Politics of Privatisation: Water Tariff in Water Supply Distribution in Selangor

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Abstract

Privatisation of water supply distribution in Selangor has been implemented through concession by Syarikat Bekalan Air Selangor (SYABAS) in the period of 2004-2013. That period shows the clash between two aspirations of the state government which is Barisan Nasional (before the 12th GE) and Pakatan Rakyat (after the 12th GE). The problem statement in this study is privatisation theory in the neo-liberalism framework which promotes minimal intervention of government in the market. Nevertheless, privatisation in Malaysia, particularly water services in Selangor has shown a contradictory scenario where the privatisation has been implemented with an active intervention by the government; both by the BN & PR state governments. In federalism perspective, the interventions in the water distribution privatisation by both levels of governments (state and federal government) are through the application of power and their political agenda respectively. Next, this article also evaluates the correlation between customer satisfaction and water tariff in privatisation by SYABAS. This study applies mixed methodology which used both quantitative (by questionnaire) and qualitative (through primary and secondary data) approaches. The data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Meanwhile, the result for the survey showed a significant correlation between the customer satisfaction and water tariff by SYABAS.

Keywords: Privatisation, government intervention, water distribution, water tariff

INTRODUCTION

Water is the most important basic commodity in human life. Although 70 percent of Earth’s surface is covered with water, it is should be properly managed to benefit and fulfil the needs of the society. Effective water management is an important element in the welfare of a country. This aim can be met through strategies as well with the efficient techniques by the responsible parties. Issues including non revenue water percentage, reasonable water tariff, quality of water supply that has been prepared and also, customer satisfaction are among the components of effective water management.

Various strategies have been initiated by the government to satisfy the demand for water supply. A capable water management is needed since it impacts and always influences the social, economic and political environments. Global economic-political scenario shows that 90% of water management around the world is based on acquisition and management by the public sector (Klaver, 2012: 25; Hall et al. 2009: 2; Prasad, 2006: 670). The rejection toward privatisation of water management occurred in some cases such as a mass protest in Bolivia, the ban on the water management privatisation in Holland and many more movements rejecting privatisation such as in Stockton, USA and Ghana (Bakker, 2010: 140-142; Klaver, 2012: 25; Hall et al. 2005: 289-290; Bourguignon & Sepulveda, 2009: 15).

Despite that, perceptions about the improvement of water management by the private sector still persist in the society. Enhancement of the water quality, increasing on investment and expanding of coverage areas is among the impacts associated with the privatisation of water management (Prasad, 2006: 670). In Malaysia, the scenario shows that
privatisation of water management is one of the steps taken by the government toward a more efficient water management system. In that accord, the water management by the state governments in Malaysia has been handed over to the private sector as implemented in several states. In the context of this research, Selangor as the most advanced state in Malaysia, with the biggest population and demographically varied resembling Malaysia’s demography has implemented privatisation as catalyst towards the improvement of the state’s water management. Therefore, the selection of Syarikat Bekalan Air Selangor (SYABAS) as water supply and distribution concessionaire for 30 years since 2005 is important to be discussed.

PRIVATISATION IN MALAYSIA

The development of privatisation implementation since early 1980s shows that it is a worldwide phenomenon. Many scholars argue that the idea of privatisation (especially in the developing countries) occurred due to the encouragement and pressure from the international financial institutions (Noorul Ainur 2003: 4; Wanderley et al., 2011: 53; Chang 2006: 54). International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, WTO and Asia Development Bank (ADB) referred as the institutions that are actively spreading neoliberalism agenda in this era of globalisation through privatisation (Boubaki et al., 2008: 302; Jomo, 2010: 104; Achterhuis et al., 2010: 44). Based on the scenarios of political and economical crisis in the 1970’s and the 1980s, privatisation is a strategy of the international financial institutions to recede interventions by the ruling government in development (Mothusi & Dipholo, 2008: 239). The government’s interventions are rejected by globalization supporters due to state failure and also to ensure the economy is based on the market and not in the control of the ruling government.

