

Omani women in Parliament: social barriers and state empowerment

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Abstract

Oman shura council over thirty-one years per nine parliamentary mandate since 1991 contained fewer female members compared to the male members where we only had 12 female members since 1994 compared to 501 male members. This basic and straightforward statistic showed the critical issues in this paper, which tries to answer the main research question; why are women less present in the elected council in Oman compared to the males? Al-Balushi, Fatma (2013) argued that the main reason is social formations in the society, with lack of financial support. In addition, the lack of women's ability to present and communicate with their community. Compared to Saudi women, Al-Qahtani, Sara (2017) in her study concluded that the religious barrier and non-professional political preparation were the main reasons. This study attempts to benefit from the gulf experience in women's participation in the Shura council (elected chamber) and compare it with Omani society to discover the social and political support provided for Omani women to participate in the Parliament. A descriptive study investigates by interviewing around five members from different parliament periods. It highlights the role of family, tribe, and education in the success of members of women. In addition to discovering the real participation in the parliament. This study expects to provide good practices, challenges, and suggestions about women's participation in Parliament.

Key words: Women, Gulf region, Shura council.

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The Principle of "Shura" In Oman

Since the dawn of history, the Sultanate has believed in the importance of Shura – consultant-, (which is a living embodiment of what contemporaries have known as democracy.) (Hummody, 2005). Where the concept of "shura" and its place in the Omani man was rooted in the entry of the people of Oman into Islam in 629 AD, as has Al-Farsi mentioned (Al-farsi, 2013). Dr. Ibrahim Al-Subhi has supported this idea, noting in his book “The historical development of the state of institutions in Oman "that "Shura" is part of the Islamic law, and therefore represents the way of life for the Omani individual and society. Since then the Omani Shura process witnessed successive and continuous developments over the past years, most notably, the gradual process of participation and democratic practice in Oman. (Al-subhi, 2009).

Moving forward, the principle of gradualism was and still is the most essential feature of political action in general during the modern Omani Renaissance. This principle is applied with regard to the process of participation and democratic practice (Shura), as the process of shura and political involvement has developed in the Sultanate according to the principle of gradualism, taking into account the culture and reality of Omani society. As the Omani Shura experience is characterized by the combination of the nation's heritage and the methods and tools of the modern era. (Al-Farsi. 2013)

The Shura is one of the most important tools that aim to assist the government in achieving the progress of the nation and the happiness of its citizens. Therefore, the government proceeded to follow a conservative, slow and cautious policy with regard to opening the door to popular participation in decision-making. Given the historical context, the popular participation in the "Shura Experience" in the Sultanate of Oman can be summarized in five main stages (Al-yahyai, 2015).

The first phase began in October 1981, about ten years after Sultan Qaboos bin Said took over the reins of power, when Decree 84/81 was issued to establish the State Consultative Council, whose preamble included “a continuation of our policy of preparing citizens to participate in opinion the government’s efforts to implement its plans to advance the economic and social development in the country” (om, 2022), which is an expression of the personal desire of the late Sultan - Sultan Qaboos bin Said - towards developing the experience of citizens participation (Shura) according to his vision The cautious and gradual special. At this stage, the Sultanate adopted the appointment system, whereby 17 members were appointed to represent the government sector from the executive officials in government ministries and agencies. And 28 members represent the private sector, including 11 members representing the the merchants and business owners sector, while only 17 members -from the public- represent the states (Al-subhi, 2009).

We note at this stage that the principle of appointment supersedes the principle of free participation in its meaning, which we define as Shura. Where the final decision remained in the hands of the Sultan himself. However, this problem - appointment - will be overcome in the next stage of the Shura process in Oman, which will also be in stages (Hummody, 2005).

The second phase, On November 12, 1991, the establishment of the Shura Council was announced by Royal Decree No. 94/91 to replace the State Consultative Council, which continued to perform its functions from 1981 to 1991. In order to achieve the desire of the late Sultan Qaboos to consolidate the principle of shura by expanding the base for selecting members of the Council to include representation of the various states of the Sultanate, which will achieve the actual participation of citizens. (A'shura, 2022).At this stage, the Omani Shura

Council enjoyed legal personality and financial and administrative independence from the state. The Shura Council, which is headquartered in Muscat, includes representatives of the Sultanate's states who are elected by Omani citizens in general elections in which Omani women have the right to vote and to run for office (Hummody, 2005).

