

Musharraf perpetuates power

Pakistan's return to democracy on back gear

REFERENDUM is not the stuff of which a democratic choice of who should rule a country can be made. That's why in standard political parlance, its purpose is regarded as being confined to eliciting public opinion on an issue rather than any personality. But to military dictators who usurped power, the craving for legitimacy happened to be so compelling that they would blend an issue with a personality and seek a mandate for continuation. In 1984, Gen. Ziaul Huq took recourse to a referendum promising the dope of a Sharia law and pretending as a messiah for stability and corruption-free society in Pakistan. The exercise proved to be a sham vote by any democratic criterion. In Musharraf's case, he asked for a five-year mandate to continue with his economic and political reforms topped off by an agenda to curb religious extremism. Even though Musharraf's last-named purpose of putting a lid on religious militancy differed from Ziaul Huq's wanton pandering to Islamic orthodoxy, that by itself can not glorify the former's resort to referendum. Because basically as in Ziaul Huq's time, Musharraf's referendum has also been held from a position of power which rendered the exercise extremely vulnerable to manipulation.

In actual fact, there has been 'evidence' of the state machinery being used to influence the outcome. Public sector employees numbering some three and a half million were allegedly pressured into casting ballots, 'yes' votes were stuffed into the boxes and incidence of voting more than once has been widespread.

What really appeared to taint the credibility of the referendum was the absence of an electoral roll and lack of insistence on presentation of the voter identity card at the polling booth. Furthermore, in a desperate move to seek out voters, rules were relaxed so much so that even gas stations, hospitals and prison-houses had make-shift polling booths. An unprecedented number of polling centres were opened -- 87,000.

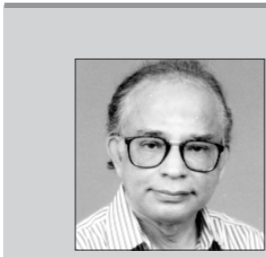
The low-turn out of voters, unofficially put at 20 per cent, is ascribed to boycott by Newaz Sharif's Muslim League and Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party. Although the two principal opposition leaders are in exile and some mid-rung leaders were arrested, the general supporters of ML and PPP seemingly held their own on the ground.

But while the opposition termed the referendum as unconstitutional and filed a pre-emptive writ before the Supreme Court, the SC declared it 'legal' clearing the course for it. It's worth recalling that the highest court in Pakistan endorsed Musharraf in the wake of his bloodless coup in 1999. It did the same thing after General Ziaul Huq had usurped power from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

In Musharraf's case, however, the Supreme Court gave him three years to return the country to democracy. That's why by the end of the three-year period i.e. in October this year he has plans to hold parliamentary elections in the country. But as things stand now, the People's Party and the Muslim League might have to participate in the polls sans Benazir Bhutto and Newaz Sharif respectively who are in exile. Crucially, Musharraf has got a 'yes' vote in the referendum to stay in power for five more years. He can change the Constitution and the electoral laws at his sweet will. He will try to get a rubber-stamp Parliament. He has already held the local government elections as an underpinning to his power. All these smack of a legacy of 'guided and controlled democracy' in Pakistan, a so-called restoration of democracy tailor-made to the needs of an incumbent military ruler.

The international disapproval of the referendum, as held, is not pronounced, the US merely fudging the issue to say, 'it could not independently verify the outcome.' Yes, the current geo-political ambience is favourable to Musharraf who is seen 'as a tested ally' of the west in its fight against international terrorism. But this credential of his needs not be mixed up with the onus that is basically on Musharraf -- who had seized power from an elected government -- to return the country to full democracy without any detour.

May Day



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

THE day has passed, marking one more May Day and ending one more celebration. In Bangladesh and all over the world once more the rights of workers have been reaffirmed in public with the usual display of unity and brotherhood. Speeches have been made with equal fervor by the high and the low. Media has lauded the glorious tradition of the day. Processions and parades have added a penumbra of festivity. Above all, there has been a holiday for all, workers and non-workers, awash with the spirit of solidarity. The spectacle and trappings of the day are all too familiar.