There are three schools of thoughts about the implementation of privatisation in Malaysia which are explored in this study. The first school of thought perceived that Malaysia has succeeded in running the privatisation based on the economic development (such as Taib Hashim, 2001; Md. Zhahir & Nor Ghani, 1991; Mahathir, 2011). The second showed various weaknesses in the implementation of privatisation in Malaysia (Smith, 2003; Nourul Ainur, 2003; Tan, 2008). Finally, the third focused on the non transparent implementation.

Among the scholars who supported the first school of thought; Ahmad Atory (1998: 297-300) explained that the principles of privatisation has contributed toward positive impacts in the country’s economy in terms of ability, growth and reducing the country’s financial burden. Sivamurugan’s research (2005: 104) also agreed that the ruling government has succeeded in implementing the privatisation towards development. Positive discrimination factor on the Bumiputra (son of the soil) in the granting of contract and the purchasing of government owned shares has contributed toward the economy’s success. However, the wealth owned by the Bumiputera is accumulated to a small group of elites and the ruling party but the rest of Bumiputeras still did not have the opportunity and benefit from the privatisation (Sivamurugan, 2005: 110; Jomo, 1993a: 448; 1993b: 158). The unbalanced impact has distanced the intra-ethnic position especially for the Malays. The interference from the ruling government that shaped the pro-Bumiputera’s policy is the main factor that caused this scenario. However, Mahathir (2011: 505) debated that the government’s action to create several Bumiputera economic elites as a positive mover in privatisation and reached the aims of New Economic Policy (NEP). Although aids and supports from the government to these Bumiputera economic elites generally did not utilise the open tender system (Sivamurugan, 2005: 111), this group has succeeded to be ‘globalisation capitalist class’ which is the opposite of the ‘crony capitalist’ concept (Jomo 2000: 26, Beeson & Robison 2000: 20). This creates a question: who really profits from the privatisation; the people or just a few of them who have personal connection with the politicians? Noorul Ainur (2003: 153) argued that cronyism and policies that prioritize the Bumiputera in the implementation of privatisation will create various impacts whether positive or negative to the economy and politics in Malaysia. The impact of the privatisation’s imbalance is also presented by Gomez and Jomo (1999: 89) who claim that privatisation always brings negative affects to the consumers, especially the poor although this group is the one who should be protected by the ruling government. This scenario shows that privatisation emphasizes on
maximization of profits by putting aside the social welfare.

The rationale and aim of NEP in the implementation of privatisation in Malaysia is also raised in Khairiah’s research (2008: 107,122). The privatisation of Malaysian Airlines (MAS) has succeeded in reducing the financial and administration burden and nurtured economic growth in the NEP outline. Besides that, the intervention of the ruling government in the privatisation through monopoly is featured by Khairiah (2008: 124) through the existence of ‘golden share’ that gives power to the ruling government to control the privatisation project as the regulator. The ‘golden share’ mechanism gives decision making power and huge influences to the ruling government to guide the direction of a privatized company (Fong, 2009: 77). In terms of impact, the privatisation of MAS has been presented to be successful in improving the services. However, Khairiah’s research did not present clearly the reacquisition of MAS through the intervention of the ruling government due to its financial management failure which contributed to its losses.

The second school of thought stressed about the failure and the lack of transparency in Malaysia’s privatisation policy. Through the examples of electric power privatisation in Malaysia, Smith (2003: 278) expressed transparency, bribery, cooperation and competition issues in the privatisation implementation in Malaysia. The approach made by the ruling government to dominate the main shares in Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) was seen as an action to push the competition aside which is supposed to be the essence in implementing privatisation. Smith summarizes that electricity privatisation in Malaysia is to enrich the elite business partners of the ruling government. This research about the utility also argues that TNB is forced to incur a higher cost in comparison to the market price to independent power providers (Fong, 2009: 73-74) based on the political relationship factor and businesses arranged by the ruling government (Mohammad Rizal Salim, 2011: 278). This scenario led to the increase of electricity tariff. This shows that privatisation in Malaysia is focused on restructuring economical and political power through intervention of the ruling government that caused public monopoly to have changed to private monopoly. (Fong, 2009: 78).