The functions of the Shura Council are summarized here in seven main competencies, namely, reviewing draft laws, studying the development of laws, participating in the preparation of development plans, following up on the implementation of development plans, raising citizens' awareness of development goals and their achievement, tasks and priorities, studying the obstacles of the economic sector and developing services and public utilities, participation in preserving the environment, and finally, expressing opinion on issues referred to it by His Majesty the Sultan and the government (Al-subhi, 2009).

As for the members, the number of members in its first parliamentary mandate reached fifty-nine members representing the wilayats -states- of the Sultanate's, fifty-nine states, in addition to the president, who is appointed by Royal Decree. However, with the beginning of the second parliamentary mandate of the council, the population density criterion was added, so that each state with a population of more than 30,000 people would have two candidates. Thus, the number of members increased in the second parliamentary mandate from fifty-nine to 80 members. And in its third parliamentary mandate, the number of members reached eighty-two members. In this parliamentary mandate as well, the membership period was set to be 4 years instead of 3 years (Al-subhi, 2009).

Of course every Omani man and woman have the right to vote for and run election of Majlis A'shura, but under certain terms and conditions. While the Shura Council was seen as part of an ambitious program on the path of full political participation in Oman, it was, in turn, subject to the well-known principle of gradualism, in terms of the nomination and election mechanism and in terms of the legislative and oversight powers granted to it by the government.

In terms of the nomination and election mechanism, the process has been gradually developed. Where in the first parliamentary mandate (1991-1994) the right to vote was granted to tribal elders and those chosen by the sheikhs from among the notables, the wise and the educated, by means of lists submitted to the Ministry of Interior through the offices of the governors. As for candidacy, the process began with each state choosing three candidates, then the government would choose one of them, and he would be appointed by a royal decree¹.

The third phase was in 1996 when the late Sultan Qaboos announced in his speech at the celebration of the twenty-sixth national day "the expansion of the Shura circle, which was urged by the true religion, by establishing the State Council alongside the Shura Council, which would be another positive tributary in the field of constructive cooperation between the government and citizens". So that we have what is now called the Oman Council, which operates in a two-chamber system, the State Council -Upper chamber- and the Shura Council -lower Chamber-, which is a new step in the field of Shura development. However, unlike the Shura Council, the State Council members are appointed by His Majesty (Al-subhi, 2009).

The third and fourth parliamentary mandates 1997-2000/2000-2003 did not see any progress with regard to political participation until the fifth parliamentary mandate 2003-2007 when the Shura experience witnessed an important qualitative leap. For the first time, participation was

1. Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2022: The Shura Experience and Popular Participation in Oman: A Reading of Stages and Transformations.

made in the state of direct general elections by secret ballot, and the right to participate was guaranteed to every citizen who reached the age of twenty-one years².

Woman's history in Shura

The history of Omani women's participation in the Shura Council is linked to the history of Shura in Oman. The second mandate period (1994-1997) of the Shura Council marked the start of Omani women by granting them the right to vote and to run for membership in the Shura Council. Although this right was limited to the Muscat Governorate, it was the cornerstone of women's political participation, and it was the first experience that was subsequently disseminated in all the governorates of the Sultanate. During this period, two women were elected to the council.

In an investigation conducted by the local newspaper, *Atheer*, the statistics indicate that “in the second period (1994-1997) of the Shura Council elections, the number of women who applied to vote for the elections was 5100, representing 10% of the electoral register, which reached 51,000 male and female citizens at that time. Third period (1997-2000) 27 women and 709 men ran for 82 seats and resulted in the same two previous candidates winning with 80 men.

As for the fourth period in 2000, the percentage of women increased to 30%, and two women out of 21 won a competition in which 540 candidates participated to obtain 83 seats. In the fifth period (2004-2007), there were 100,000 women who obtained electoral cards, which amounts to 35% of the total number of voters. The total participation of women voters amounted to 95,508 votes at a rate of 36.6%, and out of 15 female candidates, the same candidates won in the previous elections, which means that women’s representation in the Shura Council has declined since they became eligible for political representation in 1994.

