



Managing Elections under the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Republic of Korea's Crucial Test

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Since the early stages of its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented pressure on countries and states as to whether to hold or postpone scheduled elections, resulting in controversies in either case.

Striking a balance between these two choices is not an easy call. Should the fulfilment of the social contract between a government and its citizens come at the expense of endangering their health and lives? Or should concerns of exacerbating the outbreak as a result of the mass gatherings inherent to the societal ritual of voting, prevail over other considerations?

Data collected and regularly updated by International IDEA in its *Global Overview of COVID-19: Impact on Elections* confirms that, as of this writing, at least 50 countries, states and territories¹—faced with the prospect of potentially spreading the virus by holding their elections under the pandemic—have so far opted for deferring the vote. Yet, some of them have taken the difficult, and perhaps more perilous, road of still going ahead with their scheduled elections.

The Republic of Korea is one of these audacious countries and one of the first to hold major elections at the national level under the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. The elections for the 300 members of its 21st National Assembly, held on 15 April 2020, represented a critical test of confidence, on two parallel fronts.

A national test for public confidence

The first test of confidence for these elections was purely a domestic one. In February, when the first major outbreak of COVID-19 outside of China enveloped the Republic of Korea, its government implemented a containment plan based on a combination of stringent measures,

which included testing and monitoring, contact tracing, self-isolation, social distancing, and strict quarantine for those arriving from overseas. The uncertainty that initially prevailed in political and public debates, as to whether the 2020 National Assembly elections could be held or not as originally scheduled in April² was—in time—curved by the successful containment of the virus, paving the way to the decision to go ahead.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, had a significant impact on key issues that were at stake in the political agenda for the 2020 elections. In the beginning of the year, just prior to the spread of the outbreak, it appeared that the vote would be dominated by more 'conventional' issues, such as the country's economic growth, the recent electoral reform³, its relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, among others. As the COVID-19 outbreak gripped the nation, and following the government's initial sluggish response, the handling of the pandemic surged in importance, rapidly becoming a decisive electoral issue.

Held in such exceptional circumstances, the 2020 elections became an opportunity for political and electoral gains for both political fronts. For President Moon Jae-in, his government and the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), it became vital to demonstrate their capacity to respond to the ongoing crisis and the effectiveness of the measures adopted. The opposition,

1. International IDEA's website <<https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>>.

2. Article 196 of the Public Official Election Act empowers the President to postpone an election in the event of 'a natural disaster, terrestrial upheaval or for other unavoidable reasons'.

3. Adopted in December 2019, just a few months ahead of the April 2020 elections, the two main changes to the electoral law of the Republic of Korea were: (a) to fill the 300 seats of the unicameral National Assembly, the amended electoral system now requires voters to cast two ballots simultaneously: one for a candidate, to fill 253 seats through a first-past-the-post (FPTP) element, in single-member districts; the other for a political party, to fill the remaining 47 through a proportional party list system; and (b) the lowering of voting age from 19 to 18 years.

on the other hand, placed its efforts on convincing the electorate that the government's response to the pandemic had been inadequate and that its presumed failure to contain COVID-19 would shatter the national economy.

A test run for managing elections under a pandemic

The second, critical test had a wider, global dimension. As one of the pioneer countries⁴ to ever have run a national election amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the holding of the 21st National Assembly elections in the Republic of Korea has attracted global interest since the early stages of their preparation. From all continents, the eyes of officials of electoral management bodies (EMBs), electoral experts, academics, civil society representatives and politicians alike, are all pointed at the Republic of Korea. Closely watching the National Election Commission (NEC) administering these elections in such uniquely challenging circumstances, they hope to draw key lessons from the experience and that its successes and failures will provide answers to several pressing questions:

- What measures were adopted to try to ensure a safe voting environment? And to which extent did such measures provide the electorate with enough reassurance and confidence to vote?
- How has the pandemic impacted the ability of political parties to campaign and reach their audiences?
- Have the COVID-19 related health risks kept voters away from the ballot box and, thus, affected voter turnout? Was the disruption created by the pandemic of such a level that it undermined the credibility and legitimacy of the elections?
- And, last, has the decision of going ahead with elections exposed voters and polling station officials to increased health risks?

