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What a Little Democracy Can Do: Comparing Trajectories of Reform in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Economic crisis sparked political mobilization in both Malaysia and Indonesia in the late 1990s, but with very different results. Reformism in competitive electoral authoritarian Malaysia took a largely electoral route, yielding marginal, top-down institutional change and the enhancement of democratic norms. The hegemonic electoral authoritarian regime in neighbouring Indonesia, on the other hand, was toppled by a sudden upsurge of grass-roots protest, encouraged by elite factionalism. Changes to Indonesian political institutions and personnel since then have disappointed many reformers, and mounting cynicism endangers the entrenchment of democratic political culture. The article argues that a relatively more democratic system grants more space for autonomous challengers to organize and mobilize over the long term than a less open system does. Specifically, civil society agents in the former may accumulate both social capital and its organizational-level counterpart, coalitional capital, facilitating mobilization. Such a regime, though, is better able to contain or otherwise defuse protest than is a more autocratic variant. The latter is thus more vulnerable to dramatic collapse, despite its fragmented political opposition, and faces serious hurdles in subsequent democratic consolidation.

Key words: democratization; electoral authoritarian; social movements; Malaysia; Indonesia

In 1998, as the Asian economic crisis wreaked havoc throughout East and Southeast Asia, both Malaysia and Indonesia experienced massive, pro-democratic popular movements, both dubbed *Reformasi*. The two movements yielded startlingly different results. While both Malaysia and Indonesia could be categorized as electoral authoritarian (and both had been more open and competitive earlier in the post-colonial period), Malaysia's higher recent level of democracy proved more impervious to structural change than Indonesia's long-lasting, more autocratic, regime. In Malaysia, political challengers had experienced the opportunity to rally supporters and initiate networks before the Asian crisis lent an air of urgency to contention, and state-sanctioned (especially electoral) channels for contention held some promise of viability. *Reformasi* brought only incremental normative change and marginal, top-down structural change. In Indonesia, on the other hand, massive grass-roots unrest toppled the incumbent regime, although ideas about what should take its place or broad normative consensus on governance remained hazy. Within a few years, Indonesian political institutions had been significantly transformed, despite the persistence of important elements of the 'New Order' *ancien régime*. This

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apparently paradoxical disparity suggests an important question: what is it that accounts for differing trajectories of political reform across electoral authoritarian regimes, especially when key catalysts are so similar?

The article argues that the initial endowment of democracy, or political openness and accountability, plays an important role in determining the course of reformist initiatives. In particular, how much space opposition activists from both political society and civil society have to organize, interact and mobilize the public prior to moments of crisis significantly conditions the nature of their efforts. Their ability to coordinate at those moments by drawing on reserves of what the author calls 'coalitional capital', or the trust and understanding that facilitates networking across groups, is especially critical. Aware of this correlation, authoritarian governments may strive to regulate or restrict the space available for such long-term engagement. Where repression cannot be too obvious, elites may tame threats significantly by channelling them through electoral institutions, although challengers do then have the potential to organize successfully. Where that safety-valve is not available and coercion fails, the political order may be far more volatile. The end result is that comparatively more open regimes may be subject to long-term, incremental reform of political norms and processes but are better able to resist serious institutional challenges than are their more hardline counterparts.

A comparison of developments in Malaysia and Indonesia since the late 1990s illustrates this contrast effectively. The study begins by laying out the basic theoretical framework, then briefly describes what has transpired in Malaysia and Indonesia from the tumult of 1998 until now. Juxtaposing the trajectories and results of reform in these two countries highlights the significance of coalitional capital as well as of political opportunities and threats in shaping attempts at reform. This examination draws attention to a critical aspect of electoral authoritarian (or illiberal democratic¹) regimes: the importance at critical junctures of the amount of space the hybrid regime has allowed for formal and informal networking among citizens, political parties and other associations over the long term and the outlets open to those actors. Importantly, institutional openings may be underutilized given incompatible interests and bifurcating social structures. An authoritarian order may feed off and perpetuate societal rivalries; a purely institutional approach cannot go very far to explain when common interests will definitively trump exclusive ones. Still, without space to organize, such divisions would be even more likely to obscure common ground for effective coordination around reformist objectives.

The Analytical Framework

Where 'opposition political actors compete in elections that they generally consider imperfect, but winnable enough that not participating is not really an option', Nicolas van de Walle explains, 'the ability to coalesce and win a election is in large part a function of the degree of democracy that exists within the system'.² Earlier, too, he and Michael Bratton argued that neopatrimonial (personalistic, corrupt, repressive) regimes, including New Order Indonesia, are vulnerable to popular protest followed by a very messy transition, given the lack of mediating

political institutions for negotiation and routinization of participation and competition.³ It is that messiness that causes popular upsurges against authoritarianism so frequently to leave 'many dashed hopes and frustrated actors', requiring prompt and credible elections to help resurrect a viable public sphere.⁴ What the present examination contributes is not just confirmation of these conclusions, but a disaggregation and expansion of the mechanisms involved.

A greater degree of democracy translates into greater ability to develop social capital as well as coalitional capital. Social capital refers to stores of interpersonal trust and faith in collective action – knowing one's neighbours, believing that others will follow through on commitments and so forth. It is augmented by the very sort of collective endeavours it makes possible, though it resists quantification and may lie largely dormant at times. Coalitional capital is the organizational counterpart of social capital: it is developed through and facilitates collaboration across groups. Groups, like individuals, are more likely to cooperate when they trust their counterparts, understand their general objectives and orientation and can expect a degree of reciprocity. Having networked before (whether in the context of democratic episodes or otherwise) abbreviates the learning curve of getting to know what groups have in common and how they differ, and why working together is likely to be more effective than struggling alone.⁵ As a result, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or parties' past experience of working in coalition is likely to be a fairly good predictor of future attempts at doing so, just as citizens who have organized collectively in the past are less likely to remain atomized subsequently.