While in the sixth period (2007-2011), women participated with 155,041 votes, with 233,642 male votes, and two women also won out of 21 candidates. The seventh period (2011-2015) recorded an increase in the number of female candidates, as their number reached 77 out of 1,133 candidates, and women's participation in the electoral process reached 46.7%.

In the eighth period (2015-2019), the number of eligible voters reached 613,230, including 286,503 women, while the number of candidates in that period was 596, including 20 women. The ninth period (2019-2023) witnessed an increase in the number of women candidates compared to the previous period, as their number reached 40 out of 717 candidates competing for 86 seats in the Council. The number of those entitled to vote reached 337,534 women, representing 47.3% of the total number of voters, which amounted to 713,335 voters. and two female candidates won” (*Atheer*, 2019). These statistics undoubtedly show the existence of a gap between Omani women and the Shura Council membership, as there is no shortage of candidacy or voters. Rather, women reach the Shura Council to be representative of society.

Compared to her peers from the Gulf states, the Omani woman is considered the first woman to obtain the right to vote and be elected since 1994, and she witnessed promising and influential beginnings, but it declined over time. While her Gulf peers have advanced in parliamentary representation by 20% for Saudi women, according to the Saudi royal order since 2013³, and

2. Previous reference.

3. International knowledge network of women in politics, Saudi Arabia: Women enter the Saudi Shura Council for the first time in history. Retrieved from: <https://www.iknowpolitics.org/ar/news/world-news/>.

Emirati women have advanced in obtaining equal representation with men by 50% since 2019⁴, while Qatari women entered the Qatari Shura Council for the first time in 2017⁵.

In a study conducted by Al Balushi, Fatima (2019), it showed several results that would justify the weak presence of Omani women in the Shura Council, despite the length of the electoral experience at an average of nine electoral terms, each of 4 years. In its results, it referred to three factors: family factors, social factors, and skills and capabilities. This is what we will try to answer in this study by interviewing members of the Shura Council for the ninth term (2019-2023) and another female candidate for the same period who did not reach the council's membership. In the following pages, we discuss the answer to the research question: What are the challenges and proposals to enhance the participation of Omani women in the Shura Council?

Social barriers or state empowerment

The political participation of Omani women in the Shura Council represents the reality of the confusing parliamentary situation for Omani women, as the path to achieving their political and societal gains appears to be heavy at the moment. Samia Al-Jabali refers - in her article "Omani Women and Opportunities for Political Empowerment" - to two main reasons. The first relates to the extent to which Omani women participate in political life and the extent of their awareness of the importance of this participation and its effectiveness in advancing the status of the Omani women, based on the low participation rates that have been declining from one electoral cycle to another. As for the second reason, it was linked to the disappointment left by the meager results of women's participation in the elections, which generated in them, whether the female voter or the female candidate, the conviction of the futility of participation (Al-Jabali, 2022).

However, the results of the interviews that we conducted with Salama Al-Farsiah⁶, Fadela Al-Rahilia⁷, and Tahira Al-Lawatih⁸ showed other reasons for this modest representation of women in the Shura Council, as their experiences varied in their candidacy journey to the Shura Council, thus diversifying the possibilities and challenges for each one of them, which helped us form to reach a clearer view of the reasons for this low representation of women in the Shura Council. Whereas Fadela Al-Rahilia and Salama Al-Farsieh ran for the Shura Council three times in 2011, 2014, and 2019, Fadela Al-Rhaila finally managed to reach the dome of the council in 2019. Still, Salama Al-Farsieh was unable to do so. As for Tahira Al Lawati, her experience is different, as she was running for elections for the first time in 2019, and won it.

4. Al- Darmaki, Ftama (2020): Emirati women are a soft force in parliamentary work, Al-Andalus Magreb, no. 27, PP. 1-13. Retrieved from:

<http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/475/4752920004/movil/index.html>.

5. Marzouq, Adil (2021): The Shura Council Elections in Qatar: Path and Expectations, 19 July 2021. Retrieved from: <https://gulfhouse.org/posts/4644/>.

6. Salma Al-Farsieh, president of the Omani Women's Association branch in Sur. She ran for the Shura Council in the years 2011-2014-2019, but she did not win.

