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# Muslim Women Political Leaders and Electoral Participation in Muslim-Majority Countries

## Abstract

This paper focuses on Muslim women political leaders and their agency in the modern world. While some Muslim women have a difficult time participating politically, others actively act in policy and government. Culture, identity, location, and political parties are some of the factors leading to different levels of participation from Muslim women in various countries.

## Disciplines

Anthropology | International Relations | Islamic World and Near East History | Models and Methods | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Politics and Social Change | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Women's History | Women's Studies

## Comments

This paper was written for Professor Amy Evrard's course, *ANTH 218: Islam and Women*, Spring 2015.

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# Muslim Women Political Leaders and Electoral Participation in Muslim-Majority Countries

by Abby Rolland<sup>1</sup>

Studying Muslim women comes with responsibilities. One must remember to consider the wide range of historical, cultural, societal, and religious concepts when discussing Muslim women and analyzing their role and participation in the greater world community. Muslim women are often thought of as marginalized, excluded, discriminated against, and/or abused. Portrayals in the media of Muslim women suffering abuse at the hands of religiously fanatic men give the idea that Muslim women have no agency or ability to resist this use of religion as a tool. Formal politics represent a theater that does not seem to allow any rights to Muslim women. Therefore, it is surprising to consider that Muslim-majority countries such as Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Senegal, Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan have all had female political leaders at the highest levels of government. Bangladesh has had a female political leader since 1991, alternating between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Even though Muslim women, especially in certain Middle Eastern countries, face difficulties participating politically, every American should know that Muslim women do play active roles in formal politics, and female Muslim political leaders have a large influence on the world they live in.

This paper focuses on four Muslim women political leaders: President Atifete Jahjaga of Kosovo, Prime Ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, and Prime Minister Tansu Çiller of Turkey. Studying the various geographical locations and histories of their respective countries, current identity of the states, and presence of Islamic political parties can illustrate the context of how these women were able to gain power. Despite differences between the four women

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<sup>1</sup> Although this paper was submitted in May 2015, it was updated in June 2016 by the author in preparation for its inclusion in *The Cupola*.

and the three countries they led/lead, by studying these three themes in each of their contexts, one can better understand Muslim women in general and how female Muslim political leaders can gain power and prestige. Then, by examining the use of tools such as quotas and political representation in Muslim majority countries and countries worldwide, this paper will assist in explaining that Islam is not a religion with one meaning that applies to all Muslims, as some Muslim countries are more open to women in politics than others. Political participation in Muslim countries depends on many different variables, including tangible objects such as quotas and intangible processes such as culture and history.

All of these countries and their respective political systems and leaders are unique and diverse, but it is important to consider certain influences. Countries such as Kosovo and Turkey have had greater European influence than other Muslim countries; likewise, Bangladesh has been subject to South Asian cultural influences that make it unique. While these influences could be considered “moderate” compared to Middle Eastern and Northern African countries, it is important to consider religion versus culture. For example, while European culture was strict and disempowered women for an extensive period of time, it has grown to become more secular<sup>2</sup> and less restrictive on women. While there have been strides made by Arab Middle Eastern countries to empower women politically (such as the election of the first woman mayor of Baghdad in 2015), the election of female leaders has lagged behind both Europe and Southeast Asia. However, this is a result of culture and other factors rather than religion. These cultural influences have affected Islam in diverse ways; therefore, the countries featured in this chapter are different from each other but share similarities due to the influence of European and Bengali cultural practices on Islam. These cultural practices have set them apart from Arab countries. This may be a factor in explaining why

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<sup>2</sup> See *Sunday Times* survey about the secularization of Europe:  
[http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/zksfqcd9sa/Sunday%20Times%20Results%2009-111112%20VI%20and%20Tracker.pdf](http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/zksfqcd9sa/Sunday%20Times%20Results%2009-111112%20VI%20and%20Tracker.pdf).

women have played greater and higher-level political roles in Turkey, Kosovo, and Bangladesh than they have in the Arab Middle East and North Africa.