Routinised or revitalised, May Day will go on being observed as long as there are workers toiling in shop floors, on farm lands and in myriad other work places. May Day is dedicated to the glory of human labour used in producing goods and services. It is recognition of the value of the efforts put in by workers and the rights they are entitled to by virtue of that. Both in the developed and developing countries their legitimate demands were accepted long ago. There may be occasional violent demonstrations over specific issues but by and large, the basic rights have been fulfilled. Compared to the past labour movement has lost much of its initiatives, radicalism and verve. It would seem that the movement has no great challenges left to grapple with and no new height to attain. But this is illusory.

Even after the long march to victory not all workers enjoy their rights today. Part-time workers, mostly women, are victims of dis-

crimination even in the developed countries. Being outside trade unions their cause is not taken up in collective bargaining. They are at the mercy of employers and not infrequently, subject of taunt by organised labour. Even as full-time workers women get lower wages than their male counterparts. In addition, there is the not-too-invisible glass ceiling blocking their progress upwards. Discrimination on the basis of colour may not be obvious, but is present in subtler forms. Old practices, like habits, die

been little help to improve the economic conditions of their families. However well intentioned, such conventions fail to protect and further the rights of children. On the labour front simply being high minded is of no significance and use.

Developed countries eager to satisfy their organised labours' demand for protection put pressure on developing countries to ban child labour for certain sectors (e.g. garment). International organisations like the ILO working under

developing countries but can also be seen in middle income countries like the Middle East and Far East where foreigners are used as domestic help. With no fixed working hours, holidays and wages they are the modern day equivalent of slaves. May Day passes them by giving no space to deliberate on their miserable lives. No convention or laws have been framed, either nationally or internationally, to protect their rights and promote their interests.

Exploitation of illegal foreign

abysmally low.

In some countries the back of trade unions has been broken by governments opposed to strong trade unions particularly when seen as adversary or ally of political opposition. The bloody confrontation between Thatcher government and Scargill's Trade Union Congress in Britain resulting in the restraining and diminished power of the latter come to mind. Politics, and not economic considerations, determines policy and action in such cases of clashes of Titans. For their

trade unions rot from within leaving the full potentials of a vibrant and independent trade union movement unrealised. This blight that afflicts labour movement is an issue that should be addressed seriously by all the parties concerned. Government has a major role as it is the regulatory authority and is responsible for overseeing enforcement of law.

Sometimes government is a willing accomplice of wayward trade union leaders. Sometimes the trade union leaders hold government hostage to bend to their demands and high-handedness. The deleterious effects of self-serving trade union leaders can be seen starkly and graphically in public sector enterprises. While productivity is allowed to go downhill, trade unions in the public sector remain busy in extracting more and more benefits. Apart from demands for higher wages and facilities there are also clandestine activities that contribute to the sickness of public sector units. The worst example of trade unionism can thus be seen in the public sector. It is no wonder that the single most intractable obstacle to reform or privatisation of public sector units is the resistance of trade unions. The power that be in a country is so much held in thrall to them that their invidious role is hardly mentioned, far less criticised.

It is appropriate that on May Day the achievements and success benefiting workers all over the world should be celebrated with fanfare. But the observance of the Day should be tempered with the thought that even in the midst of victory in many areas there are substantial number still groaning under cruel exploitation and inhuman repression. It should be a sobering realisation that after the long march to freedom and dignity of labour that started on the fateful day in 1886 in Chicago many workers are still to enjoy their basic rights. Thoughts about the abuse and misuse of trade union power should also not be missed as the celebration begins and ends.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

IN MY VIEW

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hard.

At present many full-time workers in factories, agricultural farms and other workplaces do not enjoy the rights recognised under law because they are not organised into unions and consequently do not have bargaining power. These workers are mostly to be found in informal sectors, particularly in developing countries. Because of widespread unemployment, workers in the informal sectors are afraid to press for their rights or to organise themselves into unions. Among this category worst is the plight of child workers. Banned by law, child labour is nevertheless widely prevalent in developing countries in a wide range of workplaces. Since enforcement of total ban is not practical at present on social and economic grounds, strict supervision of working conditions and provision of literacy programme should merit priority attention. While international conventions totally discourage child labour there has

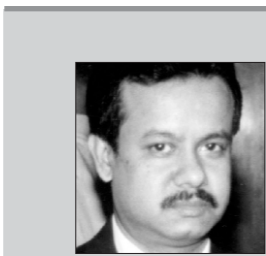
such pressure push for policies that appear fair but are impractical in the context of socio-economic realities. The time has long passed to recognise that child labour will be a fact of national life in many developing countries for quite some time. During this transitional phase attempts should be made to render working conditions more humane for child labour and to prepare them for a better life with literacy programme backed by financial incentives. In the ritualised observance of May Day issues of unorganised workers in the informal sectors and child labour hardly find any place either for discussion or participation by the representatives of these groups. They are fleeting shadows without substance, as it were.

