

## Mahathir Mohamad in Public Policy and Politics of Malaysia

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### Abstract

This article deals with the political and social achievements, but also the shortcomings of Mahathir Mohamad as long-term prime minister of Malaysia. Based on a thorough and critical literature review the authors discuss first Mahathir's reaction to the financial crisis in 1997/98 and the upcoming *reformasi* movement. Then, they analyse the conditions for the re-emergence of Mahathir as opposition leader in mid-2010s and his role in the surprising election victory of the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition in 2018. Mahathir, charismatic leader in Malaysia during the 1980s and 1990s, has contributed important role in development and change of politics in Malaysia. The victory of the opposition coalition in the 2018 election would be hardly possible without him. His political comeback prior to the election made headlines in Malaysian media and raised high hopes for a more democratic Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Malaysia; politics; Mohamad Mahathir; Prime Minister; government; development

### Introduction

Malaysia enjoyed a long period of political stability and relative inter-ethnic harmony under PM Mahathir Mohammad first administration from 1981 to 2003 and was able to build several mega infrastructure projects which brought Malaysia prestige and recognition around the world (Shamsul, 2006). Mahathir was able to overcome the social and political damages (such as a negative GDP of 6.7 percent in 1998, large portfolio outflows, and massive decline of equity and property values) caused by the 1997-1999 Asian financial crisis relatively quickly and led Malaysia to be the first country that fully recovered from the crisis. When he resigned from office on 31 October 2003, he left a stable and generally well-managed Malaysia to his successors.

In 2018, Mahathir at the age of 92 years was once again elected to be the PM of Malaysia following the 14<sup>th</sup> general elections at the same year. The dynamics of politics of the country, and especially people's rage and mounting anti-government protest related to corruption scandal involving PM Najib Razak, attracted Mahathir to once again entering the politics of Malaysia. Soon after becoming PM for the second time, Mahathir worked to deliver his election campaign promises into actions, among them were to bring about a clean government, eradicating corruption, and opening an investigation for the spectacular 1MDB corruption scandal.

Theoretically, Mahathir could have been in power until the next regular general elections that is scheduled for 2023, but due to political miscalculations he resigned from his office as prime minister in February 2020.

There is an academic consensus that the historic election victory of *Pakatan Harapan* led by Mahathir and the first election loss of the *Barisan Nasional* coalition contributed to the democratization of Malaysia (Ostwald and Oliver 2020: 676; Dettman, 2020: 1047), but there were also doubts if this democratic impetus could be sustained in the years to come (Tayeb, 2021: 104). This second political debut of Mahathir in Malaysia politics seemed to end as he lost parliamentary seat in the 2022 general election.

## **Methodology**

There is no doubt that Mahathir is one of the most decisive political figures in modern Malaysian politics. This article will critically analyse Mahathir's role and contributions to Malaysia's political system in the 1980s and 1990s, his political comeback before the 2018 general elections and his second administration as Malaysian Prime Minister (PM) from 2018 until 2020. There is already a number of academic articles on Mahathir's life, his policies and achievements, but mostly they only deal with specific aspects and are often focussed on either his first years as prime minister or his recent comeback. This article, however, aims to provide an overall and critical up-to-date analysis based on a thorough literature review. The authors decided not to use quantitative indicators but a literature review since they thought that this would be the most suitable method to provide a fresh and innovative perspective on the achievements and shortcomings of Mahathir Mohamad.

This article is written based on the qualitative data and analysis. This article is based on a thorough review of academic literature and mostly media reporting. The authors, who both lived and worked in Malaysia for many years, selected and analysed the relevant academic articles and publications about Mohamed Mahathir in specific and Malaysian politics in general.

In addition to academic record of Mahathir and his political actions, the data for this article were mostly collected and from both the media reporting and media analyzing of the 2018 general elections and other political events after. The statements and political actions of Mahathir, as both the leader of opposition coalition *Pakatan Harapan* and former Prime Minister, made a big attraction and impact to the media and people in Malaysia.