Not just political parties, but also non-party opposition groups, are critical to reform in electoral authoritarian regimes. However, analyses tend to focus primarily on formal politics and elite machinations, even while acknowledging the importance of popular mobilization at least at the moment of transition. For example, van de Walle extends beyond elections mainly just to the point of elite deal-making.⁶ That aspect really applies only to institutional reform; the normative dimensions of political change, or establishment of a democratic political culture, are more likely to entail civil societal engagement. All hybrid regimes leave at least some space for groups and coalitions to develop in advance of crises, but some leave more space than others. The present approach hence builds upon a distinction between 'hegemonic' and 'competitive' electoral authoritarian regimes, or those in which leaders are invincible as opposed to somewhat insecure,⁷ by moving beyond the party system in analysing sources of regime vulnerability and by differentiating between structural and normative shifts.

Even in a comparatively restrictive electoral authoritarian system, citizens may engage via civil society or political society (however attenuated either sphere may be); with either a pro- or anti-regime orientation; and focused on the state, civil society, business interests, or some other target. Their strategic choices range from 'contained' to 'transgressive', in McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's terms, depending on whether 'previously established actors [employ] well established means of claim making' or whether 'newly self-identified political actors' or innovative strategies are involved.⁸ The more competitive the electoral system, for instance, the more likely citizens are to opt for contained contention; a more hegemonic order may

leave only transgressive channels for opposition. The character of the regime thus plays a key role in structuring engagement. Shaping this engagement are not just concrete incentives and disincentives (for instance, patronage given government supporters or penalties for participation in banned organizations) and institutional rules (such as voting systems conducive to opposition unity⁹), but also intangible factors such as social capital and coalitional capital.

Of more importance, the possibility of collective action says little, if anything, about the ideological direction or programmatic content of that action. 'Civil society' is not a unitary actor or necessarily opposed to 'the state' – which itself may be significantly fragmented. To emphasize this diversity, the term 'civil society agents' (CSAs) is used to refer to the panoply of more or less organized interests and activists. The boundaries between civil society and political society may be permeable – especially in electoral authoritarian systems, where the state's relative tolerance of formal and informal competition may vacillate. Still, the distinction between these arenas matters and is clearly evident in their core objectives: CSAs aim to influence public policies and political behaviour and political society contests for 'control over public power and the state apparatus'.¹⁰

Particularly in an electoral authoritarian context, political reform entails both normative and institutional changes. Such governments maintain control not just through coercion, but also by precluding ideological alternatives. Political cultural shifts, or the adoption of new political norms or priorities among a critical mass of citizens, are thus a vital precursor and accompaniment to structural reform. It is partly for this reason that catalysts such as an economic crisis may be so potent: not only may the dwindling of available patronage resources erode popular support or spark infighting among state cadres, but economic failure challenges the government's claims to omniscience and makes alternatives seem more convincing.¹¹ In general, where elections are held, political parties take the lead in institutional change, while CSAs promote broader mobilization and socialization toward new political norms. Again, though, both civil society and political society may be highly heterogeneous.

Larry Diamond sums up the challenge of changing an electoral authoritarian regime: 'While an opposition victory is not impossible in a hybrid regime, it requires a level of opposition mobilization, unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democracy.'¹² The more controlling the regime, the more likely it is to have forced its opponents underground or to the margins. The less hegemonic the regime, the greater the opportunity for challengers to accumulate social capital and coalitional capital through collective engagement over time, rendering them better prepared to coalesce – as Diamond suggests they must – when the moment seems right. This unity, though, may foster greater normative than institutional change and favour contained channels, rather than sparking cataclysmic change (especially to institutions) through transgressive means.

Developments in Malaysia and Indonesia

A comparison of developments since the late 1990s in Malaysia and Indonesia effectively demonstrates these distinctions. As the framework outlined here

implies, where a greater initial level of democracy allows the accumulation over time of social and coalitional capital and encourages use of contained rather than transgressive tactics, incremental normative and institutional change are most plausible. Political reform in a more autocratic system is more likely to take the form of momentous institutional upheaval and persistent disarray, given a lack of normative consensus on the ends desired. A more fine-grained analysis of how either country's electoral authoritarianism came to take the shape it did would be beyond the scope of this article – but the deeply-entrenched ethnic cleavages that have helped bolster the Malaysian government's divide and rule strategy, for instance, obviously present an important backdrop for subsequent developments. Institutions and interests are significantly mutually constitutive, but once in place, institutions may have the 'last word' in barring some interests from full articulation.

Malaysia

Elections fall short of free and fair under Malaysia's competitive electoral authoritarian regime, but their outcome is not entirely a foregone conclusion, especially at the state level. The National Front coalition (previously called the Alliance) has governed at the federal level and in most states since independence in 1957. The primary dimension along which the incumbent government is aligned is ethnicity (usually termed communalism); the population of 23 million is about 65 per cent *bumiputera* (Malays – all of whom are Muslim – and smaller indigenous groups), 26 per cent Chinese and 8 per cent Indian. Malays have always been dominant politically and the constitution guarantees their ultimate sovereignty, but Chinese have sustained greater economic power, even despite massive affirmative action programmes to benefit *bumiputera* in access to education, government contracts, credit and investment opportunities, and more. While often described as consociational,¹³ the system better approximates a 'control' model, given that non-communal¹⁴ parties and factions compete alongside truly communal ones, and Malays have come to prevail over (rather than share power on equal terms with) other ethnic groups.¹⁵

By co-opting challengers – a remarkably fruitful means of neutralizing dissent in Malaysia – the National Front has expanded over the years, from three parties in the Alliance to over a dozen today. However, the initial members still dominate and the communal structure and ideological timbre of the coalition have remained relatively consistent: co-optation of differently organized parties has arguably changed the parties in question far more than it has the coalition. The National Front now occupies the vast middle ground of Malaysian politics, leaving opposition parties polarized along the margins, from Islamism to socialism. The early institutionalization of the then more truly consociational Alliance, the near-congruence of religious and racial cleavages (such that Malay and Muslim allegiances align), and the suppression of labour- or class-based politics helped to entrench an elite-driven, communally oriented order, albeit with persistent critics on the far left and far right. Open advocacy of communalism has diminished over the years, nudged aside by discourses of 'development', 'harmony' and in some cases, Islam. Still, most attempts of opposition parties to collaborate against the monolithic National Front over the

years have been stymied by racial and religious cleavages – cleavages which serve to reinforce the disempowering effects of less-than-liberal political institutions.