The first theme noted is the geographical location of each of the countries represented. Kosovo, situated in Europe in the area known as the Balkans, came to Islam more recently than Bangladesh and most of Turkey. Under Ottoman influence from the 14<sup>th</sup> century on, what was then Kosovo adopted the Muslim religion. After a rebellion in the mid-1990s, Kosovo gained its independence from Serbia (Britannica). Kosovo is considered secular in regards to its religion and had links to Christian heritage before many Albanians converted to Islam under Ottoman influence (Totten). In relation to this theme, former President Atifete Jahjaga assists in understanding how Islam is not the primary concern of many in Kosovo. Instead of gaining influence through a religiously affiliated political party, Jahjaga started her career with the police force and rose through the ranks (President of Kosovo). In addition, Jahjaga worked hard to build bridges between religious and ethnic communities in Kosovo.

With strong ties to a European and more secular cultural identity and situated among many European nations, the case of Kosovo illustrates that having a female leader is not unusual. Looking at the European heads of government and state, six serve as prime minister, president, or chancellor, including Angela Merkel of Germany, who serves as the head of one of the most powerful countries in the European Union and the world. By analyzing the geographical location and history of Kosovo, its current ideas about Islam, and Jahjaga and her work in bringing together various ethnic and religious communities, one can see that geographical location can affect the role of women in politics. Situating Kosovo within its unique cultural tradition, including European influences, rather than an Arab one assists in explaining why Jahjaga was chosen as president not long after Kosovo won its independence.

A major Muslim country in South Asia is Bangladesh. Over 4,000 miles away from Pristina, Kosovo, and between 3,500 to 4,000 miles from the Middle East, Bangladesh's geography and history have also affected how its inhabitants view Islam. Bengali cultural influence on Islam has had a major effect, as the Sufi saint (*pir*) played a large missionary role in Islam's early days while Sunni Islam mixed with indigenous religions in what is now Bangladesh (Gardner 1999: 38). Introduced by missionaries in the eighth century, Islam plays a strong role in Bangladeshi society, but it has a different role from that in Middle Eastern and North African society. Sufia Uddin states that a rich Bengali heritage exists outside of the Muslim framework in Bangladesh and that many have been reluctant to give that up (Uddin 2006: 185). Some Islamists in Bangladesh preach a more global form of Islam, but they also preach a more Middle Eastern version of Islam, which is culturally different from Bengali Islam. Due to differences in geography and history of cultural interactions, Bangladeshis view Islam differently from Middle Easterners or other Muslims.

For example, the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's party, the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), is considered a more secular party, with Hasina herself considered to be more pluralist and secularist, while also valuing consensus (Bennett 2010: 21). While her rival Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party is more Islamist and centrist, the existence of these two parties and the ability of two women to lead them illustrate the idea that geography plays a role in how nations view Islam. The distance from stricter Arab versions of Islamic ideas and values has given Bangladesh and its citizens the ability to support these two women in power.

Turkey also inhabits a unique space on the map when discussing its Muslim identity. Situated between Europe and Asia, it did not fully become Muslim until the Ottomans captured Constantinople in 1453 under Mehmed II. Due to its use as a Christian capital during the Byzantine Empire, Istanbul and other places around Turkey still retain vestiges of Christian influence, some of

which are designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Britannica). While considered to be in the Middle East today, the location of Turkey at the crossroads of Europe and Asia suggests that a strong European influence existed in the area for a long time and still does.

Turkey's location plays a central role in its acceptance of Eastern versus Western ideals. Like Kosovo, this acceptance can be seen through election of female political leaders. Like Jahjaga, former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller was able to build herself up without the help of male relatives after earning a Ph.D. in economics and becoming the youngest full professor in Turkey (Bennett 2010). Çiller's ability to earn a Ph.D. in the early 1970s, when about 30% of the doctorates were earned by women and only 20% of foreign nationals earned Ph.Ds. in economics, suggests the strong cultural influence of Western society and Turkey's proximity to Western cultural ideas. Other factors also play a role, but location is key. The election of Çiller's party to power in 1993 partly illustrates the theme that geographical location has a strong role to play in the flow of Arab religious versus European cultural ideas and how those ideas impact society.