## **Discussion**

### *Mahathir and Malaysian Public Policy*

Mahathir was inaugurated as the 4<sup>th</sup> PM of Malaysia in 1981. During his 22 years in office, Mahathir has transformed Malaysia from a low-income country into a high middle-income and a newly industrialized country. According to the World Bank Development Indicators the Gross National Income of Malaysia rose from 24.13 billion US-Dollar to 104.27 billion US-Dollar in 2003 (World Bank Development Indicators 2022a). Consequently, the World Bank praised Malaysia for managing to drastically reduce the incidence of poverty while achieving rapid economic growth (Choy, 2006: 865). Malaysia even produced several high-tech industrial products. Mahathir believed in the appropriateness of the authoritarian political arrangement due to the social structure of the society and the national demand to achieve economic prosperity in shortest time possible. In other words, Mahathir needed an authoritarian political regime as the social bases to support modernization projects he proposed for Malaysia.

In order to modernise Malaysian state companies, in the mid-1980s Mahathir launched a policy of economic liberalization. In the early 90s, as the Malaysian economy grew, Mahathir introduced a blueprint for development called Vision 2020. Under this plan, Malaysia set an ambitious plan to be a

modern developed industrial country in 2020. Several mega projects infrastructures were built in the early and late 1990s, including the Petronas Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), and several technology-driven “smart cities” in Malaysia. At the same time, Mahathir introduced reforms in government bureaucracy to be clean dan effective but at the same time control political participation in Malaysia. Following economic initiatives and limited reform to government, the World Bank in 1993 report included Malaysia as one of ‘the East Asian Miracle’ and one of the ‘High Performing Economies (HPAEs)’ in Asia (World Bank, 1993).

Prime Minister Mahathir also used sports as a tool for advertising the Malaysian nation and its progress in becoming a developed country. Malaysia’s successful bid to host the 16th Commonwealth Games in 1998 was significant because it was not only the first Commonwealth Games ever to be held in Asia, but it was only the second to be hosted by a developing country after Jamaica in 1966 (Westhuizen, 2004:1277). In addition, the Malaysian government was able to convince the Formula One racing bosses to allocate regular races to Malaysia. The Sepang Circuit situated 85 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur was officially opened on March 9, 1999, by the Prime Minister himself. Malaysia also applied for the 29th Olympic Summer Games in 2008 but lost to Beijing (Bullinger and Ziegenhain, 2011: 10f.).

Between 1990 and 1996 Malaysia experienced GDP growth rates of more than 9 percent annually (see World Bank Development Indicators, 2022b). It was during this good time of enormous economic growth that Malaysia was confronted with its worst financial crisis. The Asian financial crisis sent shock waves through the affected Southeast Asian countries in 1997. Malaysia was not spared from this economic nightmare. In Thailand, due to the financial crisis, a new constitution with a new political system was drafted, which eventually led to

the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra. In Indonesia, the autocratic rule of strongman Suharto was stopped after 32 years in power led to democratic elections in June 1999. In Malaysia, however, the 1997 financial crisis led to the rise of the *reformasi* movement in 1998, following an internal conflict within UMNO and the rift between Mahathir and his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim

As Mahathir sacked Anwar from UMNO and his government after a hard conflict in how to respond to the financial crisis, a splinters group within UMNO was formed and opposition parties joined forces behind Anwar to dethrone Mahathir from power. The challenge for Mahathir, this time around was not through party elections within UMNO or the normal general elections, but it was mostly through mass demonstration similar with the *reformasi* movement in Indonesia just several months before. Anwar’s supporters also named this anti-Mahathir movement as *reformasi*. This mass demonstration of *reformasi* was unprecedented in Malaysian politics and was mostly supported by the Malaysian urban middle class that aspired for a new dawn of democracy in Malaysia.

*Reformasi* had led to new situations in many parts of the Malaysia as the urban middle class became actively involved in politics and voiced their criticism openly to the government (Embong, 2011:5). These traditional orientations became slowly and incrementally less relevant and were partly replaced by more universal orientations like freedom, democracy, and social justice (Shamsul, 2001). *Reformasi* brought about a new culture and innovative ideas into the politics of Malaysia (Weiss, 1999: 446). The emergence of the Malaysian middle class and their active movement in politics gave birth to what is now popularly called “new politics”, which as a new terminology refers to politics in which ethnicity and communal identifications are no longer the primary points of political identification.

