemoni dan dominasinya di Semenanjung Melayu. Namun, kaum aristokrat Melayu yang terdidik sejak masa kolonial menentang rencana tersebut. Dengan membangun organisasi perjuangan modern, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), mereka memobilisasi gerakan sosial atas dasar ideologi nasionalisme keistimewaan Melayu sebagai penduduk asli Semenanjung. Ideologi yang dibangun sejak awal pendirian UMNO adalah menarik dukungan luas rakyat Melayu dengan tetap melestarikan keberadaan kesultanan yang dibatasi sebagai pemimpin negara, keagamaan dan budaya. Dalam konteks ini, meskipun Undang-Undang Dasar Malaysia membuktikan bahwa hak asasi dan demokrasi sebagai pilar penting Federasi Malaysia, namun ketuanan Melayu secara khusus telah mengukuhkan kekuasaan politik UMNO bersama aliansi Barisan Nasional sebagai pemegang absah dalam pemerintahan Malaysia. Pada perkembangannya, kekuasaan politik UMNO menjadi sangat otoritarian dalam menerapkan ideologi nasionalisme Melayu khususnya di bidang ekonomi. Tragedi 1969 menjadi momentum hegemonik bahwa UMNO harus mengubah kebijakan-kebijakannya agar tetap mendapat dukungan luas dari mayoritas bangsa Melayu di negara Malaysia. Ketika UMNO gagal menerapkan transformasi dalam otoritarianisme, maka masalah-masalah krusial seperti korupsi dan ketakmampuan melakukan pemulihan ekonomi di hadapan krisis ekonomi dunia tentu konsekuensinya akan mengalami kekalahan politik meskipun hegemoni ideologis nasionalisme Melayu tetap dijalankan.

ABSTRACT: After World War II, British colonialism aimed to reinstall his hegemony and domination in the Malay Peninsula. However, Malay aristocrats, the well-educated class at the colonialism era, opposed the plan. In this case, they built a modern organization, *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO), as a political and social movement based on Malay nationalism to drive Malay peoples as native ones. Their ideology was to extract them while preserving the existence of *sultans* as supreme head of the country. In this context, even though Malay constitution proved the humanity and democracy as pillars of the country, the Malay supremacy (*ketuanan Melayu*) specially allowed the political power of UMNO with the alliance of *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) in Malaysia's government. In its development, the politics of UMNO became more authoritarian in applying the Malay nationalism ideology, especially in the economic field. The May 1969 tragedy gave legitimation for UMNO to reform their policies in order to get great support from the majority of Malay people in Malaysia. When UMNO unsuccessfully applied transformation in authoritarianism, crucial issues such as corruption and economic decline in the face of global financial crisis definitely emerged as a consequence. This condition led to political defeat although the hegemony of Malay nationalism ideology was run.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Between 1946 and 1957, Malay states experienced three constitutional changes and finally achieved independence from the British. The Malayan Union Plan designed over several days in London was first applied on April 1, 1946, as a sign of the return of British colonialism after World War II. Sir Edward Gent was the first Malay Governor. This union actually merged all Malay states in a single colony to face issues immediately. The Malays, especially the aristocrats, united under the leadership of Dato Seri Onn bin Jafar and its organization of *United Malays National Organization (UMNO)* to oppose constitutional designs which reduced the status and power of the *sultans* and gave citizenship to non-Malay immigrants. Malays also disliked the way the British urged the *sultans* to hand over authority and worried about the dominance of the Chinese racial economy.

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In January 1948, a new constitutional design was created to change the union into a federation. The constitution of the Malayan Federation fixed the symbolic position of the *sultans* and their authority limitation. However, the issue of China's economic domination was not resolved until the deliberation of independence and the establishment of Reid's Constitutional Commission in 1956. The Malaysian Law entitled Alliance Institutions (*Perlembagaan Persekutuan*) 1957 as the basis of the independence contained the position protection for Malays as an indigenous people of the country and endorsed the Malay nation's quato in education and social services. Islam was declared as "Federation religion" and Malaysian language as its national language (Andrew J. Harding and James Chin, 2014, p. 86-87).