Opposition parties and politically oriented NGOs are allowed to form and participate in the polity, albeit subject to registration requirements and other restrictions. (Some groups, however, such as the once potent Malayan Communist Party and radical or 'deviant' Islamic groups, have been prohibited.) Opposition parties – especially the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and left-wing Democratic Action Party (DAP) – regularly gain at least 40 per cent of the popular vote (which translates into disproportionately few parliamentary seats, given electoral rules and constituency delineation, but sometimes control over one or two state legislatures). Meanwhile, religious and secular NGOs have developed in civil society especially since the 1970s. Most focus on informal politics or activism within civil society, but many have strong links with government or opposition political parties. The police or other government officials may obstruct or break up opposition events. On the whole, though, the state is quite selective in drawing upon more coercive means at its disposal, even though the legacy of the cold war era assault on communists is a well-stocked arsenal of such means. All things considered, popular fears notwithstanding, the threat of arrest or other serious sanction for oppositional activity is comparatively low – although cooperating with the government not only avoids those costs altogether, but may bring rewards in terms of patronage or (the regime avers) continued economic development and racial harmony.

Given how commodious an umbrella the National Front provides, major political change is unlikely unless usually polarized opposition parties find some way to coordinate their efforts, at least through an electoral pact to avoid splitting the opposition vote, if not with a full-fledged coalition. However, the ideological distance between parties is great and historically, 'the imperatives for unity have invariably proved weaker than the divisions caused by communal sentiment, ideology and the desire [among parties and their leaders] for an individual identity'.¹⁶ Undemocratic institutional constraints aside, fear of alienating their core constituencies leaves parties limited room to manoeuvre. For instance, Malay-majority Islamist parties and Chinese-majority leftist parties may both want democratization, stronger protections for civil liberties and a degree of economic redistribution, but justify and speak about these goals in different terms in order to appeal to different sets of voters. The very idea of cooperation between Islamist and secular parties is considered suspect from both sides – as a betrayal of either Islamist aspirations or commitment to secular governance. The spectres of radical Islam on the one hand and Chinese 'chauvinism' on the other go far in helping the National Front scare off support for cross-party opposition pacts.

In contrast, while most NGOs appear at least somewhat communal in their membership, they are oriented more around issues than ethnicity. They can and do thus forge strategic alliances across ethnic and religious lines without compromising their character. Among the most influential Malaysian NGOs have been human rights groups like Aliran Kesedaran Negara (National Consciousness Movement, Aliran) and Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Malaysian People, Suaram); women's groups like the All Women's Action Society; and consumers' groups like

the Consumers' Association of Penang – all of which are non-communal in ideology and composition. By their focus on specific issues, such CSAs may have greater flexibility than parties in finding ways to bridge the gap between constituencies in the name of opposition unity. Increasingly since the 1980s, CSAs of varying racial and religious orientations have found common ground in support for particular issues (such as against police brutality and for judicial independence), even when similar cooperation has eluded political parties and politicians. Up until the late 1990s, more comprehensive coordination proved elusive, but the *Reformasi* movement that took shape in late 1998 – energized by disgruntlement with corruption, 'money politics', declining employment and exchange rates and the like – built upon previous, smaller-scale efforts to unite the opposition for both normative and institutional political change.

In September 1998, a year into the Asian crisis, a popular government leader and former Islamic activist, Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, was dismissed from his government and party posts. Though he was charged with corruption and sodomy (the conviction for sodomy was overturned in 2004), conventional wisdom insisted that Anwar had been deposed for challenging his mentor, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, including on matters of economic policy. Anwar's supporters provided the kernel for the massive *Reformasi* movement. Activists from civil society, opposition parties and the ruling coalition – including many who had already been pursuing broad-based mobilization in light of the Asian crisis – saw a political opportunity and came together to demand systemic reforms: good governance, civil liberties, a less communal political orientation and so forth. The overarching theme of the campaign was 'justice' – for Anwar, under Islam, through democracy, or in socio-economic terms. Central targets of the campaign included Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, crony capitalists, subservient law enforcement and judicial officers and others associated with the National Front government. Organized loosely under two umbrella coalitions, activists focused initially on street protests, proclamations and other comparatively confrontational tactics. Given both repression and looming elections, the movement soon gravitated toward electoral negotiations. With material, mobilizational and discursive assistance from CSAs, and with Anwar as a potent symbol, the four principal opposition parties forged an Alternative Front of unprecedented breadth to challenge the National Front in the 1999 elections.¹⁷

The opposition's campaign in 1999 was conceived of as an extension of the *Reformasi* movement. CSAs were critical to the launch of the Alternative Front and retained core roles – running for office, campaigning on behalf of opposition parties, helping the coalition to craft and frame its platform and working to mobilize the public around reformist goals. The Alternative Front was intended to remain idealistic, issue-oriented and non-communal, even if the parties failed at times to sustain that goal.¹⁸ Crucial to the relative success of the Front in cohering and having a real impact at the polls was that the coalition was rooted in, supported by and monitored by a wide range of CSAs and could call upon a proactive, normative agenda that evoked a sequence of reform initiatives in the past. Previous coalition-building initiatives from the 1950s through the 1990s had not only left activists with a repertoire of strategies, but also with ever-greater stores of coalitional

capital: the groups involved were familiar with each others' ideologies and goals, had established means of communicating and had built up at least some degree of mutual trust and expectations of reciprocity on the organizational level. Drawing upon this resource, groups could efficiently negotiate and propagate a mutually agreeable (and hence necessarily relatively moderate) platform.