The *reformasi* movement significantly changed the political landscape and the social situation in Malaysia have consequences until today. For the first time in Malaysian history, activists of the opposition parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other civil society movements were united under the reform umbrella as they launched protests and street demonstrations to call for the change in the political regime and the end of the Mahathir administration. This movement was “the most overt and unambiguous statement by a huge segment of the Malaysian society as there was a demand for major and meaningful changes in the country’s political system” and also “shook the foundations of Malaysia’s long entrenched authoritarian system” (Gomez, 2007). Mahathir successfully handled the economic crisis 1998-1999. In October 2003, five years after the Asian financial crisis and the start of the *reformasi* movement, then 78-year-old Mahathir resigned and handed over his premiership to his deputy Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

There were several UMNO leaders who contributed to shaping Malaysia into what it looks today. Mahathir undoubtedly has a special place in among them, not only that he served the longest compared to all of them but, as Shamsul (2006) wrote, he has “built Malaysia into what it is now”. Mahathir as leader with a clear vision on modern Malaysia with a strong will to realize it. In addition to this, Gomez (2004) noted that Mahathir was also the prime minister who strengthened the authoritarian political system as the autonomy of other government institutions was reduced. The monarchy, judiciary and parliament were “reputed to have lost the capacity to check the executive, while the bureaucracy, military and police have apparently become extremely subservient to the office of the prime minister where enormous power has come to be concentrated” (Gomez, 2004).

### *Mahathir and Malaysian Politics*

In 2014, after the general elections that reaffirmed the mandate of PM Najib Razak, Mahathir continued to publicly comment on his successors became more and more dissatisfied with their performance. As a “Father Knows Best” leader, Mahathir became deeply concerned about the present situation and the future of the society that he shaped to a great extent in the last decades (Jaes et al., 2020: 49). Not least to his paternal leadership style who likes to manage his community like his own children who needs to develop their potential and talents in development (Jaes et al., 2020: 49), Mahathir Mohamed turned out to become one of the strongest critics of Najib Razak’s administration in the mid-2010s (Nadzri, 2018: 18). Mahathir particularly focused on the mismanagement and corruption surrounding one of the government’s investment arms, the 1Malaysia Development Board (1MDB).

Eventually, in February 2016 Mahathir decided to quit UMNO, the party whose leader he was for more than 20 years. Mahathir stated that he wanted to leave UMNO because it was no longer the UMNO he knew: “It is now a party dedicated to protecting Najib. I can’t be a member of such a party. I feel embarrassed that I am associated with a party that is seen as supporting corruption. It had caused me to feel ashamed” (Paddock, 2016). Mahathir’s bold step sent shockwaves throughout the country and Najib Razak was deeply disappointed.

In mid-2016, now already 90 years old, Mahathir decided to re-enter Malaysian politics formally. First, he officially joined the opposition movement against the *Barisan Nasional*, and then formed together with Muhyiddin Yassin and his son Mukhriz Mahathir a new political party, *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (PPBM). As the word *pribumi* already indicates, PPBM or shortly named *Bersatu* was an exclusive Malay political party, and its members were mostly

former UMNO members which were either sacked for their disloyalty towards Najib Razak or decided on their own to follow their patron/idol Mahathir.

*Bersatu* was an “UMNO-clone opposition party”, which “limited its membership to Malays (and other Bumiputera) and maintained the objective of upholding the special position of Islam and the Malays” (Ostwald and Oliver, 2020: 667). The new party quickly drew in other UMNO defectors. Mahathir, in his capacity as chairman of the party, repeatedly proclaimed that *Bersatu*’s intention was to take over UMNO’s role as the main political party for ethnic Malays (Wan Saiful Wan Jan, 2020: 7).

In the preparation for the 2018 general elections, the opposition leaders gathered to form a coalition. Due to Malaysia’s first-past-the-post election system in single member constituency, the opposition must be united to have a real chance at defeating the ruling *Barisan Nasional* coalition. The biggest problem was to get the two top opposition leaders, Anwar Ibrahim and Mahathir Mohamad into that coalition. As have been mentioned before, Anwar was sacked by Mahathir in 1998. Mahathir was also responsible for accusing Anwar of homosexuality and corruption. The Malaysian judiciary on these two charges, subsequently sent Anwar to prison in 1999. He was not released until 2004, a year after Mahathir stepped down as prime minister.