Identity, as the second theme, also plays a strong role in understanding how female political leaders gained power. As mentioned earlier, Kosovo lies deep within Europe. As a result, many Kosovars affiliate more with their European identity rather than their Muslim one, and they say that religion in Kosovo is private, not public. In addition, people from Kosovo consider themselves first Albanians, then Muslims (Totten 2008). Most of society rejects radical Muslim groups and believes that Albanian culture would not bend naturally to "rigid Arabic Islam." President Jahjaga advocated joining the European Union (EU) and the United Nations and favored strong relations with the United States (Bennett 2010). Jahjaga reflected popular thought within Kosovo, as many Albanian Muslims favor U.S. foreign policy. Kosovo's identity, including the general adherence to Islam, leans more towards a Western cultural identity than the Arabic one. Understanding the Kosovan

identity as linked to the European one can help to clarify the relationship of female Muslim leaders to that theme. It can also demonstrate that Muslim identity is not one monolithic idea; it varies from country to country depending on the history of that country and outside influences.

Identity in Bangladesh also illustrates how Khaleda and Hasina gained power. Members from different parties supported both of the women leaders and accepted the legitimacy of each of their leadership styles (Bennett 2010: 83). In Bangladesh, Bennett notes that the religion-culture dynamic and its place in history allows people to be more tolerant, open, and pluralist, which in turn supports women's rights and empowerment. Hindus and Muslims were culturally close, which allowed for a more cultural view and not a strictly religious view of Islam (144). In addition, women have enjoyed rights throughout history. Women started their own businesses, took part in the independence struggle, and some enjoyed political office before Khaleda or Hasina became party leaders. In addition, while Ziaur Rahman (Khaleda's husband) and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Hasina's father) influenced them and their respective assassinations helped these women become party leaders, Khaleda and Hasina have retained these positions due to their political savvy and aptitude. Both support women's rights, with Khaleda increasing the number of women's seats in Parliament from 30 to 45 during her terms and Hasina launching a National Policy for the Advancement of Women, which passed several gender related laws addressing violence and oppression against women (108, 158). Bangladesh has a traditional patriarchal society; however, Khaleda and Hasina's promotion of women and children's rights and society's acceptance of these ideas illustrates that identity in Bangladesh differs greatly from Arab countries. While Arab countries do support women's rights to varying degrees, Bangladeshi identity provides a more open arena for women to promote rights, led by the two primary political leaders. While religion plays a role in Bangladeshi identity, culture, ties to the familial and private sphere, and a traditional

patriarchal system play more of a role than religion does (Panday 2008: 304). Women can be limited in electoral participation, but it is more due to cultural practices of identity than religion.

Turkish identity differs greatly from Kosovan and Bangladeshi identity. Turkey has had a wide range of influences on its identity, including a Christian one during the Byzantine Empire, a Muslim/Ottoman one until the Ottoman Empire fell in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and an authoritarian secularist and nationalist one under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. In 1996, Tansu Çiller's secularist True Path Party formed a coalition with the pro-Islamic Welfare Party. For the first time in 70 years, the dualistic tensions inherent in Turkish society and identity, Islam and secularism, came together to work collectively (Yavuz 2003: 1). However, this did not last long, as the Kemalist (those who base their beliefs on Ataturk's) military-bureaucratic establishment led a soft coup in order to unseat the Islamic party from power. This example shows that Turkish identity combines both secularism and Islam. The dualism illustrates that not only does religion have a strong impact on Turkish thought, but the tradition of secularism and a "Westernization" established by Ataturk also plays a strong role in society. In addition, although Turkey remains patriarchal in many ways, more Turkish women have participated in protests and there has been a growth of women in Parliament (Bennett 2010: 136).