Extraordinary measures for extraordinary circumstances

From the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, and as soon as the decision to go ahead with the elections was formalized, the NEC took immediate action to assert its commitment and capacity to ensure the safest possible voting environment for its voters: 'With the belief that

4. International IDEA's *Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on Elections* lists the countries that conducted elections under COVID-19 as of March 2020, among which: Australia (local elections in Queensland); Dominican Republic (municipal elections); France (local elections); Germany (local elections in Bavaria); Guyana (general elections); Israel (general elections); Mali (general elections); Switzerland (local elections in Lucerne) and Vanuatu (general elections).

disinfecting as much as possible is the best election management, the National Election Commission will prepare and carry out measures to ensure voters can cast their ballots without concerns about their safety', the NEC Chairman declared in a public statement, to reassure the electorate.

To that end, the NEC promptly followed its pledge by announcing several extraordinary measures it was putting in place to minimise the risk for voters of contracting and spreading the virus when casting their ballots.

Encouraging early voting

The first of such measures was to encourage all those eligible to vote to take full advantage of early voting provisions. This advance voting method was introduced for the first time in 2013, during by-elections, and implemented nationwide in local elections held one year later, allows all voters to cast their ballots in advance of election day, irrespective of their residence. For the 2020 elections, early voting took place on 10 and 11 April, at any of the 3,500 polling stations established nationwide. The rationale of encouraging more voters to use early voting provisions in these elections was to attempt reducing the number of voters expected to gather at the polling stations on election day.

Another important measure was to extend home voting provisions (early voting by mail) to COVID-19 patients who were being treated in hospitals and other medical facilities, as well as to citizens in quarantine or in self-isolation for having been in contact with infected people. In normal circumstances and previous elections, only special categories of voters⁵ would have been entitled to home voting provisions. To vote by mail in the 2020 elections, a 'home voting' application had to be filed to a local administrative office between 24–28 March.

Additionally, the NEC took steps to guarantee the enfranchisement of persons were infected with COVID-19 after the 'home voting' application period had formally ended and, as a result, were unable to apply for 'home voting'. These patients, along with medical and support staff, could cast an early vote at special polling stations established in hospitals and other medical facilities.

Ensuring a safe voting environment

The NEC enacted stringent measures to guarantee a safer voting environment for those intending to cast

5. Such categories include persons with disabilities, elderly with limited mobility, persons unable to leave hospitals and nursing homes, those confined in detention centres, etc.

their ballot through in-person voting, on 15 April, at any of the 14,330 polling stations established nationwide. To this end, the NEC adopted important safeguards and precautions to contain the risk of infection for voters throughout the steps of the in-person voting process, from queuing outside the polling stations, to limiting crowding in voting area, to the safe handling of election

Stringent safeguards and precautions outlined by the Code of Conduct for Voters included:

- When queuing to vote, voters had to wear face masks.
- Before accessing the polling station, their temperature had to be checked with non-contact thermometers; those showing a temperature higher than 37.5 degrees Celsius, or displaying respiratory problems, were redirected to special polling stations with even higher degrees of protection.
- Voters had to keep a safety distance of at least one meter from each other, with signs and marks strategically placed throughout the voting premises to assist them in strictly maintaining such distance.
- Keeping their IDs ready to be inspected, voters had to sanitize their hands and wear plastic gloves that were provided to them.
- Once allowed to enter the polling station's premises to vote, at the identification stage, voters had to either temporarily lower or remove their mask to facilitate their identification.
- Putting back their masks and keeping their gloves on, voters then received, handled and cast their ballots.
- Finally, when leaving the polling station, they had to remove their gloves and discard them into a disposal box, located at the exit.

materials.

A critical measure implemented towards this end was that of establishing a Code of Conduct for Voters, which provided detailed instructions and outlined actions, safeguards and precautions that voters were required to follow through each step of the voting process. The NEC exerted significant efforts to disseminate, as widely as possible, the Code of Conduct so voters would be well prepared on election day.

On their side of the polling process, poll workers also had clear and strict instructions to follow, including: wearing masks and plastic gloves, following strict hygiene rules, sanitizing the polling station on the eve

of the elections and preventing anyone from entering the premises until voting had started, regularly disinfecting voting compartments, ballot stamps and other election materials, and ensuring that the premises were regularly ventilated.