The history of Malaysia is inseparable from the political role of UMNO and its alliance since the opposition to the return of British colonialism. The main ideology of UMNO was the defence, protection, and privilege of Malays as the *Bumiputera* in the state power. Despite a number of important issues related to Singapore and Brunei, this *Bumiputera* (nationalism) ideology was able to attract great support from Malays. Even, the important political forces in Sarawak and Sabah supported the National Front (*Barisan Nasional-BN*)) after the two entered the Federated Malay States in 1963.

With the charge of protecting the position of *Bumiputera* (Malay ethnic group) in the Malaysian Law, UMNO gained considerable support from Malays and was able to defeat its opposition through the National Front. All Malaysian prime ministers came from UMNO before the time of Mohammad Najib Tun Abdul Razak. At the 14th General Election (*Pilihan Raya*) in 2018, UMNO lost, but with a political event attracting the international public in which the National Front as a broad political alliance of UMNO was defeated by Mahathir Muhammad as one of UMNO's important figures who left UMNO and formed his own political alliance.

This article aimed to explain the UMNO's political defeat to its opposition in Malaysia's 14th General Election. The important questions to be raised are: (1) Why did UMNO's hegemony decline in the momentum of Malaysia's 14th General Election?; (2) What variables influenced the declining vote acquisition of UMNO-National Front in Malaysia's 14th General Election?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

GRAMSCI'S HEGEMONY CONCEPT

In general, Gramsci witnessed the defeat of the class of Italian workers in the class struggle after World War I and the failure of social revolution in Italy at that time, the second half of the 1920s. From the prison, he filtered out a number of thoughts he examined in depth to explain the past mistakes and the political programs or theories for the future worker class struggle. Gramsci needed a new strategy in understanding the history of society on the basis of historical materialism that does not always analyze the structure (base) or what Gramsci called as economicism (including the management of power) but tends to analyze the superstructure or social awareness.

When historical materialism is narrowed in historical economism, it loses a lot of potential for cultural growth among scholars, but this symptom is most likely suffered by lazy intellectuals – those who always want to give an impression of being the smartest human, and so on. As written by Engels, historical materialism leads many people to believe that they have all the historical knowledge and political wisdom in their pockets, at a small cost and without effort. We also forget that the thesis of Marx – men realize their fundamental conflict in the realm of ideology – has an organic value. It is an epistemological thesis, rather than a psychological or moral thesis. Ignoring this important thesis creates a frame of mind that sees politics and all histories as deception and ingenuity of individuals. All cultural activities are also narrowed as "declared" deception, provocative scandals and personal problems from political figures. Therefore, economism must be opposed not only in historiography theory but also in political theory and practice. Thus, the struggle must be carried out in the realm of the hegemony concept (Antonio Gramsci, 1996, p.186).

The statement that humans achieve structural conflict awareness at the level of ideologies must be considered as an epistemological affirmation, not just psychological contents and moral values. In other words, the theoretical-practical principles of hegemony also have epistemological significance. Illich's greatest contribution to the praxis philosophy must be raised in this matter. Therefore, we can state that Illich promoted philosophy as a philosophy as long as it promoted political doctrine and practice. As long as the hegemonic device creates a new ideological domain, its manifestation restores an awareness reform and knowledge method: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact (Antonio Gramsci, 1971, p.365-366).

On the basis of the two parts of the critical study, Gramsci built the hegemony concept as an epistemology for analyzing socio-political conditions in Italy and its correlation with the decline of revolution in Europe. Moreover, the value of the study has international significance, so the hegemony concept is applied by a number of intellectuals in analyzing the hegemony of the US and its allies (especially Britain) at the level of the global political economy. That is, as an epistemology, hegemony is the basic concept of understanding or how

to know scientifically the power applied in the fields of culture, law and politics, or in short, in class struggle in the field of awareness or ideology.