Çiller used her identity as a woman and a mother to gain the liberal vote in 1996 and distance herself from what were thought of as corrupt, aggressive male politics (Bennett 2010: 129). Furthermore, Çiller has used her identity as a Muslim to ally with an Islamic-focused party, who agreed to support her as Prime Minister. This illustrates that it was not religion, but strict cultural ideas and practices supporting the disempowerment of women, which would have limited Çiller. As a result of her election and her role as Prime Minister, Çiller encouraged a more female-inclusive

identity in Turkey, and the dualism of Islamism and secularism gives women the chance, and gave Tansu Çiller the ability, to forge coalitions and make their way in Turkish society.

Finally, when considering Muslim women political heads, one must consider the prevalence of Islamic political parties. While these parties can foster a more democratic society, they may also limit women's participation or advocate strict, limited roles for women. In order to understand how these women rose to power, one must understand the role that Islamic parties have played.

In Kosovo, only one Islamic political party, the Justice Party, won seats in the 2010 Parliament elections. It won three out of 120 seats and espouses a more moderate form of Islamism. A small but loud radical Muslim fundamental group called the Islamic Movement to Unite (LISBA) has formed and criticizes Kosovo's commitment to secularism, particularly its 2011 ban on the headscarf and public prayer in schools. However, it has not won any seats in municipal elections (Schwartz 2014). Kosovo's commitment to secularism is illustrated in its many secular political parties. Three secular parties supported Jahjaga as their candidate for president: the Democratic Party of Kosovo (a center right party and the largest in Kosovo), the Democratic League of Kosovo (a conservative/liberal conservative party and the second largest), and the New Kosovo Alliance (a liberalist party). Secular society in Kosovo allowed Atifete Jahjaga to be appointed President with an 80-20 vote by Parliament.

Bangladesh has many Islamic political parties, but two of the most well known are Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (Islamic Society Bangladesh), a leading revivalist Islamic group originally based in Pakistan, and Islami Oikya Jote (Islamic Unity Front), which has focused on building an Islamic state (Riaz 2003: 301). Jamaat-e-Islami was banned from the 2013 elections because the group stated that its charter acknowledged the absolute power of God, which is outlawed by the Constitution (Al-Mahmood 2013). Islami Oikya Jote is aligned with the Awami League and does

not seem to play as much of a role in the political arena. While Jamaat-e-Islami has a strong influence, the fact that it was banned from elections in 2013 illustrates that Islamic political parties may play a role in Bangladesh but do not challenge the other, more secular political parties. While this could be a correlation and not a cause, it is interesting to note that two women leaders have retained power for 25 years while the Islamic party does not have much electoral (or what appears to be popular) support. Neither Khaleda's nor Hasina's major parties are directly Islamic affiliated, even though they do align with Islamic parties at times. Instead of the religious groups playing a large role in the election of two women as the major party leaders, it seems that culture plays more of a role.

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Part (AKP) is a political party with Islamic roots (Taspinar 2012: 127). Çiller's party, the True Path Party (DYP) was considered center-right and originally had a more Islamic focus until it shifted policies in the 1980s and become more secular. However, it should be noted that Turkish voters are not as concerned with the ideological or religious factors related to the party but instead with the increase in social services provided, including health care and housing. Omer Taspinar also argues that the AKP has grown to become more moderate, and its previous leader and founder Recep Erdoğan rejects the religious terms that some use to define it. While the AKP gained power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century after Tansu Çiller's election, the growth of and moderate influence of Islamic parties in Turkish politics shows that women can participate politically in Turkey regardless of the party in power. Growth in the number of women in Parliament has occurred since Çiller: the percentage of women in Parliament was 4.5 during one-party rule, 9.1 in 2010 and 14 by 2014 (World Bank). Writers such as Nilüfer Göle, Ismail Kara, and Şerif Mardin argue that Islamic movements with secularist movements promote a more

democratic and pluralist society (Yavuz 2003: 4). This kind of society gives Muslim women more of a chance to participate in formal politics.

