

**GOMBE JOURNAL OF ADMINISTRATION AND
MANAGEMENT (GJAM)**

Vol. 5 No. 1

Print ISSN: 2705-3407

Online ISSN: 2714-2442

May, 2023

2023 PRESIDENTIAL AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A POST MORTEM ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper examined the situations and circumstances that characterized the Presidential and National Assembly elections of 2023 in Nigeria. It is incontrovertible to assert that the said election has generated issues more than any previous elections since the returned of Democratic rule in 1999. Despite a lot of time, energy and resources invested in voter education, awareness, sensitization with deep presence and participation of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and other collaborators in ensuring that not only the electoral body do the right thing, but entrenched the need for the elections to be peaceful, free, fair, transparent, credible and acceptable, the election manifested similar features of the past elections and in some cases with more lethal ferocity. The adoption of technology as permitted by the Electoral Act, 2022 has as well raised hope and expectations which generated interest with total registered voters of 93.5 million out of which 87.2 million collected their permanent voter's cards (PVCs), the elections were marred with logistical challenges, voter's intimidation, violence, Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and ballot box snatching and all sorts of electoral malpractices. In the course of the elections, INEC was found culpable in observing the Electoral Act, 2022 and its own guidelines as Presidential results were not uploaded in real time to INEC Results Viewing portal (IREV) as severally been promised by the electoral body. This paper relied solely on secondary sources of data collection through an in-depth search of the available literature on 2023 general elections in Nigeria. In view of the hitches documented in this study, it is incumbent on INEC to have some introspection with a view to strengthening its capacity and widening its tentacles toward greater collaboration with relevant Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), government security agencies, local and international development partners, traditional and religious bodies and other key stakeholders for active engagements in critical areas such as logistics, security, awareness, voter education and other non-sensitive responsibilities of the electoral institution while severe punishment for electoral offenders to serve as deterrent to potential offenders were recommended to ensure a hitch-free poll with wider participation towards Nigerian democratic consolidation and sustainability.

Key Words: Presidential, National Assembly, Elections, Transparent, Credible.

Introduction

The Nigeria 2023 general election has come and gone. As it is usually experienced in many democracies, Nigerian 2023 elections has its peculiarities, challenges and prospects. The exercise was embedded with a lot of technological innovations to tackle previous and future challenges in electoral process, some of which but not limited to; over-voting, ballot box snatching, ballot box stuffing, and rigging. Precisely, the Electoral Acts 2022 have permitted the use of technology to be used by the Nigerian electoral umpire contrary to the previous elections where the laws did not specify the use of machine in collation and transmission of result. Thus, a Bimodal Voters Accredited System (BVAS) was introduced as an antidote of electoral malfeasance which in the past marred the Nigerian electoral processes.

In an attempt to have smooth elections, according to Umoru (2022) the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) proposed and got approval of whopping sum of #355 billion for 2023 general elections. The high expenditure was generally to ensure seamless conduct of the elections especially in ensuring that the votes count and results released on time as it was planned to be transmitted from polling booths to INEC Result Viewing (IREV) portal amongst other good innovations and intentions of the electoral body.

However, contrary to the prolonged plans and resources deposited into the preparations for the 2023 elections, the Presidential and the National Assembly elections which took place February 25, 2023, were marred by logistical challenges, late arrival of election materials, violence, voter apathy, voter suppression, ballot box snatching, BVAS snatching, BVAS bypass, vote buying, BVAS malfunction, amongst others. This particular failure generated a lot of issues which almost overwhelmed the credibility of the election as it has raised many suspicious and resentment among opposition parties, local and international election monitoring observers, and the electorates.

The main thrust of this paper therefore, is to critically examine the administrative issues that characterized the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections with the view to identifying and assessing its impacts on the credibility of the elections and proffer a lasting solution against future occurrence in the interest of free, fair, credible, transparent future elections towards Nigeria democratic consolidation and sustainability.