Safety measures similar to those for voters were also applied for police officers, media representatives and election observers. As for the poll workers managing special polling stations, established for more than 3,000 COVID-19 patients and almost 1,000 medical workers in Seoul and Daegu, they had to wear protective equipment, such as full-body protective clothing, face protection, masks and plastic gloves to prevent the greater risks of exposure to infection. The NEC confirmed that the adopted extraordinary measures required an additional force of 20,000 poll workers to be deployed.

Last-minute special measures were also introduced for voters quarantined at home, who were allowed to leave their place of confinement and vote at polling stations, when official voting hours had ended, and these had been closed to other voters.

In addition to introducing measures to facilitate the voting process, the NEC was also compelled to adopt drastic restrictive measures for the Out-of-Country Voting (OCV) operation. Concerns over the safety of the voters of the Republic of Korea in countries with a higher diffusion of COVID-19 and their inability to go out and vote under the lockdowns and other strict restrictions of movement imposed by host governments, forced the NEC to cancel the planned OCV operations in as many as 55 countries, with some diplomatic missions also forced to shorten their voting periods.

Communicating with the public

The NEC used different communication means to reach the electorate, including messages on its own broadcasting channel, the NEC eTV, running frequent voting information advertisements on national television, affixing posters and banners around the country, and displaying copies of the Code of Conduct inside polling stations during early voting and election day.

Maintaining transparency of voting and counting operations

Even if uniquely meant to protect public health, the stringent safeguards and precautions adopted by the NEC had inevitable impact on the levels of transparency and accessibility of the voting and counting operations. To respond to this need without undermining the precautions that had been adopted, the NEC resorted

to livestreaming polling station activities on its eTV and national channels at regular intervals, both during the two-day early voting period and on election day. Livestreaming cameras provided all viewers, nationally and globally, remote access to the various stages of the electoral process, including the preparation and start of voting; the actual voting in progress; the close of voting and the transferring and storing of the voted ballots; the preparation and the start of counting; the counting process as it was progressing; and the close of the vote counting.

As an additional precautionary measure to limit person-to-person contact, the NEC also considered introducing drive-through voting, which would have allowed voters to line up and vote at special polling stations while remaining inside their vehicles. However, with the date of the elections nearing, the NEC had to put this alternative voting method aside as it was too late to introduce it.

Adapting the election campaign

The COVID-19 outbreak also significantly affected the methods conventionally used by political parties and candidates to conduct their election campaigns. Holding rallies, public speeches, debates fund raising events for large groups of voters, or even door-to-door canvassing, were all in-person campaign methods and activities interdicted under the new COVID-19 reality. Although the country wasn't under a national lockdown, restrictions in holding events and attending public gatherings, and requirements of social distancing and limited in-person contacts, were all in place for the period leading up to the elections. These restrictions obliged political parties and candidates to resort to alternative campaigning methods to reach out to their voters.

Inevitably, election campaigning activities for the 2020 elections had a much lower profile than in any previous election. To reach voters, political parties and candidates had to change their conventional campaigning method, shifting to online and digital technology, mainly video messages disseminated through social media platforms, SMS and mobile phone apps. Some candidates went as far as using innovative methods, employing augmented reality (AR) technology⁶ to remotely and virtually

6. A candidate resorted to AR technology, allowing supporters to digitally express their endorsement to his election pledges through a mobile application and their phone cameras. Other candidates launched AR mobile services that enabled voters to digitally 'meet' and interact with a 3D animated party's character. Through the AR technology, this character could appear on photos and videos taken by users, who could then share these with other supporters.

interact with their supporters. Other candidates conducted volunteer COVID-19-related work, which involved cleaning neighbourhoods in their constituencies and disinfecting the streets. Others, more conventionally, sent their campaign materials and information about their platforms to voters through printed election-related information booklets distributed to households nationwide.

How the 2020 National Assembly elections unfolded

Already at the closing of the polling stations, two initial successes for the 2020 National Assembly elections were evident. The seamless management of these elections by the NEC and the level of voter participation despite the serious risks of exposure to the COVID-19 disease, offered an early indication that, for the most part, the stringent safeguards that were put in place by the NEC worked well.