In the end, Mahathir and his (former) foe Anwar could find a compromise and Mahathir “expressed his surprise and gratitude to Anwar for his willingness to prioritize the country over personal grudges” (Wan Saiful Wan Jan 2020: 10). Mahathir successfully persuaded Anwar to let him assume the position of prime minister-designate. In return, Mahathir promised to secure Anwar’s release from prison through a royal pardon and to hand Anwar the prime minister after two years (Kassim, 2018: 2).

Interestingly, most analysts commented that the exact time and terms of the promised succession were never spelled out (Moten, 2020: 393). The pact between Mahathir and Anwar was most decisive “in assuring the old *reformasi* activists that Mahathir would only be an interim prime minister and that Anwar would take over some time after his release from prison” (Ufen, 2020: 177).

After the deal between Mahathir and Anwar the opposition was more united, but within the opposition movement, many criticized the inclusion of Mahathir, since they could not forgive Mahathir for his past authoritarian rule, that included jailing Anwar and many other senior opposition politicians (Chin, 2017). In addition, Mahathir never showed any regrets for his authoritarian actions. Resistance was particularly high in the non-Malay opposition movement, which well-remembered Mahathir’s stance on *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and *Ketuanan Islam* (Islam supremacy). In the past, the Chinese-based DAP was the main victim of Mahathir’s authoritarian rule when he was in power. DAP’s top politicians, the Chinese-Malaysian Lim Kit Siang and his son, Lim Guan Eng, were jailed several times for political reasons during Mahathir’s tenure (Chin, 2017).

The decision of Mahathir from a long-term UMNO ruler in Malaysia to become the chief opposition against his own former party UMNO in coalition with his long-term opponent Anwar Ibrahim came as a surprising and “unprecedented political turnaround” (Malhi, 2018) in Malaysian politics. During the election campaign Mahathir frequently used “emotional appeals – taking his weakness (then being 92 years of age) as, in fact, a strength, to build up a sense of sacrifice to enhance his “saviour” role.” (Welsh, 2018: 96). Mahathir also portrayed himself as a 92-year-old man under attack, with claims that his campaign was being sabotaged – and thus further evoking sympathy and anger.

On the 2018 general election, the victory of PH was in many ways remarkable. The landslide victory of the PH coalition meant that then 92-year-old Mahathir became the Prime Minister once again. Mahathir then became the oldest leader in the world. The man who ruled for 22 years with UMNO, the party he had just defeated. For the first time in 61 years, UMNO had been removed from power. For the first time since independence from the British in 1957, the government has changed. The UMNO government had stood for twice as long as the Berlin Wall, but now one by one the bricks were being dismantled (Blakkarly, 2020) by a coalition headed by Malaysia's greatest transformer.

Mahathir's contribution to the electoral win of the opposition was significant. As the "chairperson and prime minister candidate for PH, he provided leadership and stability within the opposition coalition. More importantly, Mahathir provided trust and security among the Malay electorate – a crucial voter segment whose support is imperative for victory in Malaysian elections" (Chan Tsu Chong, 2018: 111). The inclusion of Mahathir in PH moved many Malays to put more faith in the opposition to be the new government, something that had never be achieved by any opposition forces in the past" (Nadzri, 2018: 160).

Mahathir arguably offered a realistic alternative to the unpopular then Prime Minister Najib especially among the conservative and somewhat nostalgic Malay voters who were concerned with the erosion of Malay primacy a "return" to a more confident era of UMNO-led politics. In that sense, Mahathir and *Bersatu* assumed the role of an alternative UMNO, one based on many of the same principle, but with different and less tarnished faces: "same same, but different" (Ostwald and Oliver, 2020: 672). In addition, Mahathir (and Anwar as the designated successor), as respectable Malay leaders mitigated fears of a potentially tumultuous regime change. Therefore, the

PH was very strong compared to previous opposition coalitions who could not give this assurance (Ufen, 2020: 180)