In the end, bolstered by incumbency advantage and skewed electoral rules, the National Front prevailed, though its whittled-down margins served as a 'wake-up call' to party leaders and prompted internal reform as well as new policy initiatives. In particular, the National Front was forced to take note of demands for accountability and better governance – and for Mahathir's departure. Efforts at top-down reform gained steam once Mahathir handed over the premiership to his latest deputy, Abdullah Badawi, in advance of the next polls, in October 2003. Such efforts represent another core strategy by which the governing coalition sustains its dominance without recourse to coercion,¹⁹ but the strategy requires that opponents be able to express their concerns so the National Front can redress (and hence, defang) them. Abdullah's reputation was more friendly, clean and pious than Mahathir's. Seeking to build electoral support, Abdullah began with a populist approach. Among his first acts were bolstering the Anti-Corruption Agency; charging a Police Commission to investigate the force; refocusing state development efforts from megaprojects to smaller, rural initiatives; and freeing a number of opposition activists, culminating with the release of Anwar in September 2004 – a move which 'sent a strong signal of commitment to judicial integrity'.²⁰ However, pressure to cultivate a stronger base within his own party soon put the brakes on crowd-pleasing corruption indictments and bureaucratic reforms. After mid-2004, Abdullah turned his reformist eye more to political culture, introducing the concept of Islam Hadhari (Civilizational Islam) as a tolerant, modern orientation to compete with the vision of PAS.²¹

By the 2004 general elections, the National Front had reconsolidated its grip. Abdullah's avowed reformism and a generalized sense that he should be given a chance to make good on his promises, as well as a sufficiently strong economy that voters were disinclined to gamble on an untested alternative, helped the coalition. Meanwhile, mounting popular panic about the dangers of Islamic radicalism (problematic for the increasingly Islamist PAS), policy disputes between Islamist and secular portions of the opposition, and a lack of clear and compelling catalysts as in the late 1990s stalled collaboration among opposition parties. Divided, the opposition made less of an impact: the incumbent coalition posted its best showing ever. All the same, the *Reformasi* movement had clearly reflected and promoted mounting pro-democratic demands. Steps toward consensus on the sort of order desired clearly benefited from a long history of incremental efforts at coalition-building in both civil society and political society. Never before had PAS and the DAP been able to work so closely together – and never before had CSAs played so active a role in maintaining the focus on issues of mutual concern. Most important of all, the parties and CSAs involved had accumulated stores of coalitional capital on which to draw, facilitating coordination and cooperation. These advantages allowed a 'symbolic victory' for the opposition and seemed to foretell the development of 'more participatory democratic institutions in the longer term'.²²

Overall, then, the prior existence of enough democratic space for opposition actors to organize, mobilize and network left the regime's challengers relatively well prepared to coalesce when political opportunity structures were favourable. The resultant coalition was – not surprisingly – comparatively moderate in approach and objectives. The imperatives of coalition-building meant that radical demands were tempered through compromise. Moreover, the availability of electoral channels for reform – and the popular perception that to be legitimate, change should come through the 'democratic' mechanism of elections – shifted attention from the streets to the ballot-box. What one might expect in such a system is thus the very sort of incremental change Malaysia experienced: development of an electoral alternative with a proactive agenda (which then encouraged a rejoinder from the incumbent and hence, at least minor reforms) rather than a reactive, mass insurgency.

Indonesia

While Malaysian and Indonesian events bear some similarities, these cases are clearly very different in scale, processes and outcomes. Suharto's hegemonic electoral authoritarian New Order regime, in power for over 30 years by the time the *Reformasi* movement emerged, placed much stricter and more harshly enforced controls on association than the Malaysian government ever has. All parties except three state-sanctioned amalgamated ones were banned. Independent labour unions, critical NGOs and activist student groups were largely proscribed, although not obliterated. For instance, students periodically asserted themselves, mass Islamic organizations persisted (albeit with less overtly political objectives) and advocacy organizations took root, even if somewhat covertly.²³ The government instituted a 'floating mass' policy, encouraging Indonesians to place unity and development above involvement in the details of politics, specifically to keep the population atomized and depoliticized. Hence, Suharto 'eliminated the possibility of any organized or coordinated social challenge to the regime ... [such that] even disruptive and troublesome protest or rioting could not attain the kind of coordination or longevity necessary to contend for state power'.²⁴ Moreover, unlike in Malaysia, the armed forces had a secure political position in Indonesia (thanks primarily to the doctrine of *dwifungsi*, or their dual position in defence and socio-political affairs) and were far less hesitant to employ brutal coercive tactics.

These constraints worked to dismantle or erode stocks of social capital and coalitional capital built up during Indonesia's more democratic prior period; 'floating' rather than networked citizens were presumed less a threat to the political order. While New Order Indonesia did experience protests and riots, the state's tactics rendered these largely isolated from one another and the populations involved sensed little point of connection with each other.²⁵ As a result, while 'opposition was ubiquitous, at least in the late Suharto years', it was unofficial and so pessimistic about the chances of reform that dissidents gave little thought to specifying a preferred alternative order.²⁶