However, class analysis and class struggle as an important part of historical materialism in *Prison Notebooks* are less clearly defined. Gramsci used the term 'social group' instead of 'class'. It actually provides a broader and general meaning so as to open up space for fundamental reflection. In his article, Gramsci noted "the supremacy of a social group is applied in two ways: "domination" and "moral and intellectual leadership". A social group dominates its rivals with a tendency to 'liquidate' or subjugate them through the application of armed forces and the leadership of alliance groups and their partners (Pozzolini, 1970, p. 73).

Thus, a class must apply a hegemonic function before seizing power because it must not only rely on the material strength of power to implement effective leadership. Gramsci noted that the concepts of revolution and internationalism are closely intertwined with the conception of a country and class (Pozzolini, h.73). That is, the concept of a class always relates to the concept of a country, just like the concept of class struggle and power struggle. The class or social group is a group of intellectuals who restore and apply hegemony in the fields of culture, law, and politics.

Intellectuals as a social group are the actual creator of the agent of hegemony and hegemonic competition (counter-hegemonic). Given the importance of this social group, Gramsci discussed the intellectuals in a fairly comprehensive and detailed manner, regarding their position and function in Italy's historical development in particular and the world in general (Europe, Russia, and America). The main idea of Gramsci's essay on intellectuals rejects the concept of saying the intellectuals as an autonomous social class category. Everyone is potentially intellectual in the sense of having and using mind, but not all people have the social-intellectual function. In relation to hegemony, the intellectual function covers two groups: (1) "organic" intellectuals and (2) "traditional" intellectuals. Organic intellectuals refer to the thinker and organizer elements of a basic social class. This group is less related to any professional worker, but their function is to direct the thoughts and aspirations of their organic class. Meanwhile, traditional intellectuals mostly relate to the field of profession, literature, science and so on. Their positions in society are inter-class, but basically comes from the past and present class relations and historically conceals their relations with the hegemonic class formulation (Antonio Gramsci, 1992, p.3).

III. RESEARCH METHOD

To answer the two research questions, the researcher raised UMNO's political historiography, especially its important moments in restoring its hegemony until the decline period. On the basis of quantitative data on the defeat of UMNO in the 14th General Election, this research employed a qualitative research method by using the objects of UMNO as the analysis unit and "voters" as the explanatory unit. The data were obtained from literature reviews (*library research*) such as books, journals, magazines, newspapers, documents, research result reports, or official reports. This study describes and interprets these data accordingly to the theoretical framework used (hegemony) to draw conclusions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Hegemonic Momentum

Momentum, in the lexical sense, means the driving force achieved by the development of processes or events. The early development took place at the time of British and Japanese colonialism. In World War II, British colonialism was removed by Japanese colonialism which modified a number of legacies of British colonialism. At the end of the Japanese colonialism in 1945, Burhanuddin Helmi (an Islamic and Malay Customary Official under the Japanese Military Government) and Mustapha Hussain (Vice President of the Young Malay Union) planned for Malay independence whose laws were prepared in a secret manner and discussed in a joint conference in Kuala Lumpur in the mid of August 1945. However, this plan was not implemented due to a number of reasons which became historiographic studies.

The weakness of Malay leaders in gaining the people's support and opposing the British and Japanese colonialism was the first important moment in Malaysian politics after World War II. On one side, social chaos at the moment encouraged Malay people to be aware of their economic and political positions before the non-Malays but, on another side, it caused unrest in their own society (Rizal Yaakop, 2014, p.59).

In this condition, the British proposed the Malayan Union design which was first declared on October 10, 1945, in London. There were three important objectives to be achieved by the Malayan Union: *First*, the *sultan* sovereignty was surrendered to the British empire; *Second*, the autonomy of the Malay states must be united in the Malayan Union; *Third*, the Malay supremacy or privilege position was abolished and all residents obtained the same rights. The colonial government as a strong center of government was built and the Malays were encouraged to comply with this design (Allen and Unwin, 2003, p. 187). Thus, the Malay Peninsula (Malaya Union) was a unitary state of general citizens from all races without the privilege of the Malay tribe.