Did the electoral win of PH really lead to a "democratic breakthrough" (Chan Tsu Chong, 2018)? Certainly not from one day to another, because one election alone cannot lead to an immediate change of all institutions, processes, and regulations. Nevertheless, Malaysia had finally become a democratising country. In so far, the first power transfer in Malaysia since independence opened "the possibility of democracy as conceived in the 1957 constitution" (Funston, 2018: 58). In 2019, the Economist Intelligence Unit gave Malaysia its highest democracy score since the rating was created in 2006, a clear nod to the country's democratic progress (Tayeb, 2021: 105). Other democracy indices such as Freedom House lifted Malaysia from 45 to 52 points in their ranking on civil rights and political liberties, but judged the country still only as partly free, but with similar ratings as the regional peers in terms of democracy, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

#### *Mahathir and 2nd Mandate as Malaysian PM*

Then new prime minister Mahathir emphasized that his government would be the government committed to democracy, rule of law and respect the wishes of people as important values of new politics (The Star, 2018). This was a huge task, having in mind that before PH's election victory almost all the country's key institutions such as the upper echelons of the civil service, the judiciary, the security services, parliament and the religious bureaucracy were all controlled by UMNO and their leader Najib Razak. Prior to 2018, "the entire government machinery acted more like a branch of UMNO party rather than as independent public institutions" (Chin, 2018: 535). Consequently, major institutional changes were necessary in order to create a more democratic government whose policies are intended for the whole Malaysian society.

Delivering clean government and good governance were important promises made by Mahathir during the election campaign. Corruption was the most worrying problem in Malaysia since Mahathir himself was passionate about it and he was expected to eradicate corruption in Malaysia. Mahathir said, in an interview cited by Bernama News Agency, that he had removed 'a lot of personnel' as well as senior civil servants in bureaucracy because they openly campaigned for the previous ruling party (The Straits Times, 2018). This idea of clean government and eradicating corruption in bureaucracy was clearly one of Mahathir's top priorities after assuming power in 2018.

With regard to the 1MDB scandal, Mahathir committed to what he promised before the elections. Less than one month in power, he instructed a full, open and transparent investigation on the scandal, starting with the key person, former prime minister Najib Razak. In addition to having adopted democratic ideas related to people's aspiration for new politics of the *reformasi* movement in 1998 Mahathir appointed DAP politician Yeo Bee Yin, then 35 years old, to be the Minister of Energy, Technology, Science, and Climate Change and young *Bersatu* parliamentarian Syed Saddiq, then 25 years old, as the Minister of Youth and Sports. Both Yeo and Saddiq represented the educated and hard-working millennial generation of Malaysia, which were heading for a modern and more democratic Malaysia free from corruption. Mahathir seemed to be committed in accommodating both the political legacy of the *reformasi* movement from 1998 and the new political understanding of the millennial generation.

However, soon after becoming the 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir had to realize that he did not have the full decision-making power that he exercised as the Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003. As his party, *Bersatu*, was the smallest party in the PH coalition, Mahathir was obliged to heed

the voices of his partners in Anwar Ibrahim's PKR, the Chinese dominated DAP, and the moderate *Parti Amanah Negara* (PAN), and hence he could not take major decisions. The coalition parties did their best to "train Mahathir to doff his ingrained authoritarian habits" (Weiss, 2020: 208). Mahathir was aware of this and stated that he was "leading a coalition of parties which were very much against me before, so I have to be rather careful about how their sensitivities are treated" (Massola, 2019).

The mechanisms of shared powers in a coalition government were not only new to prime minister Mahathir, but also to the Malaysian general public. The Malaysians were used to having a united coalition led by a dominant UMNO for decades. So, the relative equality among PH's component parties created a perception that they were incoherent and weak, although there was a strong figure like Mahathir leading them (Wan Saiful Wan Jan, 2020: 9.)

After the election victory of *Pakatan Harapan*, the coalition and its prime minister surfed on a wave of public support and enthusiasm. As time passed by, however, the initial euphoria faded away and the support rates for the PH government and also for Prime Minister Mahathir fell significantly. Mahathir's popularity plunged from 71 percent in August 2018 to a mere 46 percent in April 2019 according to a representative survey by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research. In the same poll, the support for PH fell from 66 percent in August 2018 to only 39 percent (Hassan, 2019). In October 2019, another survey by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research found that there was only 35 percent support for the PH government.