7. Her Excellency Dr. Fadela bint Abdullah bin Suleiman Al-Rahailiya, member of the Shura Council for the ninth term 2019-2023. Representative of Sohar, North Al Batinah Governorate. She holds a PhD in Mathematics Teaching Methods from the Arab Republic of Egypt (Cairo University) in 2018. She worked as the Director of Student Services at Sohar University from 2013-2014, and she moved from her work in the Ministry of Education from 1992-2019. She worked as a member of the Services and Social Development Committee in the first and second sessions, then the Education Committee in the third and fourth sessions.

8. Her Excellency Dr. Tahira Al Lawati, member of the Shura Council for the ninth term 2019-2023. A representative of the Wilayat of Muttrah, member of the Economic and Financial Committee, writer and media figure.

Women' Motives towards Candidacy

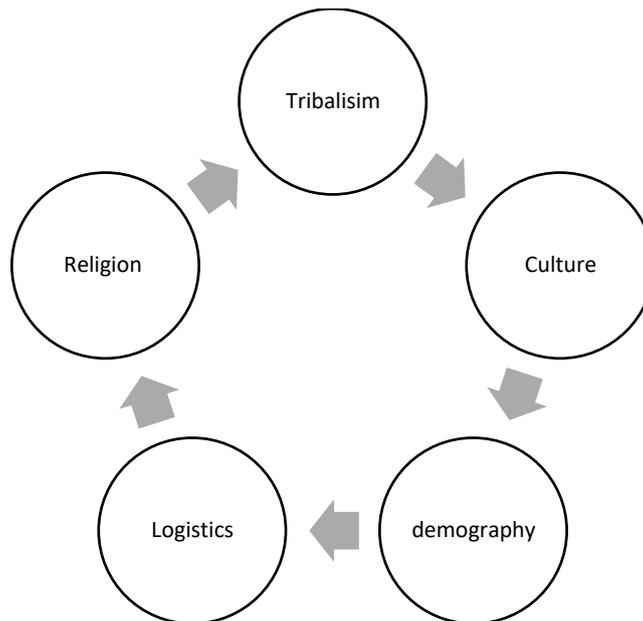
Before starting, we may have to ask, why do women seek to nominate themselves for the Shura Council, in light of the few opportunities for their access to the Council through the previous experiences of Omani women during the period of the nine mandates of the Council. It is expected that we will find differences in answering this question, but it is a very important factor in charting its way to the Council later.

Through our research on the reasons and motives for their candidacy for the Shura Council, both Fadela Al-Rhailiyah and Salama Al-Farsiah confirmed “that the motive for candidacy came as a result of their work in the social services sector (Omani Women’s Association) and as a result of contact with members of the community on their various social groups”. In addition to their desire “to prove that women exist and have the competence to exercise parliamentary roles like their male counterparts”. And their intention “to communicate women’s issues that men cannot reach and understand by virtue of their distance from the female environment and by virtue of the biological and ideological difference between women and men”. As for Tahira Al Lawati, her motive was different. In her talk about her electoral experience as a candidate for the Wilayat of Muttrah in the Governorate of Muscat in the ninth parliamentary mandate, she stated that “she prepared for the experience by joining a program organized by the Ministry of Social Development presented by experts from the Netherlands, to guide Omani women to participate in political life through how Preparing to run for the Shura Council”. As for Her Excellency Dr. Tahira Al Lawati, she confirmed that the “advanced and elaborate preparation for the electoral program focused on serving all its segments of society is the most important enabler to reaching the Shura Council”.

From the foregoing, the reasons and motives for Omani women’s political participation are multiple, most notably the continuation of work to serve the extended community of Omani women’s associations, or the desire to extend participation from the individual level to the institutional level and from local to regional or global in an organized manner that ensures the presence and participation of Omani women in parliament, and an active community service.

Women's Challenges of Running for the Shura Council

The continued absence of women from political participation, whether by voting, running for office, or assuming political positions in the Sultanate has been present to this day (Al-Balushi, 2019). It can be said that the problem is not only related to tribalism. But the problem is greater than that, as it lies in the traditional patterns of behavior and the traditional mentality that prevail and dominate the Omani social structures, according to which women are not qualified compared to their male counterparts to perform parliamentary and political roles. Fadela Al-Rhailiya, Tahira Al-Lawati, and Salama Al-Farsiah emphasized that there are challenges that impede women’s access to the Shura Council along with tribalism, which can be summarized in five obstacles: a cultural challenge, a tribal challenge, a religious challenge, a demographic challenge, and a logistical challenge.