Several other scholars also presented the failures of infrastructure privatisation. Tan (2008: 123) took the example of management and operation of light transit rail service by Sistem Transit Aliran Ringan Sdn. Bhd (STAR) and Projek Usahasama Transit Ringan Automatik (PUTRA) that is forced to be taken over by the government due to the failure of the private sector (Malaysia, 2006: 239). The active interveentions of the ruling government in the privatisation case is obvious through its waiving of import duty, local sales tax and the granting of the investment loan allowance that profited the concessionaire (Abdul Rashid, 2006: 848). The impact is the ruling government through Ministry of Finance was forced to takeover STAR and PUTRA’s debt through the issuance of bond amounting to RM 5.5 billion (Tan, 2008: 114). This situation is an indicator that shows the incapability of the ruling government in implementing privatisation in Malaysia. This weakness is supported by the failure of legal enforcement along with corruption that caused incertitude among the public and international investors (Boubakri et al., 2008: 303).

Management inability along with patronage relations of political and economical elites in many privatisation programmes forced the government to take over the projects by pumping out huge amount of funds to cover the losses. This scenario of failure in money losing privatisation programme and eventual government buyback is considered as ‘nationalizing the losses’.

There are also those who acknowledged the success of privatisation but claimed the privatisation practices in Malaysia are lacking transparency. Jomo (2010: 19) criticized the scenario because privatisation in Malaysia involves government intervention that provides profit opportunities to certain individuals, based on political and personal relationships. The drafting of the Official Secrets Act (OSA) which mentions that the tender documents are government secrets is seen as a government strategy that instigated suspicion about the existence of corrupt practices (Abdul Rahman, 2006: 851) thus hiding the weaknesses of the privatisation practices that does not utilise an open tender system which therefore reducing the value of accountability. Several examples of privatisation such as Syarikat Televisyen Malaysia Berhad (STMB), Sport Toto and MAS shows the existence of ruling politicians having interests in
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the privatized companies. Jomo (2010: 132) explained privatisation programs ala ‘civil service’ by cronies who were willing to accept minimal profit projects with the intention to get far more profitable opportunities through other privatisation projects that will be offered by the ruling government.

This is also supported by Gomez and Jomo (1999: 90) who summarized that the implementation of privatisation in Malaysia did not foster free market; in fact, it is controlled tightly by the ruling government. The economic elites’ close relationship with the ruling party (Barisan Nasional) make it easier for them to get profit guarantee with the granting of private concession. This relationships based on mutual assistance allows cronies or firms belonging to proxy ruling government to give back their profit to ruling parties and close any chances for the opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010: 10). Based on the raising cost issue among the people, the unbalanced projects grants among the ethnicities (with excuses of NEP objectives), monopoly by the ruling government along with the lack of free body to regulate the privatisation implementation, Jomo (2010) concluded that the implementation of this privatisation entails a review from the government. Issue of the non transparent implementation of this privatisation was argued by Mohd. Fo’ad (1992), which implies the existence of relations of ruling elites and the economic elites who adopt privatisation for personal gain. The synergy of this relationship has a negative impact on the accountability of the privatisation exercise in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This research used qualitative and quantitative approaches which are a mix methodology (Creswell, 2009: 203). This type of methodology enables researchers to use a variety of tools in qualitative and quantitative approaches to monitor developments in the study period as used by the World Bank for a study of water supply and the study of political economy through the use of a qualitative approach to improve the quality of questionnaire data (Bamberger, 2000: 7-19; Chung, 2000: 43-44). Qualitative approach in this study is through research literature for secondary sources. This method seeks to obtain data to meet the needs of the study. For quantitative methodology, sampling technique is a significant aspect in determining the legitimacy and reliability of research (Chua Yan Piaw, 2011: 203). This research chose central limit theorem approach (Pierce, 2008: 199) that shows sampel taken exceeds more than 30 from the large population; shaping a normal distribution. The determined level of statistical significance for this research is p< .05 which is the level of reliability of 95%, suitable for a research in the social sciences field (Chua Yan Piaw, 2011: 208; Carlson & Hyde, 2003: 216). Population from the research include every water consumer in the entire Selangor while the sampling frame of this research involves domestic water consumer from the Selangor’s population. Random sampling technique in the probability sample category is used. Thus, every element in the population has equal chances to be chosen as a sample, especially if it includes a large population (Carlson & Hyde, 2003: 198; Pierce, 2008: 93).