On October 11, 1945, Sir Harold McMichael arrived in the Malay Land. Not until two months, he had obtained the approval and signatures of all the *sultans* and kings of Malay states for realizing the Malayan Union. Finally, the White Paper of Malayan Union was spread out in London on January 22, 1946. Malays were disappointed with the British empire because of making "broken trust". To strive against the Malayan Union, educated aristocrats, intellectuals, and other educated Malays made various movements, unions, alliances, or parties in all cities, towns, and villages. Politically oriented social movements in Malay states are increasingly developing with mass support (Abd Ghapa Harun *et al*, 2012, h. 28-43). On March 1, 1946, representatives of 41 associations attended the *Pan-Malayan Malay Congress* in Kuala Lumpur. One of the resolutions was the establishment of a new unity organization, namely *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu* or United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO) led by Dato' Onn Jaafar, the first President (Mohd Helmi Abd Rahim *et al.*, 2013, p.40).

UMNO succeeded in leading this social movement when the Chinese and Indian communities did not care and even criticized some of its programs. UMNO under the leadership of Dato' Onn Jafar encouraged civil disobedience, one of which was through the great meeting as a protest or demonstration at Johor Bahru Mosque with demand slogans, for example, 'Down with the Sultan' (the demand to depose the Johor sultan because the Johor people opposed Sultan Sir Ibrahim who signed the Malayan Union agreement). This people's opposition to the sultan was a new and sustainable feature in Malay Land after World War II. This is evidence of the sociopolitical weakness of the sultan because of their major mistake of accepting the return of the British colonialism (James de V. Allen, 1967, p.33-35). Thus, the British rule was forced to consider the view of the Malay Bumiputera privileges. As a result, the Malayan Union design was never realized. Eventually, it was revoked completely on February 1, 1948, and, as a substitute, the Federation of Malaya was formed (Mohd Helmi Abd Rahim et al., 2013, p.40)

In the Federation of Malaya, the Sultan sovereignty, the autonomy of the states and the Malay supremacy (*ketuanan*) ¹ is still preserved. Strong central power is formed as legislative power although the states have legal rights to several important issues. The British High Commissioner was appointed instead of the Governor of the United Kingdom. Thus, two historical developments have alienated the power of the Malay *Sultanates: First*, the MacMichael Pact and the Malayan Union 1946-1948 itself, and *Second*, the political power struggle of UMNO since its establishment (*Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian*, 2009, p. 118).

The important momentum of resistance to the Malayan Union by UMNO and the victory of its political hegemony as the rise of Malaysian modern politics still have several aspects to date (Mohd Helmi Abd Rahim *et al.*, 2013, h. 40-41):

- 1) Establishment of the Malay political party that is strong and accepted by the majority of Malays, namely *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu* or *United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO)* is the platform of the Malay nation to gain its independence. This development shows the transformation of Malay reform and politics from traditional to modern. UMNO has been able to unite the Malay nation with clear, infavor and affordable goals. The formation of this political party also indicates the absorption of democracy and the struggle for independence.
- 2) Malays won their right and privilege over their homeland (the Malay peninsula). They are no longer willing to be 'beggars' (a call often addressed to them) in their own homeland, lose economic power, government and homeland rights.

UMNO succeeded in strengthening the Malay hegemony in the land of Malay peninsula in economy, politics and cultures since the establishment of the Federation of Malaya as the first important momentum. The second important momentum was the Malay independence from the British colonialism in 1957 through its law of *Alliance Institutions* (31 August 1957). However, the hegemony in the field of basic law was not fully fulfilled in a concrete manner although UMNO had succeeded in establishing a political *Alliance* with *Malayan Chinese Association* (MCA) and *Malayan Indian Congress* (MIC).

The third important momentum in Malay politics was the racial riots whose climax happened on May 13, 1969. UMNO as a hegemonic political party in Malaysia certainly had a crucial connection with the event. Why did Malaysia experience racial riots in the momentum of the 3rd General Election in 1969 under the UMNO political hegemony? In general, this event depicts that the UMNO hegemony in the community is experiencing major challenges, but the reason is still in question and needs to be explored further.

