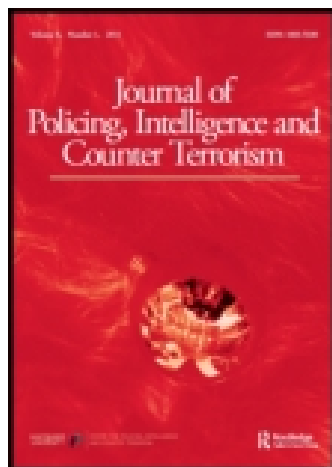


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Media and Terrorism in the Philippines: The Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement

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ABSTRACT

Though the RSIM is believed to have been deactivated in 2006 as a result of the capture and death of its key leaders, remnants of the RSIM reportedly continue to embrace an extremist ideology that justifies terrorism. The RSIM has used the media in all its forms to spread its extremist ideology, publicize its cause and mount terrorist operations. This paper examines the use of media in terrorism in the Philippines focusing on the RSIM as a case study. It aims to describe RSIM's use of the broadcast (radio and television), print (news papers, magazines) and cyber media (internet) to spread its Islamic fundamentalist ideology that frames the terrorist acts of its members.

Introduction

On 19 October 2007, a blast ripped through the Glorietta 2 mall in Makati City, the Philippines' main financial center. The blast resulted in the death of 11 people and the wounding of at least 120 others.

A day after the blast, the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM), through its so-called "ideological beacon", Sheik Omar Lavilla, claimed responsibility for the said explosion and demanded the release of its Amir, Ahmad Santos. The results of police investigation, however, revealed that the blast was an industrial accident and the alleged claim of RSIM was a mere hoax. Nonetheless, the Glorietta 2 mall explosion revived public discussions on the RSIM, which is believed to have been disbanded in 2006.

There is no doubt that one of the major sources of terrorist threats in the Philippines is the RSIM. Better known as the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM) or Rajah Solaiman Revolutionary Movement (RSRM), it is alleged to be a clandestine organization of Muslim converts in Manila believed to be collaborating with the Abu Syyaf Group (ASG), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and even Al-Qaeda to wage urban *jihad* in the Philippines. The RSIM was accused of having participated in several terrorist bombing incidents in the

country, particularly the Davao Airport bombing in March 2003, the SuperFerry 14 bombing in February 2004, and the Valentines Day bombing in Makati in 2005.

The media and terrorism: Analytical studies

According to terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman (1998, p. 142), terrorism and media “are bound together in an inherently symbiotic relationship, each feeding of and exploiting the other for their purposes”. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher commented that media provides terrorists “the oxygen of publicity” (ibid). Media certainly provides terrorists the useful link with their audience. Frederick Hacker (in Combs, 2000, p. 128) stressed that “if the media did not exist, terrorists would have to invent them”. This has prompted terrorist expert Walter Lacquer (ibid) to conclude that “the media are a terrorist’s best friend”.

Terrorists regard the media as a weapon of war. Terrorists identify the media as potential supplements to their arsenal. According to Gus Martin (2003, p. 295) “when terrorists successfully and violently manipulate important symbols, relatively weak movements can influence governments and entire societies. Even when a terrorist unit fails to complete its mission, intensive media exposure can lead to a propaganda victory”.

Many studies linking media and terrorism have concentrated on describing the response of media when terrorist attacks occur. Most of the existing literature agreed that the relationship between terrorism and the mass media is “symbiotic”, in that insurgent terrorist organizations use the media as a conduit for their political message to be heard by the target audience, whilst supplying “exciting news” for the media (Narcos, 1994; Schlesinger, 1991).

Jonathan White (2002, p. 258) provides three different points of view about terrorism and the media. The first view regards the media as a quasi-constitutional force that critically balances the government’s view of terrorist events. But this view is based on the assumption that media is behaving responsibly (responsible journalism). Abraham Miller’s study on terrorism and the media indicates that the media has a self-regulating mechanism that prevents media from interfering with security forces or even from assisting terrorist groups when reporting. The media has “internal codes”, so to speak, “controlling journalistic excess” (ibid; see also Miller, 1982, pp. 133-47).