The questionnaire was conducted to determine the perception of consumers towards the water tariffs in privatisation of water supply in Selangor is which managed by SYABAS. Instruments used include the introduction, compilation of questions, format and pre-test to detect errors in the questionnaire (Carlson & Hyde, 2003: 236). Questions assigned to the sample are in the form of closed-ended structure that has been set by the researcher (Carlson & Hyde, 2003: 223). Next, the inferential analysis is based on Chi-squared test. Inferential analysis method describes the relationship and identifies factors influencing among the variables in the questionnaire. The data were analyzed as inferential use with software Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS) v.16.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on a report issued by the Water Asset Corporation Berhad, the water tariff for domestic consumption in Selangor is the third highest among all states in Malaysia after Johor and Labuan at RM 0.90/m³ (PAAB, 2008). This rating is based on water tariffs charged by SYABAS for domestic consumption by an average of RM 0.77/m³ based on the use of each 35 m³. However for industrial use, the water tariff RM 2.27/m³ imposed by SYABAS in Selangor is the second highest in Malaysia, after Johor’s water tariffs of RM 2.93/m³.
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Figure 1: Relationship between frugality need with perception toward water tariff

According to Figure 1 above which uses the Chi-square test above, there is a relationship between the perception of water tariff towards raising prudence and frugality in water use which the value is $\chi^2 = 70.420$ with $p<0.05$. This relationship shows the frequency and percentage of low water tariffs perception with prudence and frugality $N=11$ (5%) and those without prudence and frugality $N=3$ (5.9%). Respondents that have perception of reasonable water tariff with prudence and frugality $N=170$ (76.9%) and those without prudence and frugality $N=20$ (39.2%). Respondents with perception of high water tariff with prudence and frugality $N=27$ (12.2%) and those without prudence and frugality $N=18$ (35.3%) while respondents of unsure perceptions with prudence and frugality $N=13$ (5.9%), without prudence and frugality $N=6$ (11.8%), no bill $N=1$ (50%). For respondents without bill and without prudence and frugality $N=4$ (7.8%) and without bill $N=1$ (50%).

The significant relationship in Figure 1 above shows that 76.9 percent of consumers thought that the imposed water tariff still makes them to be thrifty and frugal; even though the rate is reasonable. This is due to a sense of responsibility to save water consumption which is something considered to be natural, especially on the basis of religion and moral claims. Apart from awareness campaigns, family education is an important element in ensuring a positive attitude in the prudent use of water. It can also be analyzed from the above data that 35.3 percent of consumers indicated that water tariffs failed to evoke a sense to be frugal, even though these people think they were imposed with high tariffs. Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from these two opposite scenarios is the dominant factor in responsibility for water usage is the intrinsic value and not from water tariffs imposed by suppliers. Intrinsic value is the impact of religious beliefs and upbringings of human socialization.

Figure 2: Relationship between water tariff’s perception and water billing amount

Referring to Figure 2 and using Chi-squared test above, there is a relationship between the amount of water bills that are often applied to the perception among users of water tariff, which is the $\chi^2 = 75.497$ with $p<0.05$. These relationships through the frequencies and percentages is low estimated water tariff where water bills are often charged RM 70 to RM 99.95 $N=1$ (2.8%), RM 50 to RM 79.95 $N=1$ (2.9%), RM 20 to RM 49.95 $N=1$ (1.3%), RM 10 to RM 19.95 $N=2$ (3.9%) and less than RM 10 $N=9$ (18.4%). Respondents’ affordable water tariffs in which estimated water bills are often charged as much as RM 100 on the $N = 8$ (57.1 % ), RM 70 to RM 99.95 $N = 20$ (55.6 % ), RM 50 to RM 79.95 $N = 22$ (62.9 % ) and RM 20 to RM 49.95 $n = 63$ (78.8 % ). Respondents high water tariffs estimated’s water bills are often charged as much as RM 100 on the $N = 5$ (35.7 % ), RM 70 to RM 99.95 $N = 11$ (30.6 % ), RM 50 to RM 79.95 $N = 9$ (25.7 % ), RM 20 to RM 49.95 $n = 11$ (13.8 % ), RM 10 to RM 19.95 $n = 6$ (11.8 % ) and less than RM 10, $N = 3$ (6.1 % ). Respondents who are not sure with the water tariffs in their estimated water bills are often charged as much as RM 100 on the $N = 1$ (71.1 % ), RM 70 to RM 99.95 $N = 2$ (5.6 % ), RM 50 to RM 79.95 $N = 2$ (5.7 % ), RM 20 to RM 49.95 $n = 4$ (5 % ), RM10 to RM19.95 $n = 2$ (3.9 % ), less than RM 10 $n = 4$ (8.2 % ) and was not sure $n = 5$ (55.6 % ). The respondents no bill with an estimated water bills are often charged as much as RM 100 on the $N = 2$ (5.6 % ), RM 50.
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to RM 79.95 N = 1 (2.9%), RM 20 to RM 49.95 N = 1 (1.3%) and less than RM10 n = 1 (2%).