Conceptualizing Election

Election is an opportunity for leadership selection offered to the people by a democratic system of government conducted periodically. The survival of democracy anywhere in the world is contingent upon how peaceful and orderly elections are conducted and how voters, election officials, and observers are secured, and other individuals involved in the electoral process are guaranteed of their safety to exercise their civic mandate (Mohammed, 2023)

Put differently, election is a mechanism through which the public chooses and select representatives of their choice in a democratic system. The idea of representative democracy in the modern world enhances the need for election to determine leaders and representatives. In other words, an election is the formal process of choosing people for public offices in a democratic society. Likewise, election is a process towards accepting or rejecting political ambitions of individuals through voting in a most credible, free, fair and transparent manner.

Similarly, elections are primarily a mechanism for selecting certain governmental leaders, as well as removing leaders from office, and preventing others from gaining office (Flanigan & Zingale, 1998 cited in Ikpe (2014). It constitutes the major process for instituting governments and for holding public officials accountable for their actions and keeping them responsive to the people's needs and interests in democracies (Wayne, 2001). From the simplistic definition of democracy as people's rule, elections provide the link between citizens (people) and the government (rulers) because individuals and parties interested in holding political power use elections to compete for the people's votes.

Literature Review

It is imperative to clarify that there is a paucity of literature on many of the imaging developments in the electoral process, as observed in the general elections of 2023 in Nigeria. Thus, this paper heavily relied on newspapers reportage and main stream media official report as secondary sources in dissecting the issues that surrounded the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections in Nigeria. Voters' apathy constituted the first point of observation made. It was generally observed and reported that the level of voter turnout was low compared to the number of registered voters and the number of Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs) collected.

Mordi (2023) says that before the 2023 elections cycle Nigerians were enthusiastic that citizen participation would be greater than the previous electoral outing in Nigeria electoral history, which led the electoral umpire to target at least 50% of voters turn out based on the steps it took to boost citizen confidence in the electoral process. But at the end of the day, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) data showed that only 24.5 million Nigerians amounting to 28.63 percent of eligible voters, voted during the Presidential and National Assembly elections. According to INEC (2023), 93.5 million eligible voters were registered for the elections, but only 87.2 million of the target population collected their PVCs for the 2023 elections.

Obviously, INEC experienced logistical challenges that hampered the timely commencements of elections in some polling units across the country. The nature of the logistical failure includes but not limited to; late arrival of electoral materials, BVAS malfunctioning, night voting etc. According to Morphy (2023) there are many reports of electoral officials who did not meet up on time with the national exercise. Thus in many polling stations the voting process started very late and eventually lasted to the late hours of the night. By this account, we can infer that many electorates might have taken their leaves adding to the number of poor turn out during the elections. Equally worrisome is the cash crunch associated with the redesign of the naira and the cashless policy introduced by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) prior to the elections and the fuel scarcity experienced, most likely attributed to the poor turnout of the electorates.

In a different perspective, the voter apathy encountered during the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections could suggest that the country's democracy is under a serious threat and it could be that the masses have lost confidence in the electoral process (Uniegboro, 2023). Mordi (2023) says:

Though the 2023 election turnout is abysmally low expert say it is a reflection of the reality on ground compared to the number of votes many state used to chum out in the past. Now with the introduction of the Bimodal Voters' Accreditation System (BVAS) politicians can no longer inflate the number of those that turned out to vote. The technological innovation appears to have eliminated identity theft, multiple voting, and inflation of voters turn out for pecuniary gains by politicians.

Voters' suppression and intimidation were one of the major setback of the Presidential and National Assembly in Nigeria. They act was to bend the minds of voters in favor of a particular political party or to deny voters access to a favorable environment to exercise their franchise. This ugly trend was also in the form of disallowing voters from electoral materials, verbal threat to voters, and invocation of spiritual threat to scare voters with different political wish or aspirations from performing their democratic rights. According to Ajayi (2023) a political element across the breath and length of Nigeria has deployed all manners of misinformation, blackmail, threats, intimidation, sabotage, and evil coercion to sway voters. This singular act has a negative psychological effect on the turnout of voters, who out of fear of the unknown excused themselves from the opportunity to exercise their fundamental human right as citizens of Nigeria. Onuoha (2023) comprehensively captured the scenario more accurately that:

In a viral video during the elections in Imo, Rivers and Lagos State clearly show political thugs where stream rolling polling units allegedly enforcing disenfranchisement of those who were suspected would vote against their pay master's political party... some of the game changing rules of BVAS was automatically defeated by the voter suppression and intimidation antics during the 2023 elections.