A large group of workers, which include both child and adults, toil away punishing hours, day and night, in households as domestic servants without any rights worth the name. This is more prevalent in

workers both in households and in other workplace including factories and restaurants is now taking place in developed countries with increasing frequency. Afraid to be caught by law enforcing agencies these illegal workers accept inhuman conditions of work and wages simply to repay the loan taken for their tortuous journey or to pay the price for the job. Their employment conditions combine the worst of slavery and bonded labour. So far no international organisation has taken any step to alleviate the misery of these unfortunate labourers. Meanwhile illegal trafficking in men, women and children continue unabated continuously supplying labour to the shadowy labour markets in the world. In times of need and shortages of labour the authorities turn a blind eye to this violation of human rights through exploitation. With recession and unemployment staring in the face they crack down on illegal workers mercilessly. The ethical quotient in both the attitudes is

nemesis the trade unions themselves are sometimes responsible. Apart from being highly politicised and thereby becoming visibly partisan, trade unions have also become hotbed of corruption. In this venality often the rank and file members are not involved. It is the rapacity and greed for power and pelf of trade union leaders that contribute to the weakening of the moral strength of trade unions. More than tarnishing the image the corrupt practices of trade union leaders exact a heavy toll in terms of service delivery. Vigorous promotion of the genuine interests of workers is sacrificed at the altar of selfish interests of the few. The undesirable nexus between trade union leaders and political power wielders often thrive on the web of corruption weaved by both sides. Attempts to rid trade unions of this malaise are not seen even periodically, so firmly entrenched are the vested interests. Like a festering wound corruption spreads insidiously. As a result

Dilemma and paradox



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HE cherished to have a balcony where he could go out for fresh air whenever it was suffocating inside the room. He fancied for swimming in the pool if he ever got tired of taking showers in the house. He feared to drive his car without a spare tire in the boot lest one of the tires went flat and he got stuck on the road.

This is a man who extrapolated his inhibitions into a state of mind. He believed that one must have alternatives in life to avoid disappointments. There was more to life than people knew how to live, he argued. Convenience was the credo of existence because nothing survived unless first suited the whims of nature.

One afternoon nature suited him to talk to a woman other than his wife, and he fell for her head over heels. She was standing in the balcony of her apartment and he was standing in his, and a brisk breeze blew between them redolent

with fragrance of roses from a nearby bush. First they smiled, then they waved their hands, until the words popped out of their mouths before either of them realised that they had spoken. Then came a lull between them as he looked at the sky and she looked at the ground. Men soared in love, which hunkered down women, he concluded.

The few words they spoke echoed in his mind, while she was not seen for a number of days. He went to his balcony again and again under various pretexts, but returned to his room with the dismay of some-

thing filled his heart with vapours of grief.

Nature suited him again to see her on the balcony and his heart leapt like a frog chasing its prey. He rushed to his balcony and she greeted him with smile as if they had known each other for ages. Women are different from men, he thought. They are like a murder scene after the clean up, whereas men wear their guilt all over them. She looked fresh and happy, her face showing no sign of the fact that she was gone for a long time.

They talked about each other

appeared on her balcony at his wish as if there was a telepathic connection between the two of them. She would show him a new dress before wearing it to go out and he would do the same. He started taking his tea in the balcony, and falling asleep in the wicker chair facing the other balcony until his wife woke him up in the middle of the night and took him inside to sleep in the bed.

One night he woke up in the chair and his wife didn't come to take him. The lights in the opposite apartment had gone out, and the street below was dark and desolate. The stars

for him, that he could have remained exposed to the cooling night and fallen sick! An uncontrollable urge overtook him to rouse each of them from their peaceful sleep, and bring them to suffer the tumultuous sorrow that was brewing inside him.