Figure 2 shows that there is a direct relationship between the total bill charged to the views of users on the water tariff. The consumer group that was charged bills between RM 10 - RM 19.95, 80.4 per cent of them thought that the water tariffs charged are reasonable. This view is also influenced by water subsidy program run by the state government (led by the Pakatan Rakyat), which accounts for the payment of RM 11.20 for each account that use individual water meters in Selangor. These subsidies have an impact on consumers billing amount as they can use 20 cubic meters of free water. However, Figure 2 above also shows an increasing number of charges; growing percentage of consumers who say the water bill is higher. Thus, the conclusion of these scenarios is the use of water has an impact on the perception of water tariffs.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Water tariffs are important elements in the discussion of water supply services. Determination of water tariffs are based on several criteria such as the type of account (domestic, commercial and industrial) and residential houses (terraced houses, apartments, low cost apartments). During the era of Barisan Nasional (before GE-12 in 2008), the neoliberalism approach of the implemented private water supply was consistent with the elite theory that the ruling elite are responsible for shaping and implementing policies in their administration. Thus, the privatisation of water supply is a response to address the water supply problem faced by public sector management as well as providing benefits to the people and the ruling elite. The implication of this occurs when the ruling elite and the Barisan Nasional generally received political support from the community when viewed to have successfully solved the problem of water supply that has been going on prior to privatisation.

The privatisation of water leads to the dependency relationship between the political elite and economic elite. It is important to note here that the approach to implement privatisation of water is not a government directives of Barisan Nasional at the federal to the state government under its leadership. This is because there are many more states under the leadership of the Barisan Nasional that did not implement privatisation, such as Penang which successfully managed water efficiently, both in terms of affordable tariffs or efficient services. Thus, the privatisation of water supply in Selangor is implemented based on the aspirations of the Selangor government’s ruling elites. However, this privatisation approach is conflicted against the principle of neoliberalism itself, which is a reduction of government intervention in the market. This is shown through SYABAS privatisation, in which the state government has high total share, reaching 30 percent. In addition, various forms of aid and loans are granted by the state government to SYABAS. This scenario shows that the strategy of water privatisation in Selangor involves active state intervention and collaborative “win-win” between the political elite and economic elite.

On the other hand, when the state government is led by the Pakatan Rakyat (after GE-12 in 2008), the issue of increasing tariffs structure (every 3 years) was among the highlighted and manipulated issues to show the people about the injustice of the concession agreement between SYABAS and the previous ruling government (Barisan Nasional) on its clients. The increasing tariff structure approved by the state government in the era of the Barisan Nasional government before 2008 (through concession agreements) has empowered the SYABAS to impose tariffs in line with the reduction in non-revenue water (NRW). According to the concession agreement, the consumer will experience an increase in water tariffs if there is a decline in non-revenue water (different amount of water processed with charged water bills) which led to the increase of 25% on 2012, 10% on 2015 on 2019, and also 5% on 2021, 2024, 2027 and 2030. Based on the agreement, if the government does not want to increase the tariff, the financial burden has to be borne by the state government. The concession agreement is not balanced and the resulting increase in tariffs is a key argument of the Pakatan Rakyat-led state government to take over water supply services. To reduce the burden on the people of Selangor, Pakatan Rakyat component parties have begun to push hard on their manifesto to give free water subsidies for domestic consumers (who have individual meters) during the campaign for the 12th General Election on March 8, 2008 and began to perform this manifesto in June 2008. Although it resulted the
state government-link company, Kumpulan Darul Ehsan Berhad (KDEB) to sponsor the subsidy of RM 10.8 million per month, the free water policy (which is the first in Malaysia) have given political mileage to Pakatan Rakyat in general.