There were several reasons for the decline of public trust in Mahathir and its government. The most important ones were the lack of decisive economic and political reforms, the stubbornness of Mahathir to remain in power and not letting Anwar Ibrahim become PM as agreed before the elections,

and the perception among Malay voters that PH was not looking after their interests.

Mahathir declared his resignation as Prime Minister and *Bersatu* chairman on 24 February 2020. Probably, he hoped to be reappointed by the King a few days later. His former ally, and vice-chairman from *Bersatu*, Muhyiddin Yassin, however, had a grand strategy and ousted Mahathir in backdoor dealings within *Bersatu*. In early March 2020 Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in at Istana Negara, after a week full of political intrigue (Latif, 2020: 146).

Mahathir left his prime minister post full of anger, but with dignity. UMNO secretary-general, Tan Sri Annuar Musa remarked later "We understand the situation that Dr Mahathir is facing. However, Dr Mahathir was also responsible for some matters related to the current turmoil" (quoted in Latif, 2020: 157). Mahathir later stated that he felt betrayed by his long-term ally Muhyiddin, whom he accused of plotting to take the prime minister post from him (New Straits Times, 2020). Muhyiddin replied publicly that he did not "dream of the post of prime minister" and initially had supported Dr Mahathir to return as prime minister. But, according to Muhyiddin, Mahathir failed to gain the majority backing of the new PN coalition, which has instead expressed its support for Muhyiddin (New Straits Times, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The 14th general elections in 2018 in Malaysia were not only drastically changed the political regime to a more democratic system but also brought new politics to the country. In the age of 92, when Mahathir was re-elected as PM, he surprised many when he brought a spirit of the new politics of Malaysia of pro-democracy, pro-millennials, and pro-change and also appointed both clean and new figures in cabinet to deliver his promises for clean government in Malaysia. He also fulfilled the people's expectation

to open investigation on 1MDB corruption scandal.

In his first time as Prime minister from 1982 until 2003, Mahathir was a nationalist Malay leader who made decisions pragmatically and sometimes controversially based on his subjective perception to benefit for Malaysia. He was able to do that because of a string support from both his party and a semi-democratic political system of Malaysia. He was ready to take the risk of his political decision, even the most controversial, and never hesitated to resort to authoritarian actions in order to achieve the interest of the people and Malaysia according to his view. Among these controversial decisions he made were implementing selected capital control, bailing-out national companies, and expelling Anwar Ibrahim from his position as deputy prime minister and cabinet member in 1998.

The political choice and the political strategy of Mahathir should indeed be counted as important factor for political change in Malaysia during and after the 2018 general elections, but this only made possible as it was already large independent middle-class Malaysia supportive to democracy and clean government. Mahathir's role and contribution must be mentioned as an important factor for the election result and for the transformation of Malaysian politics. While committed to clean government he promised during the elections campaign, Mahathir has also embraced ideas brought by the *reformasi* movement such as clean government, equality, and social justice for all Malaysians.

After only one year in power, however, he returned to his political roots as a representative of the Malay ethnic group and a protagonist of Malay domination in multi-ethnic Malaysia. An all-Malay government by UMNO, PAS and his *Bersatu* party became his new target, together with the ousting of the Chinese-dominated DAP from government and preventing his old rival Anwar Ibrahim from becoming prime minister.



All this came finally true in the turbulent last days of February 2020, but Mahathir himself was outmanoeuvred and his former ally Muhyiddin took over as prime minister. The breakdown of the Mahathir government showed the fragility of Malaysia's democracy.

Mahathir had made a mistake by stepping down as Prime Minister instead of using the power of his office to control the situation. In this case, Mahathir was blinded by his political ego that Malaysia could not live without him. He unable to contemplate the idea of letting go of power which he thought that the politicians from all Malay parties would come begging to him to continue serving as the prime minister. Mahathir was lost to the Malaysian style of politics. The dynamics of Malaysian public policy and politics now becomes the task of politicians both old and new generation without Mahathir.

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