Every man was unto himself, he realised in the dead of night as he surveyed the sky studded with twinkling stars, which looked like the dimming lights of departing souls in their flights. Only if he could have the power of vision to see what was going on inside that apartment across the street! Was that woman

heart wrenched by the torments of life he no longer wished to bear.

He got up from the chair and walked into the room, his body slumped by the burden of sorrow piled on him by the solitary night. He saw his wife crumpled in bed, and woke her up with a rude jerk. He asked why she didn't wake him up to bring him inside the room. Half-awake and half-asleep, she said she meant to do it but didn't realise she was going to fall asleep so fast.

That night he went to bed with a resolution that he would ask the same question to the other woman. He waited to see her for several days, but she didn't appear on the balcony again. He came to know through a friend who knew her husband that she was hospitalised on the same night he woke up in the balcony alone. The woman was suffering from bouts of mental illness for a long time, and it relapsed that night after she had an argument with her husband.

That afternoon the man took his tea with his wife inside the room. He told her that his heart was heavy with a strange sadness, because he felt like someone who had gone for a drive on a beautiful road, when one of the tires went flat and he realised that there was no spare in the boot.

In his mind he vowed not to go to the balcony again until that woman returned home.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

The stars and people have a conflict between them, he wondered. One appeared when the other vanished in the rotation, which configured the mystery of this universe. He felt abandoned and loveless, forgotten by the world in his own secluded corner as the hissing sound of a desperate silence rose in the air.

one whose adventure had failed. He was restless throughout that night, remaining oblivious to his wife lying next to him, as he tossed and turned in bed like a fluttering fish.

For the next few days, his mind wavered between hope and despair like sunshine and rain in the monsoon weather. He felt at once gay and guilty, heady with the excitement of a prospective affair but worried that it was going to ruin his marriage. He stared at his wife, while his eyes roamed in the balcony across the street. Its desola-

she married with children, he married without children, and both agreed that marriage was a trap. Then they discussed respective spouses; he compared her with his wife and she compared him with her husband. She educated him on children, how they brought her joy and comfort in a bleak and blighted marriage. So many marriages in the world hinged on their children, she explained.

He now preferred the balcony to his bedroom, and went for long and refreshing swim in the pool. She

and people have a conflict between them, he wondered. One appeared when the other vanished in the rotation, which configured the mystery of this universe. He felt abandoned and loveless, forgotten by the world in his own secluded corner as the hissing sound of a desperate silence rose in the air.

The calm of the night gnawed him with the rage of a snarling beast and he started to envy rest of the world wallowing in slumber. He felt betrayed by either woman, who went to bed having no consideration

sleeping in the arm of her husband, her face snuggled in the cavity of his chest to eavesdrop on his heart? His body shook up in disgust as if he could already see what was in his imagination.

The solitude of the night resounded in his mind, which filled with the moisture of an elusive sadness. Never before in his life had he felt so deserted, never before had he felt so unwanted that he thought of death. The sound of his own breathing startled him as if it resonated the hollowness of a grave in the air, his

While Palestine was burning . . .

AMM SHAHABUDDIN

THE inevitable had happened. The much-orchestrated US-brokered Mid-East Peace Mission, led by US Secretary of State Gen Colin Powell, had crashed mid-stream without achieving its objective. The generally-turned-politician Powell had literally ran from pillar to post, during his mission, holding several rounds of talks in Morocco, Cairo, Amman and Tel Aviv, but at the end of the day, had to return home empty-handed.

He had earlier announced of 'progress' made in the talks which was immediately dubbed by Palestinian leaders as not true. Before the mission was launched, president Bush himself was against Powell-Arafat meeting perhaps to please fire-brand Sharon and the Jewish lobby in America. But the world-wide popular demonstrations against America and Israel for the latter's ruthless policy towards Palestine, in different world capitals, from Washington itself to London, Paris, and other European and Latin American countries, besides violent demonstrations in the Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, and a number of Asian countries, rang the alarm bell and sent a hard message for Bush forcing him to revise his earlier decision, allowing later Powell's meetings with Arafat. It may be noted here that Sharon called it a tragic mistake!