Participatory elections

With slightly over a quarter of those eligible who voted in advance, early voting provisions considerably helped decrease the number of voters potentially crowding the polling stations on election day. As early voting ended on 11 April, with a recorded turnout of 26.7 per cent, the NEC confirmed that approximately 12 million voters had resorted to this advance voting method to cast their ballots. The early voting turnout marked a sharp increase compared to previous elections⁷ and the highest on record, indicating that a segment of the electorate deemed that early voting offered increased safety conditions than voting on election day.

The extension of home voting provisions to hospitalised patients being treated for COVID-19 was also an important measure. While perhaps it didn't significantly increase turnout, it emblematically guaranteed the enfranchisement of vulnerable citizens who were most directly affected by the pandemic.

Once the difficult decision to move ahead with the 2020 elections was made, the NEC found itself suddenly confronting a multitude of COVID-19-related challenges, which could have majorly disrupted the electoral process and its outcome. Perhaps, the most significant concern was that the risk of exposure to infection would keep voters away⁸ from crowded polling stations, reducing voter

7. Early voting turnout recorded in the 20th National Assembly Elections held in 2016 was 12.19 per cent.

8. Voter participation drastically plunged in the mayoral elections held in France in mid-March and in the parliamentary elections held in Mali in the same period.

participation rates and, possibly, putting the credibility of the elections at stake.

However, voter turnout figures for the 2020 elections indicate the opposite. Queuing at the 14,330 polling stations established nationwide and patiently waiting for their turn to cast their ballot, on 15 April, the voters of the Republic of Korea took part in the elections in large numbers, amid unprecedented circumstances and safety measures. Preliminary results released by the NEC indicate that nearly 66 per cent of the country's 44 million eligible voters participated in the elections, the highest turnout since 1992.⁹

It is also noteworthy to highlight that recent electoral reform to lower voting age from 19 to 18 years is likely to have contributed to increasing turnout.

These participation figures suggest a remarkable outcome and the efficacy of the efforts exerted by the NEC in encouraging, and convincing, a significant portion of its electorate to fulfil their right to vote, despite the risks it may have involved to their health and lives. The NEC methodically announced and explained to the public the extraordinary measures it had devised to protect their safety, also clarifying the reasons for adopting them. This equally transparent and proactive approach not only reassured the electorate about the minimized risk of contagion while voting, but also facilitated political parties and candidates to cope with the stringent limitations to their campaigning activities, giving them time to adopt alternative solutions to reach out to their voters.

In showing up to the polls in such large numbers, the voters of the Republic of Korea demonstrated a strong resolve in upholding their civic duty of voting, amid dire circumstances that forced them to put their health at risk to vote under a pandemic. Paradoxically, rather than keeping them away from the ballot boxes, the unprecedented situation ended up giving even more value to the exercise of their right to vote: they voted as a way to defeat, at least symbolically, the COVID-19 virus.

With the polls just closed, it is premature to determine, with degrees of certainty, whether and to which extent the decision of going ahead with elections has exposed voters of the Republic of Korea and NEC polling station officials to increased risks of contagion. What is certain,

9. For previous National Assembly elections in the Republic of Korea, International IDEA's *Voter Turnout Database* indicates the following turnout percentages: 58,03 per cent in 2016; 54,26 per cent in 2012; 46,01 per cent in 2008.

however, is that the stringent health safeguards and precautions adopted and rigorously put in place by the NEC reassured the voters. It remains to be seen in the weeks to come whether these measures were adequate to prevent their exposure to potential risks of infection and if mass gatherings of voters will trigger a new wave of the pandemic.

A limited reach for OCV and the election campaign

Despite these evident successes, however, the numerous complexities arising from the truly exceptional circumstance of running a general election during a pandemic, and the ensuing severe restrictions that this entailed, ended up affecting some critical phases of the electoral process.