Despite the examples that illustrate that women in Muslim-majority countries can become political leaders, it is still difficult to be a Muslim woman leader. Stereotypes in their own countries still exist. While Turkey and other countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan had women leaders in the past, they have not had one for quite some time. Even with all of the accomplishments achieved by women in the political system, women still face stereotypes and difficulties within their own countries. However, showing the differences between the countries highlights that many Muslim-majority countries do not have the same codes, laws, or traditions. It can be difficult to be a female Muslim leader, especially when some women have a difficult time participating in electoral politics. In addition, people in the United States often only view Muslim women from the lens of the Middle East, where in some countries women do not have the political, electoral power (although they may have that behind-the-scenes) that women in other Muslim-majority countries have. Not many focus on Kosovo, Bangladesh, and Turkey, and the result is shown in the way that Americans discount or do not even know about female political leaders in Muslim-majority countries. In order to fully understand how women politically act in a Muslim-majority country, one must analyze the various Muslim majority countries and how geography and history, identity, and both the prevalence and importance of Islamic political parties play a role. Other factors also contribute, such as the influence of family members and their legacies on both Hasina and Khaleda and other Muslim women leaders, such as Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan and Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia. However, the three themes discussed are incredibly important to study when examining women political leaders in Muslim countries. By studying them and understanding the differences between

the three countries, one can dispel stereotypes about Islam and understand how Muslim-majority countries differ.

While analyzing these specific factors and how they relate to Muslim women political leaders, it is also important to look at political participation in Muslim countries. Quotas as a tool to increase participation can be controversial, but they can also increase participation. Looking at women's electoral participation in Muslim-majority versus non-Muslim-majority countries, and then furthering a study to focus on Muslim-majority countries and the differences between the societies in that study, can also create a better understanding of how women in each Muslim country politically participate.

As of 2009, 18.3% of legislators around the world are women, with the lowest number of women in legislatures in the Middle East (Gelb and Palley 31). While this falls behind the statistic that about 50% of people in the world are women, women's active participation as female legislators has grown in the last century from 11.3% of legislators in 1995 to 22% in 2015 (UN Women 2015). The effects of globalization have increased women's roles in local politics, while many NGOs have improved women's status in the private and public sphere (Gelb and Palley 2009: 44). As a result, women's political status has grown over time and given them more of a chance to act in local and national politics. One controversial topic that affects both Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries are quotas. Quotas vary in their specific function – legislative quotas call for a certain proportion of female candidates for nomination by political parties, while some political parties institute voluntary party quotas, which requires the party itself to nominate a certain percentage of female party members for office. There can also be quotas regarding reserving the number of seats for women. Quotas can increase women's participation while merging ideas of equality and representation (91). While some argue that quotas can limit democratic participation

and draw focus to a candidate's gender rather than their policies or goals, others claim that quotas can renew feminist engagement with the political arena (96).

Sophia Del Prado Lu studied and analyzed women's electoral participation in 329 party lists in 26 countries (Del Prado Lu 2013: 137).<sup>3</sup> She suggests that there is a link between Islam and women's political participation, as well as a difference in participation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries. She looked into the effect of religiosity on women's electoral participation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries, and also looked at the difference in electoral participation between the two groups of countries. Del Prado Lu studied two indicators related to Islam: religiosity and Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries (140). Studying women's electoral participation, she looked at the percentage of female nominees of party's electoral lists for Parliament, the share of women in decision making bodies, the interaction of female leadership and female membership, internal (voluntary) party quotas, and electoral (which can be legislative) quotas for women. Results showed that only 16.2% of Muslim majority countries had party quotas, compared to 57.9% of non-Muslim majority countries. According to Del Prado Lu, Islam as the main political factor in Muslim majority countries greatly affects women's electoral participation. She also found that the populations of Muslim majority countries have lower electoral participation than those of non-Muslim majority countries. Del Prado Lu argues that extreme Islam is associated with a smaller number of women nominees on party lists and that social attitudes towards women in regards to politics follow the teachings of Islam (145). However, she does say that women's experiences should be contextualized within the broader

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<sup>3</sup> Countries included: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Yemen, Albania, Indonesia, Senegal, Turkey, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Israel. Oceanic, North American, and South American countries were not included.

socio-economic and political culture of that specific country or area, and that could include looking at geography and history, identity, and the prevalence of Islamic political parties.