Perhaps by isolating Arafat from his people and the world community, by putting him virtually under house-arrest, without light, water and telephone, his compound being surrounded by Israeli soldiers, tank

and armoured cars, Sharon had planned to carry Powell's peace mission on a smooth-sailing on the terms to be dictated by him. But that had failed because of strong stand taken by the Palestinian leadership that there could be no peace talks or a cease-fire until the Israeli occupation forces were withdrawn from all Palestinian territories occupied by them. This was indeed a big shock for the hawks in Israeli and US Administration.

A caged lion

It was indeed a shame, on both the UN and President Bush that Powell came in a big motorcade to hold peace talks with a helpless and imprisoned Palestinian leader Arafat, who even had no right to go outside his two rooms. Is this also not a big slap on the civilised world where leaders often speak highly of human rights and democracy? It is a pity that Arafat during the meeting had to appeal to the UN and President Bush for freeing him from the imprisonment of the Israeli forces. A wild cry indeed on the part of a caged lion.

One thing however is clear, from the debris of deaths and destructions caused by the neo-Nazis in Palestine, one thing that stands out in bold relief on the hazy horizon, is the utter failure of the United Nations (UN), that was created by its founding fathers in 1947 with the sole purpose of saving the succeeding generations from the scourge of war and maintain international peace and security using its own inherent mechanism provided by its Charter, called the Bible of the UN. What was UN doing all the time

when US-aided Israeli forces were playing havoc on innocent Palestinian people, men, women and children, with F-16 fighter bombers, tanks, missiles, helicopter and naval gunships and bombs? What were the responsibilities in such tragic circumstance of the Security Council and the UN Secretary General? Were they oblivious of these responsibilities? What made them play blind and tow the line dictated from outside? These are vital questions cried loud for answers. It is good that SG Kofi Annan had come up, at the sag end of the day, with his proposal for deployment of an international force to maintain peace in the area. But the SG, considered as the 'eyes and ears' of the UN, should have placed his proposal much earlier at the Security Council, as required under Charter provisions.

Acting on behalf of US?

Before I go into discussions of the Charter articles that enunciates the duties and responsibilities of the Security Council and the SG, I would like to mention here the strong voice raised so far by the only non-government international body in New Delhi recently blaming UN for its failure to do its duties to maintain world peace for which it was established. The eminent lawyers, jurists and academicians, gathered recently in New Delhi, at their 70th biennial conference of the International Law Associations, also criticised America's West Asia policy. Some of the speakers accused UN of 'acting on behalf of America' and said that the world body had become irrelevant. Why the UN will

have to hear such unkind and uncharitable remarks if it was on right path?

Has the world body become irrelevant? It is hard to believe. Some frustrated philosopher might have lamented saying, "what man has made of man!" But how we, the peoples of the UN would lament over what some so-called big powers have had of the UN to serve their selfish ends? The heart-rending scenario of Palestine after being ravaged by the 'peace-loving' Israeli forces during their two-week long military operation, with death, destruction and massacre of innocent people, becomes all the more shocking because of the silence and inaction on the part of the UN and the world community. What is now going on in the Security Council is more pathetic because they were almost paralysed when the aggression against Palestine by the forces of the *enfant terrible* of America was going on in full swing. The fire engineers are meant for work when the fire is on and not when the fire has died after causing the devastation. It is a good sign that America at least had not vetoed the resolutions for sending a fact-finding mission to Palestine to assess the massacre done by the Israeli forces.

However America was prompt enough to veto the latest Arab resolution demanding immediate withdrawal of all Israeli forces from Palestinian territories, and an end to the siege of Palestinian leader Arafat and the Church of Nativity and UN investigation into the deaths and destruction in Jenin refugee camp. It may be recalled here America, only a couple of months back,

had rejected Arafat's appeal to the Security Council to deploy UN observers to maintain peace in the area.

It is true that, under the present circumstances, no resolutions can be adopted by the Security Council if it goes against the interest of Israel. It will be 'killed' by America by using the 'veto' system which has become a pernicious weapon in the hands of the five permanent members of the Security Council. And that is why the popular demand is that the veto system or a 'negative vote' system in the SC should be abolished forthwith to save the UN from going the League of Nations way and thereby save the global peace and security from being in jeopardy.