Violence and other electoral offences equally marred the 2023 presidential and National Assembly Elections. It is worthy of note to establish that, violence has characterized the pre-elections, elections and post elections era in the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections. According to Yakubu (2023) gruesome murder of three persons causing grievous injury of eight 8 others in Tudun Wada local government area of Kano State on the 26th of February 2023 was reported. Regrettably, significant human resources and financial disbursement to secure lives and property before, during and after the elections, bad habits of ruffians, violent disruptions of electoral process, hooliganism, bloodshed, etc. overwhelmed the security arrangements and architectures. To corroborate the violent situation associated with the 2023 elections, the Nigeria Police Force (2023) cited in Daily Trust Editorial (2023) the Inspector General of Police (IGP) made the disclosure that a total of 185 major electoral offences were reported during the Presidential and National Assembly elections with 203 arrest made and 18 fire arms recovered.

However, many arrests have been made, there have been similar arrests in previous elections in either national, state, or local government elections, but lack of political will to prosecute electoral

offenders continues to constitute a threat to free, fair, transparent, and credible elections in Nigeria's political landscape. Obviously, INEC lacks instruments to arrest and thoroughly investigate that can aid a successful prosecution of electoral offenders; this continues to arm twist to ability of the electoral body to conduct hitch free elections in Nigeria. The INEC chairman speaking at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, UK (2023) cited in Daily Trust Editorial (2023) said that:

Many political elites have either engaged in or supported violence in their bid to illegally shape the outcome of contests: this is largely because the system has failed in applying appropriate sanction over such acts to serve as deterrence to others. And by extension, it continues to be an albatross or impediment to Nigeria nascent democracy and democratic process.

Violence during the national exercise was occasioned by ballot box snatching, ballot box stuffing BVAS snatching among other violent means to truncate the will of the people in favor of a preferred political party or candidate. Morphy (2023) gave a vivid account of some ugly incidences. Thus:

There are so many authentic videos showing men in uniform snatching ballot boxes. There were also men in uniform destroying already casted ballots, when policemen stood by as thugs threatened voters. All these seems to lend credence to complicity of high up individuals if not state actors. Erakhrumen (2023) in a different perspective viewed that the 25th February 2023 showed that the country still have a long way to go even with the electoral act 2022 that spelt out punishment for electoral offenders, unfortunately, they act was brazenly violated in broad daylight by policemen and their cohorts.

Of course the relevance of security in any given national or local exercise like election cannot overemphasized, what is worrying and disturbing in the Nigerian experience is the general understanding that the security department and INEC have been compromised in the 2023 general election.

Obasi Jerry in granting interview with Obinna Odogwu on Saturday Sun, strongly condemned the attitudes of INEC officials in his words; there is an incident at Umobo ward in Ebonyi state where one young man who is supposed to be an INEC official turned himself into a thug... while voting was ongoing, the INEC staff carried the BVAS and enter inside the Bush it was the youth in the polling station that accosted him and rescued the BVAS from being snatched (Obasi, 2023).

The president of Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) Joe Ajaero lamented that; the widespread irregularities and violence in Lagos and Rivers among others using thugs to mete out violence and intimidation of voters in these states run counter to the tenants and principle of democracy. Bloodletting, harassment, ballot box snatching, and deliberate destruction of election materials especially in these two states even in the presence of members of the security agencies and INEC officials cannot be interpreted any other way except that of collusion.

This unacceptable scenario of violence is against the efforts of the National Peace Committee (NPC) to ensure that all the Chairmen and Aspirants of the Political Party signed the peace agreement before the start of the poll. But despite this initiative, electoral process in Nigeria kept constitution security threat associated with; hate speeches, violence, unfounded allegations among other threats to Nigeria's democracy.