Nonetheless, faced with a dire economic situation, obvious and massive corruption among elites, Suharto's unpopularity and declining health, and international support for democratization, a massive ground swell for political reform came

together in the late 1990s. Indonesian students, NGOs, labour groups, opposition parties, Islamic organizations, urban masses and others (legal or not) all launched or joined protests, as fragmented elites began to take sides.²⁷ Their efforts were largely uncoordinated and centred around divergent concerns. Students were central to the movement and had particular mobilizational potential,²⁸ but their chief goal was reactive – the ouster of Suharto – and the alternative list of leaders they helped to promote was more conservative than the bulk of students. Suharto was obliged to resign – doing so even earlier than those calling for his downfall expected – when the disjointed opposition ‘convince[d] those in power to exercise their authority to move Suharto aside’.²⁹

Suharto was succeeded by his former deputy, B.J. Habibie. Habibie relaxed some controls on formal and informal political activity and moved toward a general election, upholding the 1945 constitution for stability, but with promises of reforms to come.³⁰ Events moved quickly. By the time of the polls in June 1999, it remained unclear what sort of power-sharing might happen among parties and whether CSAs would be able to retain a niche in formal politics. No party of the 48 contesting attracted more than half the popular vote. The only real electoral pact was among eight Muslim parties that formed a ‘central axis’ (*poros tengah*), although still jointly lagging behind the front runners in the polls. The axis’s main achievement was keeping popular favourite Megawati Sukarnoputri – whose party secured a plurality of votes – out of the presidency in 1999, after which point the grouping lost steam.³¹ Indeed, the coalition that eventually formed the government (under Abdurrahman Wahid in 1999, then Megawati after Wahid’s removal from office less than two years later) proved too broad and unstable, the new leaders’ commitment to serious overhaul of the military and other state institutions dubious, corruption still debilitating, and CSAs (especially students, notwithstanding their pivotal initial role) largely excluded from decision-making.³² It is revealing that despite the raising of issues and demands by students and other activists – expressed most cogently in the student-brokered/elite-endorsed eight-point Ciganjur Declaration of November 1998 – the only significant party to focus on substantive, progressive policy proposals rather than generalized mantras of reform, Amien Rais’s National Mandate Party, proved a ‘tragic story’, faring poorly in the polls.³³

Indonesia has experienced significant institutional change since the end of the New Order, although falling far short of what many activists sought. Among these reforms – many codified in far-reaching constitutional amendments in 2001 and 2002 – the size and composition of the legislature have been adjusted; parties and other organizations have been allowed to form more freely and for more diverse purposes; restrictions on the press, speech and association have been lifted; the military has lost its assured political position; substantial authority has been devolved to local-level governments (including special provisions for Aceh and Papua and secession via referendum in East Timor); and the president and vice-president are now directly elected.³⁴ Moreover, parties touting better governance and clean leadership did relatively well (albeit less so than Suharto’s own Golkar) in the 1999 and 2004 parliamentary elections. Egregiously, though, few top New Order government or military officials have been brought to trial, let alone convicted, even as corruption remains endemic

and 'petty political protesters run too easily afoul of the law'.³⁵ Suharto was declared 'permanently ill' and unfit for trial, his son Hutomo Mandala Putra (Tommy) escaped custody before serving a sentence for corruption, Golkar chair Akbar Tanjung ran for president while out on appeal on embezzlement charges, General Wiranto ran against him while evading trial altogether for alleged crimes against humanity in East Timor, and other former military officers have simply failed to show up in court.³⁶

Indeed, institutional reform has been erratic. Most of the parties and leaders in place even after the 2004 elections have their roots in the New Order administration and armed forces – not least former general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, chosen as Indonesia's first directly elected president. Political institutions still exclude 'organised representation from the democratic movement'.³⁷ Given the lack of a strong and organized alternative to the New Order government, 'the only Indonesian actors positioned to take power were those with some existing access to state power'.³⁸ In particular, the persistently high political stature of leaders from the military and Golkar suggests the extent of continuity even today at the elite level. Max Lane charges that *Reformasi* elites thus 'were just as afraid of mass mobilisations as the regime was'³⁹ and therefore could not be expected to promote an emboldened public. Attempts at forging more coherent coalitions for the executive or legislative branch have failed, too.⁴⁰ The selection of running mates is more opportunistic than idealistic, keeping parties personalistic and coalitions too broad to function effectively. Party platforms steer clear of substantive issues and appeal primarily to enduring societal cleavages rather than policy goals.⁴¹ The tangible benefits of more free elections as well as the permeation of democratic norms may thus be curbed by the persistent dominance of such fragmented elites. Moreover, continuing separatist tensions and sporadic terrorist attacks have undercut hopes of scaling back military power, even if the armed forces are unlikely to regain a political mandate.⁴²

Overall, as one comprehensive democratic audit concludes, Indonesia still requires 'drastic changes to power relations by way of social movements and mass organising before rights and institutions may be deemed to carry any meaning'.⁴³ At least an authoritarian backlash seems unlikely, if only because CSAs have quickly been sidelined, leaving no 'strong pro-reform constituency'.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, established elites have regrouped, and 'while allowing democratization to go forward, . . . [have truncated] democratic procedures that might otherwise threaten their interests'.⁴⁵ Given the lack of coherence, credibility and stability of Indonesia's post-transition governments so far, however – institutional changes and optimistic predictions notwithstanding – the depth and scope of democratization remain uncertain.⁴⁶

In sum, the nature of the New Order precluded the accumulation of sufficient coalitional capital for development of a proactive rather than just reactive reform movement. As Aspinall describes, Suharto's manipulations left opposition forces 'ill suited to the tasks of democratic consolidation'⁴⁷ when he was forced from office:

[The] mixture of repression and toleration, of coercion and co-optation that the regime used to control dissent . . . produced an opposition that was eventually very effective at performing some of the tasks necessary to achieve democratization, such as undermining the legitimacy of authoritarian rule. But it was less

well-suited to performing others, such as formulating an alternative to the regime's ideology or organizing an alternative to its leadership.⁴⁸

In 1998, protesters could identify a common enemy, but had no time to develop a sense of mutual interests and objectives, trust and expectations of reciprocity, or agreement on strategies in advance of Suharto's fall. Moreover, the lack of available channels for contained contention under the New Order forced opponents of the government toward transgressive channels, from petitions, to marches, to the students' occupation of the parliament building. Their experience of and inclination toward elections was thus more limited than in Malaysia.