One of them was the OCV operation, which was conducted from 1 to 6 April. The closure of OCV facilities in numerous countries due to COVID-19-related concerns and restrictions, had a great impact on the OCV operation. Given that eligible voters of the Republic of Korea residing abroad may only vote in-person¹⁰ at embassies or consulates overseas, meant that all those voters residing in countries in which OCV facilities had to be closed were unable to vote. The NEC estimated that the closure of 55 OCV facilities affected as many as 87,000 voters, accounting for approximately 51 per cent of the total 172,000 voters registered abroad. As the OCV operation concluded, the NEC reported that only 41,000 of them had voted in their current locations abroad. Notwithstanding the best intentions of the NEC and the unavoidability of the drastic measures it was forced to adopt, the OCV turnout of 23.8 per cent recorded for the 2020 elections marked the lowest¹¹ since this voting method was introduced in the Republic of Korea.

The other phase of the electoral process to be affected was the election campaign. Being forced to conduct their election campaigns under major limitations, the activities of political parties and candidates had a much reduced scale, reach and impact than those conducted in any previous election, making the conditions for the interaction with their supporters less than ideal. Despite such limitations, parties and candidates seemed to have accepted the fact that the stringent measures required by the seriousness of the circumstances to protect public

10. In the Republic of Korea, for Out-of-Country Voting, no 'mail voting' provisions are in place.

11. OCV turnout in the 2017 presidential elections was 75.3 per cent; in the 2016 national assembly elections 41.4 per cent; and in the 2012 presidential elections 71.1 per cent.

health were inevitable and that, in a way, the limitations were equally affecting their ability to use conventional campaign methods in these elections.

What can be learned from this experience?

With the COVID-19 outbreak still raging worldwide and no presumed end in sight, several countries, states and territories are bracing themselves to face the same dilemma confronted by the Republic of Korea in deciding whether to go ahead with scheduled elections and in such a case, how to guarantee a safe voting environment. What guidance could the unprecedented electoral management experience of the Republic of Korea provide, and how much of it could be possibly adapted to contexts having different historical, social, political, cultural, infrastructural and economic conditions?

Looking at the case of the Republic of Korea, at least from its outset, it appears that the NEC has succeeded in delivering what can be defined as a technically sound national election implemented under extremely difficult circumstances. However, this doesn't imply that this experience could be easily and fully adapted to fit diverse contexts of other countries.

The ability of guaranteeing similar levels of safety in elections in other countries, states and territories is heavily reliant on the existence, in any of these contexts, of some fundamental preconditions.

Effective capacity to contain the COVID-19 pandemic

One initial consideration is that countries, states and territories have different capacities, infrastructures, means approaches and results in combating the COVID-19 outbreak. Each of them is, and will continue to be, at different stages in their individual fights to contain the pandemic, and eventually suppress it.

In the case of the Republic of Korea, the incumbent government, albeit with a sluggish start, rapidly asserted its role, demonstrating to the country and the rest of the world that it had the capacity to limit the outbreak and flatten the curve of new infections. Without imposing any lockdown or major restrictions on citizens' freedom of movement, the pandemic remained at contained levels throughout the pre-election and election periods.

Therefore, a foregone requirement for the decision of holding an election under the COVID-19 pandemic would be that the level of the outbreak is at contained levels, or that—at least—it can be brought down at contained levels, by the time the election has to be held.

In fact, unless voting is conducted entirely through remote voting methods, it would be inconceivable to run an election while the country is in a partial or complete lockdown and movements are interdicted. In the case of the Republic of Korea, the ability demonstrated by the government to contain the outbreak, supported by the safety measures put in place by the NEC, contributed in creating a safe voting environment that reassured voters and ensued in their participation.

A solid electoral framework

The response provided by the NEC, and the extraordinary precautions and safeguards adopted to minimize the risks to public health involved in the act of voting, were unprecedented to previous elections held in the Republic of Korea or in any other country. These measures, however, could not have been pulled off so timely and seamlessly, hadn't numerous legal and procedural provisions to facilitate inclusion and participation of voters been already part of its electoral framework. Given that absentee and advance voting procedures—both in-person and through remote voting—were already in place prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, meant that these could be suitably and swiftly extended to address some of the extraordinary challenges that the pandemic posed. Early voting measures allowed any voter to cast their ballot in-person at any polling station in the country without prior registration; advance voting by mail enabled special categories of vulnerable voters to post their vote; and OCV provisions, although substantially limited, enfranchised many of the voters abroad. Furthermore, not only did the legal framework of the Republic of Korea already contain these provisions, but the EMB had a pre-existing experience and consolidated and proven administrative, procedural and operational capacities to implement them.