One of the significant game changing techniques introduced into the 2023 electoral process was the signing of the electoral Act of 2022 which permits the use of technology in Nigeria's electoral process. To this effect, the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) was introduced mainly to identify PVCs, verify voters, and reduce incidence of over-voting, voting by proxy, and also to transmit the EC8A (original result) sheets to INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) in real time. The implication of this, is, immediately elections are concluded at the polling units, the electoral officer in charge is expected to transmit a scanned copy of the result sheet (EC8A) to the INEC portal. As promising as the injection of technology into the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly electoral procedures could sound, the human elements in applying the game changing techniques was not all that smooth. The

programme manager (elections) at YIAGA Africa, an election observer group, James (2023) cited in Mordi (2023) said:

BVAS was a game changer, but the application of the technology was where we encountered problems. Personnel that were required to operate the device failed to live up to the expectations of Nigerians. It was a game changer in the sense that, for the first time, we saw genuine accreditation of voters with this new development, politicians resort to BVAS bypass and voters' suppression through violence and ethnic profiling.

The above confirmation gave credence to what Unuoha (2023) said “There probably should not be any doubt that BVAS is a game changer. But this Nigeria, what we cannot corrupt, we bypass. This is the fate that appears to have befallen this great innovation. Thus, despite the impressive potentials and capacity of BVAS, however, there are elixir of mix feelings predominantly in the aspect of operating and handling the gadgets. For instance, there are reports of failure of INEC officials to remember BVAS password, unavailability of back-up batteries, BVAS malfunction which disrupted smooth flows or commencement of elections in many polling units leading to voting spillover to the following day (Isuwa, Odoh & Ogutola, 2023). What this implies is, technology hasn't added significant value to Nigerians electoral process neither is it a silver bullet for credible elections in the country.

The shortfalls in optimal utilization of the BVAS centered on the fact that, we need strong characters in the electoral body and players to ensure credibility in the electoral process. The manhandling of BVAS Suggests that technology is not the magic bullet for credible elections, but strong characters in electoral administration and players which will obviously give birth to a strong electoral institution in the interest of free, fair, transparent and credible poll in Nigeria democratic journey.

Logistics is very critical for any successful election in the world; this implies early and timely preparation for human and materials (sensitive and non-sensitive), mobilization and transportation of all that is needed for successful completion of the elections, capacity building, engagement with stake leaders, training, voter education, advocacy for inclusivity is key and essential for successful electoral exercise, etc. Additionally, communication, security, provision for backup plans can also be termed as logistics. Within the context of the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly election, logistic failure was noticeable despite early preparation and homogeneous amount of time, energy and resources invested in 2023 general elections. According to the Election Plan Project (EPP) of the Commission cited in the Guardian Editorial (2023) INEChad proposed the sum of #305 billion for the conduct of the 2023 general election... if all amounts(monies) requested were released to INEC, then what else is the reason for the observed lapses is what may require further study to phantom out.

Some of the observed and reported shortfalls in logistics during the 2023 elections were laudable; these include late arrival of electoral materials internet glitches, BVAS malfunction, among other infrastructural deficiencies. The Nigeria National Labour Congress and (NLC) President Joe succinctly captured the logistical challenge with the 2023 general election;

Ill-preparedness of INEC can better be demonstrated in later arrivals of critical elections materials to the polling units and almost deliberate tempering of the BVAS in many polling units including the outright refusal of the operatives to upload results from the BVAS to the INEC server in total violation of the rule of the election and INEC own elections guideline. (Joe, 2023, cited in Morphy (2023)

According to Morphy (2023) INEC was ill equipped that we saw patriotic citizens volunteering their personal generators to provide light to the charge some INEC equipment. The implication is that the inability of the electoral umpire to utilize the operational experience in being proactive enough to block loopholes leading to voting outside the INEC prescribed time frame makes the process of 2023 Presidential and National Assembly election in many polling units exposed to human interference.