Since *Reformasi*, the democratic movement 'has not only been marginalised by the mainstream elitist politics of democratisation . . . [but] also continues to reflect Soeharto's "floating mass" politics by being fragmented, poorly organized and rather isolated from ordinary people'.⁴⁹ The change that occurred was dramatic rather than incremental, as the tumult was enough to knock Suharto out of the picture. However, what was to come next remained uncertain long after the *mêlée* had subsided. Ineffective leaders and haphazard alliances have allowed the 'stonewalling and sabotaging of reform efforts from within and the inability of the new government to draw a clear line between the authoritarian New Order past and the democratic future'.⁵⁰ Key structures and leaders of the New Order linger still, despite important institutional reforms; the state remains critically weak; civil society remains poorly situated for political efficacy; and the normative shifts that come with consciousness-raising by CSAs have yet to take root. Ending the New Order did make room for democratization, but the extent of substantive, stable institutional and normative change has fallen far short of activists' expectations. Annual public opinion surveys since 2001 find that cynicism toward political institutions, leaders, and the quality of political life is 'widely shared and has been rising'.⁵¹ By now, concludes the aforementioned audit, 'people are increasingly disappointed with democracy',⁵² leaving democratic consolidation far from assured.

The Difference Democracy Makes: The Cases Compared

The divergence between these two states' experiences is revealing regarding the trajectories of political reform in different electoral authoritarian settings. These findings augment our understanding of the role of civil society in democratic transitions, the aftermath of moments of popular upsurge and the challenges of democratic consolidation. The hypotheses explored here about the significance of antecedent levels of democracy warrant further elaboration in light of additional cases. Still, extrapolating from just the Malaysian and Indonesian cases, at least four findings seem especially plausible. The findings concern the timing of processes of transition, the significance of sequencing, the ideological heterogeneity possible, and the relative significance to reform of forces from civil society and political society.

First, timing is critical. How long reformers have between the lifting of controls on association – particularly to allow the formation of parties – and moments such as elections, when coordinated action is necessary, matters immensely. Citizens need

time to build up social capital, think of alternatives and develop confidence in their ability to effect political change. Likewise, groups must nurture coalitional capital, including finding allies, identifying points of common concern and cementing allegiances. Otherwise, the sort of disarray Indonesia has experienced is likely: cultivating new leaders and agendas after protracted strong authoritarianism may be a trickier process than overturning authoritarian institutions. Realistically, too, the panoply of incumbent authority figures (local bureaucrats, police, and so forth) may take a while to learn and come to obey new guidelines and attitudes. Even assuming an iterative process over time, as in Malaysia, the mechanics of assembling and coordinating a range of organizations, finding what is shared across their agendas (when in fact, their differences may be great), negotiating compromise positions and thinking of ways to communicate a coalition's agenda to the public as an electoral platform still requires a substantial interval between the initial steps and elections. In the meanwhile, the incumbent government may grant some concessions to regain the advantage. Of course, especially in a less democratic context, the regime has the chance to co-opt or repress opponents in that interim, as well. The formation of Malaysia's National Front out of the much smaller Alliance after a serious challenge in 1969 is a case in point. Once absorbed into the government, dissident parties might still keep a reformist edge, but they also bolster the state. Similarly, permitting at least some critical NGOs may boost the state's image and effective capacity without being easily translated into an electoral threat.⁵³

Second, the process of organizing for collective action *before* reformists reach the stage of having to form a government may have the effect of toning down more radical demands and strategies. This process of moderation is facilitated by the availability of coalitional capital, which renders collaboration across groups more efficient. Negotiating a common platform requires reaching consensus on demands and methods to accommodate diverse preferences. Along the same lines, having time for negotiation allows determination in advance of a mutually agreeable list of leaders, ideally including ones who can unite segments of the probably polarized opposition. As a result, destabilizing, reactive change grows less likely than incremental, sustainable, and proactive measures. At the same time, cultivating new, reformist leaders mitigates the advantage enjoyed by those already with access to power and makes substantial leadership turnover more likely. Meaningful institutional and other change may still occur even if the opposition fails to coalesce, but the broader the base of support for reforms, the more likely they are to succeed and persist.

Third, neither 'civil society' nor 'reform' should be presumed pro-democratic. Transitions from (electoral) authoritarianism may be toward democracy or 'an uncertain "something" else'.⁵⁴ As Levitsky and Way stress, 'While the removal of autocratic elites creates an important *opportunity* for change and even democratization, it does not ensure such an outcome'.⁵⁵ The timbre and composition of reformist coalitions and demands may vary significantly, depending on which social forces have room to manoeuvre, popular legitimacy, useful connections, or other advantages. For example, drawing on the experience of the two cases considered here as well as of the Philippines and Thailand, Eva-Lotta Hedman identifies variations in the nature of the regime, constellation of classes, legacy of the left and nature of

religious institutions as essential to understanding aspects of mobilization specifically for liberal democracy.⁵⁶ Whatever common ground unites groups drawn to collective action is likely to emerge as the dominant position, even if not representative of society at large. If, for instance, Islamist forces coalesced but secular NGOs could not work out their differences, the dominant reformist discourse in either Indonesia or Malaysia might have been (or may yet become) far more Islamist and perhaps less pro-democratic than it has been.