The main problem of all Malay political parties is how to ensure that the interests of Malays are not threatened by the division of political power for non-Malays. UMNO failed to overcome the poverty issue of its voters. The other two alliance members (MCA and MIC) also failed in this case, one of which was shown by the Chinese and Indian workers who came to the city to find work. In other words, the government of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was still weak, incapable of implementing political power to realize the contents of the constitution, and tended to preserve the previous political economy with a number of rural economic

programs (see Jomo Jwame Sundaram, Wee Chong Hui, 2014, p.2). Alternative political organization were then born out of this condition, namely *Democratic Action Party* (DAP) in 1966 based on Chinese descent and *Malaysian People's Movement* (MPM) in 1968 (Allen and Unwin, 2003, p.230).

As a result, in the 3rd General Election on May 10, 1969, UMNO and MIC lost several seats in the city parliament. Even, MCA considerably lost the support of Chinese voters in the city. Instead, DAP and MPM succeeded in seizing seats, which was then celebrated by their supporters with mass action on the streets in Kuala Lumpur on May 11 and 12. This mass action triggered UMNO to organize a rival mass action. On May 13, 1969, racial riots were turbulent, causing 177 people died (a majority of Chinese race) and 340 people injured according to the official news. On May 15, an emergency was declared and the *Internal Security Act* (ISA) was applied to detain anyone without trial. The *National Consultative Council* (NCC) was formed under the leadership of Tun Razak as Deputy Prime Minister with the aim to recover the situation. There were approximately 5,750 people detained. Kuala Lumpur was filled with people who were confused looking for security, causing more than 15,000 people to flee to the city stadiums (Allen and Unwin, 2003, p. 231-235).

Due to this condition, the General Election was postponed and NCC was assigned to restore Malaysia's law and order in place of the government of Tunku Abdul Rahman which failed to carry out UMNO's politics and caused the racial riots. It was the momentum of replacing UMNO's internal power, especially the Malaysian Prime Minister and its chairman. The NCC chairman and the new Malaysian Prime Minister was Tun Abdul Razak. The members of this national council included all political group leaders, except DAP. Nonetheless, the NCC carefully reviewed the factors triggering the riots. One of the factors was the village development plans which did not reach the people and regions that actually really needed it – village industries, fisheries, cooperatives, agricultural education, village credit and agricultural product marketing. The Malay unemployment rate was also very high, followed by Indians. The Malays only reached 1% of investment in official/ registered businesses.

The advisory team of Tun Abdul Razak stated that the Tunku's policies did not improve economic performance in general so that a new development plan was needed to fix foreign-owned enterprises. It was an efficient step to change the Malaysian economy, increase the participation of Malays in state-owned enterprises, and improve education for Malays. This plan is known as *the New Economic Policy* (NEP). NEP endorsed an increase in government interference and expansion of the public sector for the improvement of inter-ethnic welfare and the development of neglected villages to reduce poverty. Export-based industrialization also creates meaningful employment, especially for women, while increased petroleum income funds can finance the increased state budgeting (Jomo Kwame Sundaram, Wee Chong Hui, 2014, p.2).

UMNO's hegemonic momentum in the Malaysian political history indicates that although UMNO had been able to strengthen the Malay nationalism ideology in the constitution (law), internal turbulence always resulted from the change of leadership in terms of politics, constantly based on legal hegemony and a number of insignificant amendments or ad hoc, such as the issues of Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah, and Brunei (see *Malaysian Law, Alliance Institutions, containing the new amendment* - Akta 1260/2006). This paper limits the study of hegemony in the political field and excludes cultural hegemony.

2. POLITICAL TURBULENCE OF UMNO

Malaysia has experienced a fierce conflict in its government changes and political challenges to displace the still-entrenched government coalition, namely National Front ($Barisan\ Nasional\ -BN$) led by UMNO, from its power since 1957. This turbulence is continuous democratization when National Front power is challenged by the opposition in parliament and there are increasing demands for political freedom and political liberalization (see Thomas Pepinsky, March 2012 and Bridget Welsh, 2013).

Benedict Anderson argued that the states (Malaysia) inherited (then developed) the anti-subversion law and steel government administration from the colonial regime. Therefore, Malaysia is a permanent authoritarian government – a condition that is free to do anything with a collective provision for the Malay ethnic group (52%) in monopolizing real political power before the Chinese (35%) and Indian (10%) races.