This is because the government is considered to have the ability and the responsibility to provide water services to all citizens (Prasad, 2006: 270). This exercise was based on several considerations. First, the monopoly of water privatisation in Selangor is seen as unfair to the consumer with the increasing tariff structures. Changes in elite attitudes can contribute to a better relationship between the elite and society as well as the positive impact during elections by strengthening accountability of the government (Kifordu, 2010: 289-290). Second, the return of water management to the state government enable the state under the leadership Pakatan Rakyat to continue in providing subsidy of free 20 square meter water to the community. Incentives by the government are significant because it is necessary to drive the attitude and support of the community (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011).

Accordingly, after the change of leadership of the state in 2008 through the 12th General Election, the state government has taken the approach to take over the water supply management from SYABAS (as this article was written at the end of 2013, this acquisition discussions are still at the last stage). The follow-up method is the implementation of the 'Water For People' campaign to gain support and raise awareness among the public about the issue of water privatisation in Selangor. Strategies to get support through mass media and civic education is essential for the ruling elite (Dye et. al., 2012: 15). This is applied through election manifesto presented by a combination of Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the People’s Justice Party (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), which formed the Pakatan Rakyat; which is to provide subsidized water of 20 m³ free of charge to each domestic users account and those who have individual meters. For the state government, the privatisation of the water supply by SYABAS should be taken over as the structure of water tariffs (as stated in the concession agreement with the BN-led state government) would be unfair and pressure the consumers and other governance issues also emerged.

Thus, the two opposing approaches on the issue of privatisation of water supply and water tariffs between the state government of Selangor led by Barisan Nasional (formerly GE-12) with the state government led by the Pakatan Rakyat (after GE-12) shows that both of the governments responded to water supply problems that occur in the state. Collisions between neoliberalism and populist approach are seen as a strategy implemented by the ruling elite in carrying out their responsibilities to solve people's problems. Since water is a crucial basic need for all citizens of the state, thus, water management strategy is a key to the political parties to get political supports and influencing the voting pattern in winning an election.

CONCLUSION

This study argued that neoliberalism theory has failed to acknowledge the importance of the government role in implementing privatisation. Despite market being the focus for neoliberalism, the intervention from the ruling government has been the mover and main arranger in the context of water privatisation. Ability and control of the government in terms of the formulation and enforcement of regulations is the advantage to the government than the private entities. Moreover, government intervention in financial aspect, particularly in terms of capital assistance and incentives is crucial to the private concessionaires in meeting the consumers demands.

In addition, there are various elements of evidence showing personal interest by the elites toward the success of the privatisation. The elites have adopted privatisation to enhance their political influence through a symbiotic relationship and dependence between economic elites (businessmen) and the political elite, as well as the political elite itself has also become the economic elite. The importance enjoyed by the political elite is in the form of material such as stocks, profitable concession agreement and financial risk protection by the government in the event of a loss. Political elite also received non-material compensation such as increased political supports for themselves and the party with the positive impact that occurred as a result of the implementation of privatisation.

The privatisation of water supply in the Selangor also indicates the existence of political elite that manipulate vulnerabilities in privatisation and received benefits through political support. This
study argues about the emergence of the political elite who gained political support by inspiring people to reject privatisation by using political campaign to the civil society and highlight the disadvantages of privatisation agenda. For this political elite group, privatisation is described as profitable for some elites only and it adds the burden borne by the people as the implications of privatisation. Thus, the political elite of this type received image enhancement and influence as an advocate of civil society. Thus, the ruling government of Pakatan Rakyat in Selangor gives an alternative to water supply privatisation by promoting public management.

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