Another essential and noticeable aspect of electoral logistics is the transmission of results to the national coalition center. It was understood that BVAS are programmed to transmit results real-time to INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV), while it was very successful in the National Assembly election, it

was conspicuously downplayed during the Presidential, alluding to technical glitches. To buttress the necessity of electronic transmission of results within the provisions of the laws, Sections 50(2) and 60 (5) of the Electoral Act 2022 provide for electronic transmission of results. Precisely, Section 60 (5) provides that the presiding officers shall transfer the results including the total number of accredited voters and the result of the ballot in a manner as prescribed by INEC in pursuance to the provision in the said Section 60 (5) (Electoral Act, 2022). INEC has prescribed in clause 38 of the INEC regulations and guidelines for the conduct of elections, 2022 which makes it compulsory for the officer to electronically transmit results of the polling units direct to IReV. This innovation was deployed to tackle mutilation and falsification of election results, which were before now done manually with its attendant time-consuming, human errors, manipulations, and irregularities. Despite the clarity of the law, there was a flagrant disregard of electoral provision of the law with regards to the 2023 Presidential electronic transmission of results (NIEC Guideline, 2023).

Given the circumstance that surrounded the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections, there is no gainsaying the fact that the election has generated uproar and suspicions raised with litigations to appropriate courts. Suffice to say that, the laws have not been adequately exhausted in the interests of free, fair, credible and transparent election within the contest of 2023 Presidential electoral process. On the contrary, INEC failure to transmit result of the polls electronically, the Senate President, Senator Ahmed Lawal cited in Musa (2023) explained that the Commission is not bound by the provisions of the Electoral Acts 2022 to real time upload of poll results. However, Musa (2023) clarifies that the credibility of any poll is hinged on time; the longer the results are delayed, the more they are susceptible to manipulations or human interference.

Similarly, United States ambassador to Nigeria Mary Beth Leonard says:

“It is clear that the electoral process as a whole failed to meet Nigerians expectations on the basis that INEC did not adhere to Electoral Acts and its own guidelines in the conduct of the exercise (Leonard, 2023).

It is therefore the position of this article that the selective disposition of INEC to transmit results electronically can be viewed as a strategy to torpedo the wishes of Nigerian electorates and to undermine the innovation that comes with technology (BVAS) which has been very successful previously in the use of BVAS innovation in the Ekiti, Osun, and Anambra States and in the 2023 National Assembly elections.

In another view, the European Union Election Observation (EU OM) (2023) cited in Isuwa et al. (2023) alluded that, despite the fact that Presidential and National Assembly (NASS) elections were held as scheduled, the elections were affected by operational failure which reduced trust in the process and challenged the people's right to vote.... While BVAS and IReV are good innovations for credible elections, however, delayed training of technical personnel, Inadequate mock testing exercise, and lack of public information on the election technologies raised the suspicions of many Nigerians and left rooms for speculations and uncertainties.

After a thorough endoscopic examination of the Nigerian 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections, the paper deduced and arrived at the following facts:

- a. The low turnout of voters was significant in proportion to the estimated 220 million population of Nigeria. Although poor turnout was related to the issue of fuel scarcity during the elections and the redesign of the naira and the cashless policy introduced prior to the elections by the CBN gave birth to a cash trap with untold hardship to most Nigerians, hence, the policy weakened the purchasing power of the electorates and limited their movement.
- b. The level of INEC preparedness for the election was low and not impressive. The election was marred by poor logistics and malfunctioning of the BVAS. This single act disfranchised many Nigerians from exercising their democratic rights to vote.
- c. Massive uproar across the country against INEC inability to comply with the Electoral Act of 2022 and its guidelines generated a lot of acrimonies and overheated the political landscape of the county. Conspicuous among the INEC violation of the laws is the inexcusable failure to

transmit Presidential results real time to IReV. Many Nigerians believe that, failure of INEC to transmit Presidential election results real time might have exposed the results to human interference and manipulation.

- d. Among other facts, is the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly election was characterized by violence, intimidation, snatching of ballots boxes, and BVAS snatching in some polling stations across the country. Whether the disruptions are enough to affect the outcome of elections is up for further study. But what is undisputable is the activities of thugs which invariably tempered with the right of voters and subsequently led to cancellation of many polling units across the regions of Nigeria.
- e. Although, the functionality success of BVAS was impressive because of its ability to authenticate voters, curb over voting, and transmission of results of other positions, the human element of BVAS usage was grossly abused and bypassed which made the game changing capacity of the new technology less effective. This abuse of the machine gave credence to those who viewed that technology is not in a whole a magic bullet for credible election and corroborated what Onuoha (2023) said; what Nigerians cannot corrupt, they bypass. That notwithstanding, BVAS generally performed incredibly well where it was used dispassionately as it impressively transmitted results, store records of accredited electorates, amongst others.