After its independence, Malaysia gradually changed from agricultural product exporters to industrialization, and its authoritarianism was mainly maintained through laws (Ariel Heryanto and Sumit K.Mandal, Ed., 2003, p.4). However, after six decades of UMNO-NF authority, the political hegemony of UMNO-NF finally collapsed on the 14th General Election in 2018, lost 40% of 222 parliamentary seats. It means that UMNO-NF has lost power in the government.

Variables or factors of this defeat consist of elements of internal and external turbulence. The internal element was that Mahathir Mohamad left UMNO and formed a political alliance with opposition political forces growing under the Najib government administration, especially Anwar Ibrahim and his wife. UMNO-NF controlled the government in an authoritarian way, leading to power monopoly over mass media, power abuse in the fields of fiscal, security, and other government resources, striking political patronage, and corruption during its entrenched power. All internal elements inherent in UMNO-NF have caused tremendous disappointment and

resistance from the Malaysian people represented by the opposing political organizations or mass actions (Jomo Kwame Sundaram, Wee Chong Hui, 2014, p.xv).

The *Najib* Corruption Case is a big issue that has quite shaken Malaysian politics. However, more than that, under conditions of continuous international economic crisis, neoliberalism continued to be applied in Malaysia and even intensified during the time of Prime Minister *Najib*. Meanwhile, Mahathir's patronage in UMNO was also very strong so that when he left UMNO, his clients also came out along with him and launched sharp criticism towards UMNO.

However, during the political turbulence in Malaysia's power struggle, the ideology of Malay supremacy ("*Ketuanan Melayu*") still remains as a common frame of the Malaysian bourgeoisie class before the Sultans' power. The bourgeoisie class (Malay) of Malaysia has established since the NEP was implemented and grew during the Mahathir government administration. They have practised authoritarianism since the time of Tun Abdul Razak, even increasingly intensified by Mahathir. After Mahathir's opposition won in the 14th General Election, he returned to being the Prime Minister, which of course could not be separated from his past administration character. Mahathir still has a number of unfinished political programs, such as reducing the Sultans' authority and completing the 2020 visions. However, the conservative bourgeois factions hindering democratization and its opposition from various civil society circles will determine the development of Malaysia in the future.

V. CONCLUSION

The aristocrats educated in British education institutions are the founders of the "ketuanan Melayu" hegemony that has been confirmed in law, mass media, discussions, or in short, the means of modern social movements. They are the main agents of legal and political hegemony. The main content is the privilege of the Malays in the transformation after British colonialism. Within the framework of this hegemony, the political turbulence of power changes happened arbitrarily on the basis of an anti-subversion legal legacy known as the Internal Security Act (ISA) in Malaysia. However, not all scientists become organic intellectuals for UMNO-NF. The young generation (students) particularly remains the challenging force of its hegemony. Resistance actions from the people, including the young generation, have taken place since the monetary crisis hit Asia in 1998. They generally have reached a saturation point in the authoritarian power of Malaysia's old generation, and have gotten their channels politically in parliament or extra parliaments, including non-governmental activities.

The Malay nationalism hegemony in Malaysia in the fields of law, culture, and religion which is anti-Islamic fundamentalism is absolute on the basis of the economic domination of Malays. In the field of politics, political institutions or parties are especially relative. Therefore, in the field of politics, UMNO and the dominance of its allies stretching for 3 decades (with the turbulence of the change in leadership and Malaysia's Prime Minister) remain relative or dependent on the demands of the domestic political economy and foreign development. The 14th General Election of Malaysia proves that the political institutions of the Malay nationalism hegemony established in UMNO were broken by its own important figure in the inauguration, namely Mahathir Mohammad. Political parties are a relative form of the Malay nationalism hegemony content from the emergence and development of the Malay bourgeoisie in the face of the limited power of the *Sultans* and imperialism in the context of the United Kingdom Commonwealth.

The defeat of UMNO-NF was influenced by internal, external, domestic and foreign factors. This dialectic invalidates UMNO's hegemony in Malaysian politics and will greatly affect the next period.

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