Now the big question haunts the horrified people all over the world to see. The horrible situation made by Israel is: 'What UN, for that matter, the UN Security Council, which is supposed to be the main executive body of the world organization, has done so far to stop Israel's madness in Palestine and to bring that 'butcher of Tel-Aviv' to trial for committing genocide?' Certainly the UN was not established to just issue statements criticising, abuse of human rights and arrange distribution of relief goods among the victims. There are other UN agencies that for that purpose. Nor, the UN was created to adopt 'toothless' resolutions asking Israel to do this or that. This is sheer wastage of time and energy and hoodwink the people that UN was trying its best to restrain Israel's activities when every body knows Israel is not going to be cowed down by these resolu-

tions, unless UNSC gets into action, as provided in the UN charter, to force the resolutions down the throat of Israel.

UN is powered by its charter

The UN has been well-equipped by its charter to meet any volatile situation, as it happened in Palestine, if the world body wanted to do that. Undoubtedly, the US veto is proverbially hanging there as the sword of Democles to chop down anything not liked by it, that is, whatever goes against the interests of that much-spoilt 'man of peace' Sharon and his Israel. But instead of lying immobile and paralysed because of the fear of the hanging sword of veto, UN should go ahead with the powers given to it by the charter. Otherwise UN's role in the holocaust let loose by Israel in Palestine will become the blackest chapter in UN's history. In case the Security Council fails because of US veto, let the UN General Assembly come forward to invoke the 'Uniting for Peace' resolution of 1950 to assume full responsibilities.

A true and independent UN, free from the shackles of any big power is supposed to work fearlessly, irrespective of any evil machinations by any member of the 'axis of good' (as against 'axis of evil'), whenever a situation arises that "threatens peace, breach of peace or act of aggression", as mentioned in Article 39 of the UN Charter. What happened for long more than two weeks in Palestine, the Security Council couldn't see any trace of "breach of peace" or, "threat to peace", or "act of aggression"! Or,

were they seeing everything 'green' wearing 'green glasses'? Perhaps that was the tragedy with them. Otherwise, they could not have slept so well for more than two weeks like Rip Van Winkle and got up only to pass resolutions after resolutions and at last decided to send a fact-finding mission, as suggested by USA whether Israel committed any massacre in Palestine! The UN Secretary General is duty-bound, under Article 99, to bring to the attention of the Security Council "any matter which, in his opinion, may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security". And under Article 100, the SG has been clearly advised not to "seek or receive instructions from any government, or from any other authority external to the Organisation (UN)". Was it done at the right time and at right place, instead of beating about the bush?

Under Articles 41 and 42, the Security Council has options to determine its course of action, first, without use of any armed force, but through measures like "severance of diplomatic relations" with the aggressive country, interruption of economic relations, and rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio and other means of communications. In case such measures proved "inadequate", in its opinion, then the Security Council might take such action by air, sea or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security".

And plans for the application for the armed forces against the recalcitrant state was never given by the charter to any big power or group of powers to determine and raise an

international force by-passing the UN Security Council, putting their chosen commander to lead the forces. Such plans for any military operation against 'the evil' state is to be made by the Security Council with the assistance of the 'Military Staff Committee', another UN body created under Article 47, consisting of the Chiefs of the five permanent members of the Security Council, to work in the field on behalf of the Security Council, as its 'military wing'. It is a pity that America, as the only super power left in the world, has equated itself with the UN and everything is run based on that psyche. So it was not at all surprising when NATO forces were seen working as peace keeping forces under US leadership in Bosnia.

Saudi proposal

To find permanent and lasting peace in the Middle East, there should be a just solution of the decades old enmity between Palestine and Israel as well as the Arab world and Israel. And to achieve that goal the UN Security Council should be bold enough to go ahead with the Saudi proposal of establishing an independent state of Palestine side by side Israel, recognising each other's entity and sovereignty, in exchange of recognition of Israel by the Arab states. That seems to be the most plausible way-out. President Bush, instead of following a roller-coaster policy in Mid-East, should be courageous enough to accept the Saudi proposal to establish lasting peace in West Asia.

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