Finally, these two cases emphasize the fact that a focus on civil society-based activism can easily be overstated. Clearly, as Iris Young asserts, 'While civil society can promote democracy, social justice, and well-being . . . there are limits to what citizens can accomplish in civil society alone'.⁵⁷ More broadly, not only do political parties tend to predominate where elections are part of the political process, but other state institutions (for instance, the military or bureaucracy) as well as incompatibilities across social groups may also significantly help or hinder reform processes. As was evident in Indonesia, the nature of authoritarianism aside, different constituencies within civil society may be similarly aggravated and even vocal, but find little ideological common ground, have too little mutual trust and understanding to cooperate, or lack the capacity for proactive mobilization and strategizing. Overall, the 'combination of repression with toleration for constrained forms of political action' makes for an especially resilient authoritarian regime.⁵⁸ In the same vein, the extent and intensity of the catalysts that spark mobilization, as well as the availability of broadly acceptable, charismatic leaders may mitigate the effect of even the most consistently engaged and influential CSAs. It is impossible to say how much of the National Front's success in 1999, for instance, was due simply to timely economic recovery, or to the lack of any galvanizing crises in 2004.

Taken together, these two cases highlight the complex, interlacing dynamics of political reform. The nature of the incumbent regime significantly constrains the challenges it faces, the roles in reform of CSAs and parties, and the likely trajectories of political change. This analysis suggests an element of path dependency: regimes that veer toward democracy to begin with are more susceptible to moderate, contained demands; regimes that veer toward authoritarianism are more likely to be shattered only by transgressive, radical protest. Along these lines, too, citizens and groups that have networked in the past are more prone and able to forge alliances in the future. The importance of coalitional capital in particular in uniting portions of the political opposition may recommend taking reform slowly to allow mutual trust and networks to develop, or just not to expect too much from the first phase of democratization or liberalization.

Conclusions

Depending on the specific character of electoral authoritarianism, social capital and coalitional capital may be more or less easy to accumulate. Regardless, as these examples suggest, coalition-building is likely to be a critical phase of political change processes in electoral authoritarian regimes. A little more democracy in the *status quo ante* makes coordinated reformism far easier to organize on short notice,

allowing activists to take advantage of crises or other shifts in political opportunity structures. Without this resource, reform may still happen, but it is more likely than otherwise to be cataclysmic and reactive, leaving the path to democratic consolidation obscured. Furthermore, competitive electoral authoritarian regimes not only leave more space than less democratic counterparts for civil society, they also host more meaningful elections. It is that electoral outlet that allows governments like Malaysia's to contain protest, albeit often in connection with other measures to suppress or meet calls for change. Controlled reform may leave a competitive electoral authoritarian regime not just intact, but sturdier than before.

The contrast between Malaysia and Indonesia illuminates these findings. In Malaysia, a comparatively permissive, competitive electoral authoritarian system had left a fair degree of at least largely autonomous space for civil society and opposition parties to develop. Over the years, CSAs in particular had networked around specific issues, and even polarized opposition parties had been able to negotiate some sort of electoral pact in past elections. Thus, when the Asian economic crisis revealed an opportunity for mass mobilization and systemic reform, the various parts of Malaysia's political opposition were able to coalesce and negotiate a mutual platform relatively expeditiously. Pushed toward elections, but faced with an uneven electoral playing field, the opposition lost. The government was still sufficiently alarmed by the scope of protest to adopt limited institutional reforms. It emerged stronger than before the crisis, even as the experience of mobilizing furthered democratic norms across Malaysian society. In Indonesia, on the other hand, three decades of hegemonic authoritarian rule had left opposition parties debilitated and CSAs mutually wary. Collective realization in 1998 that rifts in the military left threats of repression comparatively low, while the opportunity for change was high on account of Suharto's unprecedented political and physical weakness, led dissidents in Indonesia as in Malaysia to pursue reform. That mass upsurge brought down the authoritarian order, but did so before all involved had worked out any sort of proactive consensus. While democratization is gradually proceeding in Indonesia, the CSAs most critical at the transgressive stage were largely shut out from influence in later stages and a broadly supported, truly new and reform-minded leadership has yet to emerge.

To sum up, the amount of space and level of autonomy CSAs and political parties enjoy under a given electoral authoritarian regime significantly conditions the trajectory of reformist efforts, the strategies and organizations involved and the sorts of change likely to occur. A relatively more democratic regime may (somewhat perversely) be better able to withstand or manage reformist pressures than a more autocratic variant since these are more likely to be expressed through contained channels and may still be pre-empted through co-optation or concessions. Clearly, even within the same broad regime sub-type, a little democracy can do a lot.