Challenges facing the research sample in running for the Shura Council in the period 2011-2019

In terms of the cultural challenge, social and political upbringing stands as an obstacle to women’s political representation. Salama Al Farsi said “women are always considered unable to engage in politics or take important decisions”. Strangely enough, the stereotypical image of women within Omani society is not limited to the position of men towards women only, but also we find that the woman herself trusts the performance of the political man and his decisions so she does not vote for women. Therefore the man is the most fortunate in obtaining electoral votes and reaching decision centers within the state, which was emphasized by Salama when she mentioned that “the parliamentary culture is almost illiterate in her region, as there is a lack of awareness from education or the media to promote this culture”. The situation is even worse for her female colleagues, as many of them are subject to the will of the husband, father, or brother to vote for a particular candidate, usually men. She also clarified that “there is a limited view of women in society, as there is still a culture that says that women are in the home and are not suitable for parliamentary work, as it is difficult to reach them all the time”.

Fadila Al-Rahailiya supported her point of view when she stated that “women do not receive the same assurance that men find where their social access is easier, and the societal view that women are unable to focus on the parliamentary experience because of their preoccupation with family and other responsibilities, where there is a view of fear and doubt about their ability to balance their societal duty and family”. Her Excellency also added that “the society's culture and trust in the Shura have declined due to the continued curtailment of the powers and privileges of the members of the Shura Council in general, and the inability of the members of the Council to bring about the rapid change that society demands”.

As for the tribal challenge, Salma Al-Farsieh explained that “the presence of male candidates competing with her in the same period from large tribes and merchants was one of the main reasons for her not winning the votes, as competing with these names in light of the tribalism in which the tire region lives, requires greater effort from women to reach the Shura Council, even if the competition is fair”. While Fadela Al-Rahiliah and Tahira Al-Lawati Al-Qibli did not consider the tribalism as an obstacle to their candidacy for the council.

As for the third challenge, Her Excellency Dr. Tahera Al Lawati confirmed that “the electoral process for women, in general, is more difficult than the experience of men, and during her experience, she experienced the use of religion to weaken her electoral campaign through

competitors, which is a natural thing for competitors to exploit all religious, cultural and social aspects to excel over others from Candidates, including rumors, customs, and traditions". On the other hand, Salama Al-Farsieh emphasized that "religion in itself is not an obstacle to women's access to the council, but some competitors use religion as a pressure card so that they infer religious texts with the aim of weakening their competition with women".

In the last challenge, Salama Al-Farsieh and Fadela Al-Rahili confirmed that "the lack of clarity in the procedures related to candidacy for the Shura Council, in addition to the lack of follow-up by the Ministry of Interior for the candidates, may cause the candidates to make mistakes that prevent them from continuing their candidacy journey". Another challenge from the point of view of Salama Al-Farsi, is "the presence of technical malfunctions - power outages - during the voting period, which in turn caused some to abstain from voting as a result of long queues in front of the polls".

In our question about the government's institutional support in the matter of elections, Dr. Tahera al-Lawati affirmed that "the official side is completely impartial in the matter of elections, which is very natural, and it cannot distinguish women by obtaining special programs without men". Her Excellency Dr. Taherah Al Lawati also did not see that "there are challenges that can be addressed as a phenomenon such as discrimination against women or exclusion."

In addition to the motivation to run for candidacy, there were many enablers that helped both Fadela Al-Rahiliah and Tahira Al-Lawatih to reach the council, where Her Excellency the Shura Council member from Sohar confirms that the general factors affecting the success of the electoral experience are the tribe, financial support, and gender, where Males have greater chances than women. As for her personal experience, youth is the main enabler that helped her reach the Shura Council. In this regard, she mentions that women's ability and social reach through contact with different groups of society helped her to identify the power of youth to bring about change. The youth helped her to build the electoral campaign and the electoral program and reach the largest number of segments of society in Sohar, in addition to listening to their views and adopting them even after reaching the Shura Council. This is what Salama Al-Farsiah also agrees with, as in her third experience in 2019, Salama applied all the lessons learned from her previous two experiences in 2011 and 2014, in addition to her attendance of many courses in the political empowerment of women, including the "electoral campaign management" course organized by the Association Arab women in Muscat. It also prepared a systematic and comprehensive electoral program to ensure winning the elections.