However, many countries, states and territories have no legal and procedural provisions in place to facilitate absentee¹² or early voting and can only offer voters the possibility of casting their voting in-person at the polling stations on election day. If deciding to go ahead with scheduled elections during the pandemic, these countries, states and territories will struggle significantly in sustaining the usual turnout numbers, while also protecting the voters and safeguarding the public health of their country. This is particularly the case in developing countries and emerging democracies, which are often lacking provisions for absentee and early voting.

12. See *Voting from Abroad: The International IDEA Handbook*, pp. 12–13, 19–20, 23 and 26, <<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/voting-abroad-international-idea-handbook>>, accessed 17 April 2020.

Timely availability of adequate means and resources

Another condition for effectively managing elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic relates to the level and types of means and resources available to create a safe voting environment (including financial resources, infrastructures, assets, supplies, technology, communication means, as well as human resources, know-how, capacities, codified and informal rules and practices, etc.), and their sufficient and swift availability to the EMB so that it could timely adopt and implement all necessary extraordinary measures.

While, at the time of this writing, the detailed costs incurred in putting in place the safety precautions and safeguards adopted for the 2020 National Assembly elections have not yet been disclosed, it can be assumed that the amount of financial resources and other assets required to pull off such complex operations were substantial.

Unequivocally, the timely availability of adequate levels of means and resources has played a major part in the sound electoral management by the NEC and the high levels of voter participation of the 21st National Assembly elections, despite the numerous challenges and constraints it was confronting. However, the fact that not all countries, states and territories may possess, or be able to mobilize, same or similar levels of means and resources that were readily put at the disposal of the NEC, represents a significant obstacle that—most likely—would curtail similar ambitions of achieving equivalent outcomes.

A conducive political environment

An additional condition to be considered is that of ensuring a conducive political environment. This enables the various political actors and forces (even if competing to be elected) to accept the limitations that are imposed on them and their conventional campaign activities due to the pandemic. This also enables the supportive conditions required by the EMB to effectively perform its functions under such challenging conditions.

Having a conducive political environment in place also implies the existence of a level playing field, establishing equal and equitable opportunities for all political parties and candidates and finding ways to compensate the potential advantages that the incumbent government may naturally enjoy in navigating a nation through a major crisis.

When considering what could be learned from the experience of the just concluded elections in the Republic of Korea, countries, states and territories should carefully

evaluate their own specific contexts and the existence of needed conditions, before putting themselves in the situation of being expected to deliver credible and participatory elections amid the outbreak of a pandemic.

While there is much to learn from the 2020 National Assembly elections, and many successful aspects to be considered, it is too early to predict whether countries with elections scheduled throughout the course of the year will be equally well positioned to conduct fair and safe elections. What is certain is that the Republic of Korea's experience in running a credible election under a pandemic offers major points of reflection and crucial lessons to be learned by the countries, territories and states that soon will be exploring ways to guarantee a safe voting environment for their elections.

Every context is unique

When considering what could be learned from the recent elections in the Republic of Korea, any country, state or territory should carefully evaluate its own specific context against the existence of those fundamental conditions that are essential to deliver credible, safe and fair elections amid the outbreak of a pandemic.

While there is much to learn from the experience of the Republic of Korea, and there are numerous successful aspects to be considered, not all countries, states and territories will be equally well positioned and able to adhere to the standards and approaches needed to ensure credible, safe and fair elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic. What is certain, however, is that the Republic of Korea's unprecedented experience in running a major election under the outbreak of a global pandemic offers crucial points of reflection and precious lessons to be learned by all countries, states and territories that, in the months to come, will be exploring ways to safely uphold the democratic right of their people.

Useful links

- NEC Video: [Voter Code of Conduct in 20 Seconds](#)
- NEC Video: [Come and Vote Safely during Early Voting](#)
- NEC Video: [Come and Vote Safely on Election Day](#)
- NEC Videos and images: [Come and Vote Safely](#)
- 21st National Assembly Elections [Livestreaming](#)

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