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NOTES

1. A sub-type of authoritarianism rather than democracy is used here not to cast a normative judgment, but to stress the limits in place 'on the freedom, fairness, inclusiveness, and meaningfulness of elections' in these regimes, unlike in electoral democracies. See Larry Diamond, 'Thinking About Hybrid Regimes', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), p. 28. See also, Daniel Bell and Kanishka Jayasuriya, 'Understanding Illiberal Democracy: A Framework', in Daniel Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Jayasuriya and David Martin Jones, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 1–16.
2. Nicolas van de Walle, 'When Do Oppositions Coalesce in Electoral Autocracies?', Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, 2–6 September 2004, p.4. His analysis is based on sub-Saharan African cases.
3. Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, 'Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa', *World Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1994), pp.453–89.
4. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp.55–7.
5. The author develops this concept further in Meredith L. Weiss, *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp.31–3.
6. Van de Walle, (note 2), p.7.
7. Andreas Schedler, 'The Menu of Manipulation', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), p.47.
8. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.7–8.
9. Van de Walle, (note 2), p.10.
10. Alfred Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.4.
11. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
12. Diamond, (note 1), p.24.
13. Arend Lijphart, 'Consociational Democracy', *World Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1969), pp.207–25.
14. Non-communal refers to 'attitudes, orientations or actions motivated by a concern for the common good rather than by a preoccupation with the interests of a single ethnic group (or combination of ethnic groups)'. See Simon Barraclough, 'Barisan Nasional Dominance and Opposition Fragmentation: The Failure of Attempts to Create Opposition Cooperation in the Malaysian Party System', *Asian Profile*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1985), p.34, note 3.
15. Ian Lustick, 'Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism Versus Control', *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1979), pp.325–44; Lloyd Musolf and J. Fred Springer, 'Legislatures and Divided Societies: The Malaysian Parliament and Multi-Ethnicity', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. II, No. 2 (1977), pp. 113–36.
16. Barraclough, (note 14), p.41.
17. Jason Abbott, 'Vanquishing Banquo's Ghost: The Anwar Ibrahim Affair and Its Impact on Malaysian Politics', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2001), p.286.
18. For details, see Meredith L. Weiss, 'The 1999 Malaysian General Elections: Issues, Insults, and Irregularities', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2000), pp.413–35.
19. See Harold Crouch, 'Malaysia: Do Elections Make a Difference?', in R.H. Taylor (ed.), *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.114–35.
20. Bridget Welsh, 'Malaysia in 2004: Out of Mahathir's Shadow?', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2005), p.156.
21. Ibid., pp.155–6; Bridget Welsh, 'Tears and Fears: Tun Mahathir's Last Hurrah', in Daljit Singh and Chin Kin Wah (eds), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2004* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2004), pp.139–55.
22. Abbott, (note 17), p.286.
23. For instance, Edward Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Philip Eldridge, *Non-Government Organizations and Democratic Participation in Indonesia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995); Suzaina Kadir, 'Contested Visions of State and Society in Indonesian Islam: The Nahdlatul Ulama in Perspective', in Chris Manning and Peter van Diermen (eds), *Indonesia in Transition: Social Aspects of Reformasi and Crisis* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), pp.319–35.

24. Vincent Boudreau, 'Diffusing Democracy? People Power in Indonesia and the Philippines', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (1999), p.6.
25. *Ibid.*, pp.11–12.
26. Aspinall (note 23), pp. xi, 252. Aspinall untangles this paradox of organizational weakness and rampant opposition sentiment to understand *Reformasi* from the point of view of its protagonists.
27. See Stefan Eklöf, *Indonesian Politics in Crisis: The Long Fall of Suharto, 1996–98* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1999) or Aspinall, (note 23).
28. Aspinall, (note 23), chap. 5.
29. Boudreau, (note 24), p.13.
30. R. William Liddle, 'Indonesia's Democratic Transition: Playing by the Rules', in Andrew Reynolds (ed.), *The Architecture of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.373–99.
31. Ken Young, 'The National Picture—A Victory for Reform?', in Susan Blackburn (ed.), *Pemilu: The 1999 Indonesian Election* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1999), pp. 3–9; Azyumardi Azra, 'The Islamic Factor in Post-Soeharto Indonesia', in Chris Manning and Peter van Diermen (eds), *Indonesia in Transition: Social Aspects of Reformasi and Crisis* (Singapore: Institute of South-east Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 309–18.
32. R. William Liddle, 'Indonesia in 2000: A Shaky Start for Democracy', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2001), pp.208–20; Michael S. Malley, 'Indonesia in 2001: Restoring Stability in Jakarta', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2002), pp.124–32.
33. Arief Budiman, 'The 1999 Indonesian Election: Impressions and Reflections', in Susan Blackburn (ed.), *Pemilu: The 1999 Indonesian Election* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1999), pp. 17–18; Margot Cohen, 'Unguided Missiles', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 November 1998, pp. 16, 18. The Ciganjur Declaration called for free elections and popular sovereignty, phasing out the military's political and parliamentary role, decentralization and fair allocation of funds to the regions (but still a unitary state), and investigation into corruption and especially Suharto's wealth.
34. Malley (note 32); Michael S. Malley, 'Indonesia in 2002: The Rising Cost of Inaction', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2003), pp.135–46.
35. Rita Smith Kipp, 'Indonesia in 2003: Terror's Aftermath', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2004), p.69.
36. *Ibid.*; Liddle (note 32).
37. DEMOS, Executive Report, *1st Round Study of the Problems and Options of Indonesian Democratisation* (Jakarta: Indonesian Center for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, 2004), p.2.
38. Boudreau (note 24), p.14.
39. Max Lane, 'Mass Politics and Political Change in Indonesia', in Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley, and Damien Kingsbury (eds), *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash Asia Institute, 1999), pp.242, 245.
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41. Stephen Sherlock, *The 2004 Indonesian Elections: How the System Works and What the Parties Stand For* (Canberra: Centre for Democratic Institutions, 2004), pp.4, 15–16.
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43. DEMOS, (note 37), p.3. See also the account by Olle Törnquist, 'Assessing Democracy from Below: A Framework and Indonesian Pilot Study', *Democratization* Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 2006), pp.227–55.
44. Malley, 'Indonesia in 2002', (note 34), p.146.
45. William Case, 'Democracy in Southeast Asia: How to Get It and What Does It Matter?', in Mark Beeson (ed.), *Contemporary Southeast Asia: Regional Dynamics, National Differences* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 96.
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47. Aspinall, (note 23), p.259.
48. Aspinall, (note 23), p.2.
49. DEMOS, (note 37), p.3.
50. Aspinall, (note 23), p.272.
51. Emmerson, (note 46), p.95.
52. DEMOS, (note 37), p.3.
53. Cf. Holger Albrecht, 'How Can Opposition Support Authoritarianism? Lessons from Egypt', *Democratization*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2005), pp.378–97; or Nancy Bermeo, 'Myths of Moderation: Confrontation and Conflict During Democratic Transitions', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1997), pp.305–22.
54. O'Donnell and Schmitter, (note 4), p.3.

55. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), p.59, emphasis in original.
56. Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, 'Contesting State and Civil Society: Southeast Asian Trajectories', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2001), pp.921–51.
57. Iris Marion Young, 'State, Civil Society, and Social Justice', in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón (eds), *Democracy's Value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.153.
58. Aspinall, (note 23), p. 2.

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