The challenges of women's political participation also remain numerous and varied and are linked on the one hand to the society itself and on the other hand to the political bodies within the state. The weak participation of women appears in the weak representation of women in political bodies within the state, such as the Shura Council and the State. This is what must be overcome, however, there are many factors that stand in the way of the actual participation of women.

What is coming next?

The experiences presented by Omani women members and candidates of the Shura Council are consistent with what previous studies have produced on women's political participation in Omani society. Social norms, religion, and the institutional system all constitute limits that can be factors in whether or not a woman has access to the Shura Council. But the most prominent factor is the woman herself. Dr. Tahera Al Lawati emphasized that "the woman herself, with her culture, strength of presence, elaborate representation, and serious willingness to raise issues without waiting for the support of others" is the real key to the success of women in parliament or not. She also affirmed that she faced the challenges "by elaborately preparing in

advance a balanced electoral program focused on serving the community of all its spectrum, in terms of honesty, transparency and trust and building it with the community".

All the women participating in this study indicated that "using or activating the quota system is one of the solutions offered to increase women's participation in the Shura Council and the political process in general." Over the course of thirty years, the number of women in the Shura Council is few compared to male members.

Her Excellency Dr. Tahera Al Lawati put forward several axes to enhance the participation of women in the Shura Council. She initially referred to "strengthening the community's confidence in the Shura Council by increasing the powers granted, as this motivates members to contribute more." As well as "increasing society's awareness of the importance of the council and the importance of the correct election of a member who is serious about raising societal issues." This is a process that requires the participation of all parties, members and voters, where awareness is the key to changing the parliamentary culture. This is confirmed by Dr. Fadela Al-Rahili, "The Shura experience in Oman needs an explicit and general review. Despite the challenges and general features that Shura members participate in when running for candidacy or parliamentary work, women still find it difficult to work because they are a woman for social and sometimes official reasons." She also believes that women's political participation in the Shura Council can be enhanced by "supporting their access to the council by allocating more seats in each election, supporting the electoral program, allocating special offices in the community to practice their social work, and supporting them to represent the Omani parliamentary experience in the counterpart councils in regional countries, world parliaments, etc."

Dr. Tahera al-Lawati concludes that "solving the main problems around the image of the Shura Council in society will enhance women's participation. On the one hand, men support women who are voters, candidates and members." On the other hand, "the candidacy of an educated and skilled woman is also important for the arrival of the most suitable member of the council, including the woman herself".

During a dialogue session organized by the Omani Women's Association⁹ on women's participation in the electoral process, the candidates called for "the need for long-term and good advance preparation for themselves long before the start of the elections and to gain the trust of the male and female public" (Atheer, 2019).

Conclusion

Omani women witnessed support at the legislative level that qualifies them to participate politically in the local community as voters, candidates, and members. Omani women have sought to exploit these opportunities, despite the limited opportunities for membership in the Shura Council, but throughout the nine states they have competed with their male counterparts for membership in the Council and contributed to their role as a voter to choose who represents them during each election.

Studies and reports have shown that the presence of Omani women in the Shura Council is declining due to several factors, the most important of which are social barriers, then women themselves, in addition to legislation. This study confirmed the following - despite the relative difference in each factor:

9. Omani Women's Participation in the Electoral Process (2019): Seminar, Omani Women's Association, Muscat.

- Social barriers: and the accompanying religious factors - not religion in itself, but its use as a pretext - including, for example, tribe and social status, economic factors, cultural factors, family, geographical area and others.
- Legislation: Its ability to bring about a change in the presence of women in the Council of Oman, not just the Shura Council, by allocating a quota for women in the Council, whether by election or appointment, and the accompanying procedures and legislation related to the electoral process or parliamentary practice.
- Personal Qualifications: For women in terms of education level, culture, personal presence, social and professional relations with fellow members, society, or various institutions.

All the above may be a double-edged sword for a woman's parliamentary journey and political participation, in addition to official support for preparation, advance preparation, actual attendance and the required change after reaching the Shura Council.

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