Del Prado Lu's study is helpful in looking at women's political and electoral participation in Muslim majority countries compared with non-Muslim ones. However, scholars studying women in politics should be careful regarding her use of countries. For one, she combines all Muslim majority countries together, when Middle East culture varies drastically from state to state and differs even more when compared to Southeast Asian and European countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Bosnia. While it may be effective to group these countries together based on the religion of their inhabitants, it may not be useful in the long run because of the large variances in culture between these countries. In addition, Del Prado Lu only looks at six non-Muslim majority countries, including five in Europe and one in Asia (Israel nestles the Mediterranean Sea with many European countries, though). She does not look at other countries outside of Europe, Asia, and Africa, such as the United States, which does not have political quotas (although many Latin American countries do). While Del Prado Lu's study may illustrate some insight in regards to quotas and women's electoral participation in non-Muslim majority and Muslim-majority countries, her study could be furthered as well by studying specific Muslim-majority countries to view their similarities and differences and explain why they exist.<sup>4</sup>

Studying women's overall electoral participation is key in determining trends, but looking at women in a specific case assists in identifying and potentially separating the intertwining factors of culture, religion, and politics. In addition, studying the context of a country and women's political role there can also show how geography and history, identity, and Islamic political parties vary from country to country. A good example is Nelly van Doorn-Harder's (2002) look at political

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<sup>4</sup> It would also be interesting to look at how many women in Muslim majority countries participate in political rallies, protests, and other events, which means political if not electoral participation. Del Prado Lu mentions this but does not go into great detail (2013: 138).

debates and leaders in Indonesia in the early 2000s that sought to keep Megawati Sukarnoputri (the daughter of the leader of Indonesia's independence struggle) from becoming president and gaining power. While van Doorn-Harder admits that religious arguments were made in order to keep Sukarnoputri from gaining power, these arguments were mixed with biases based on politics, local culture, and social hierarchy (164). Throughout the paper, she notes that interpretations of the holy texts of Islam differ from place to place. She mentions that most of the *fiqh* (human interpretation of the Qur'an and hadiths) used in Indonesia came from the Middle East, which has an entirely different culture and background from Indonesia (166). In addition, Muslim countries in Southeast Asia have given women considerable freedom in public life (168). Finally, while going into great detail about the Indonesian debate and decision to finally accept Sukarnoputri, van Doorn-Harder's most important message is that Muslim tradition and its interpreters do not have just one opinion or just one voice (181). Cultures vary across Muslim countries, and culture mixed with religion, along with other factors, can decide how accepting the country is about women in electoral positions.

This chapter is not an exhaustive study on women leaders or women's electoral or political participation in the Muslim world, but it provides examples of specific women who have risen to power in Muslim-majority countries and other useful ways of looking at electoral participation such as quotas. The most important aspect to stress is the difference between cultures in Muslim nations. The Middle East and North Africa region represents only 20% of the world's Muslims, with Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and India (a Hindu-majority nation with large numbers of Muslims) hosting over 40% of Muslims in the world. Countries vary from region to region and within a region, and it is vital to remember that Islam differs from place to place. Depending on the specific culture of the area, individuals and groups may interpret Islam in diverse ways and therefore apply it to their daily lives differently. While Turkey is the only Middle Eastern nation to

have a female head of government, more women are informally participating in politics. Culture, religion, history and geography, identity and informal participation in politics are important measures to consider when looking at women's electoral and political participation. In order to understand the full scope of political participation in Muslim-majority countries, one must look at specific countries within the Muslim world instead of stereotyping and looking at Islam as a whole.

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