To cap the electoral event of 2023, Ibeanu (2023) gives a scintillating defining factors (positive and negative) that characterized the 2023 elections but not limited to Presidential and National Assembly elections. Thus, The positive part of the elections;

- i. The new legal framework, specifically the Electoral Act 2022
- ii. Early planning for the election by the Commission, both the strategic Plan and Election project plan.
- iii. New technologies particularly, the IVED, BVAS IReV, online candidate management etc.
- iv. Voter enthusiasm, especially the massive interest by young voters
- v. Expansion of voters' access to polling units

While the negative factors include the following:

- a. Insecurity and violence, especially attacks on INEC's facilities and threats to peaceful elections.
- b. Instrumentalization of ethnic and religion for electoral purposes by politicians.
- c. Culture of electoral impunity and voter inducement and vote buying, particularly with money.
- d. Economic challenges prior to the election.
- e. Large and mostly late turnout of critical personnel of INEC, especially National and Resident Electoral Commissioners and the quality of their replacement.

Conclusion

From the forgoing post mortem of the 2023 elections, the Electoral Act, 2022 which permits to use of technology in the whole electoral process has injected new vibes, enthusiasms and boosted confidence of Nigerians especially among the circle that believe that their votes don't count leading to low turnout. The paper discovered that, the 2023 turnout is not as low as it appeared compared to previous general elections as 2023 elections used of technology has checkmated inflation of figures through stuffing of ballot boxes with illegally thumb-printed ballot papers which was the features of the previous polls.

However, the gains achieved with the use of technology overwhelmed the human element abused of the innovation. Those saddled with the responsibilities to dispassionately operate the machine failed to live up to expectation of Nigerians, local and international election monitors and observers.

The elections were not hitch-free, as many violent behaviors and incidence were recorded in terms of ballot box snatching. BVAS snatching, voters' suppression, voter intimidation, erring INEC officials etc. Logistics failure was also obvious as this led to late arrival of electoral materials and late commencement of voting was observed in many places across the country.

To this end, therefore, now that the election has come and gone and the use of technology has come to stay, it is imperative that character molding should accompanied the use of technological innovations towards building a resilient electoral institution in the interest of free, fair, transparent and credible elections in an effort to deepen Nigerian democracy and consolidate the little gains achieved in the 2023 elections.

Policy Recommendations

- a. While awaiting the endorsement for the establishment of the electoral offences commission and tribunal which the bill is before the National Assembly, strong and effective laws are needed in mitigating electoral malfeasance by way of arrest, prosecution and conviction of offenders to end long time electoral impunity in Nigerian electioneering process.
- b. The electoral umpire, Civil Society Organization (CSOs), the security agencies in collaboration with relevant development partners should invest more in voter education especially to the youths on the danger of allowing themselves to be used as cannon-fodder by desperate politicians to subvert the will of the majority during elections.
- c. Despite the obvious shortcomings in human management of technological innovation in the 2023 elections, and obvious disregard to extent laws, the introduction of electronic voting system will uplift trust, reduce human errors and negative human intervention in result management and widen participation of qualified voters in any given election season.
- d. To effectively manage the already overstretched security personnel, all elections from presidency to state Houses of Assembly to be conducted same day. This is not only strategic but also cost-effective.
- e. The independence of INEC should be deepened through granting of financial autonomy and appointment of its chair. This will reduce over dependence on the executive arm of the government. This is another credible path, to a credible poll. The electoral umpire also has a great duty to ensure that officials of political lineage are disassociated with the responsibilities especially in the conduct of elections.
- f. There is a need for collaboration and cross-fertilization of ideas with relevant private sectors in handling electoral logistics. This should be in form of Public Private Partnership (PPP) to strengthen and increase the speed and accuracy in service delivery before, during and after electoral exercise to ensure seamless electoral procedures in line with global best practices.

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