The second view considers the media as terrorism’s natural ally. According to Norman Podhoretz (1981, pp. 84-89), the media and terrorism collude informally because both are in business for mutual benefits. Yohan Alexander (1984, pp. 135-50) supported this view when he explained that the media have become the tool of terrorism while terrorism has provided the media an excellent story to report. By reporting terrorism incidents, the media carry several messages that favor terrorism propaganda campaigns. To publicize their cause, terrorists purposely attract media attention and consequently the general public (Martin, 2003, p. 281). Terrorists deliberately cultivate relationship with media personalities in order to communicate

their grievances. Some terrorist groups even establish aboveground organizations that intentionally promote close relations with media, particularly those members of the press who hunger to first report breaking news (ibid, p. 291).

The third view contends that while the media may exploit terrorism to sell a good story “they rarely convey messages favorable to terrorists” (White, 2002, p. 258). A study made by J. Bowyer Bell (1978, pp. 47-50) and H. Cooper (1977, pp. 140-56) pointed out that while terrorists used the media for propaganda purposes, the media focused more on violence, and built little sympathy for terrorists. This is supported by another study made by Gabriel Weiman, Michael Kelly and Thomas Mitchell who revealed that media reporting on terrorism violence painted a negative picture of terrorism (Weiman, 1983; Kelly & Mitchell, 1981; see also White, 2002, p. 285).

Mindful of the valuable role of the media in publicizing spreading its propaganda, the RSIM has utilized the media in its various operations. The RSIM regard the media as an indispensable part of its ability to get publicity, talk to the general public and create a favorable understanding of their cause. The RSIM even deliberately seek press coverage of their acts to create panic, generate a sense of unrest and amplify fear that the government cannot provide security for its people.

The RSIM use of media

The RSIM refers to a minuscule radical segment of the Balik-Islam Movement (BIM). It is believed to have been founded by Hilarion del Rosario III, known in his Muslim name as Ahmad Santos (for the origins of the RSIM, see *Armed Forces of the Philippines*, 2006; *International Crisis Group*; see also, Banlaoi, 2007; Douglas et al; 2009). Anecdotal stories state that the RSIM was named after Rajah Solaiman, the last Muslim King of Manila. On 16 June 2008, U.S. Department of the Treasury designated seven members of the RSIM as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (*US Treasury Department News Room*, 2009).

The Philippine National Police (PNP) discovered the existence of the RSIM, more commonly known as the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), in November 2001 when the PNP Intelligence Group (IG) investigated the activities of Sheikh Omar Fernandez, a preacher of Islamic Studies, Call and Guidance (ISCAG) (Banlaoi, 2006, p. 3). While Fernandez was conducting Islamic preaching at ISCAG, he was also suspected of providing bomb instructions to Marvin Apolinario Geonzon (alias Abdul Malik Hasan) (based on the debriefing of Marvin Apolinario Geonzon “Abdul Malik Hasan”, the suspect in the bombing of the Imperial Hotel and the Puericulture Restaurant in Zamboanga City, who was arrested on October 29, 2001). Fernandez was also discovered to have conducted Islamic teaching in the Fi Sabilillah Dawah and Media Foundation, Inc. (FSDMFI) chapter in Anda, Pangasinan of Central Luzon. It was in Anda when Santos was believed to have formally founded the RSIM.

During his tactical interrogation, Santos admitted having organized in 2001 a group of 20 radical Muslim converts to establish a core of Balik-Islam *mujahideen* in a makeshift camp in Anda. He originally called this group *Haraka* or *Harakat*, which

literally means “the movement”. The forerunner of the RSIM is the FSDMFI, which also belonged to a larger movement called Balik-Islam, a Filipino word describing the phenomenon of religious conversion of Filipino-Christians to Muslim faith. Almost all members of the FSDMFI and the RSIM are associated with the BIM.

Ahmad Santos was said to have formed the RSIM through the FSDMFI, a media tool that aimed to propagate Islam in the Philippines and to mount a vigorous campaign in order to lure Christians to ‘revert’ to Islamic faith. The FSDMFI, in fact, became an effective legal media front of the RSIM. It had the main goal of propagating “the true essence of Islam in order to correct the misconceptions about Islam and Muslims” (Mendoza, 2002). Based on the records obtained from the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the FSDMFI also pursued the following objectives (*SEC Document*, 2004):

- The creation of a network that would employ TV, radio, and print media to serve as the propaganda and propagation arm of *Salafi* Islam;
- The creation of Balik Islam communities that will attempt to return to the early stages of Islam when it was yet unadulterated, as well as communities that will embrace *Shariah* and the Islamic philosophy;
- The Islamization of Luzon and the creation of an Islamic movement that intends to establish an Islamic political entity with Ahmad Santos himself as the Amir.

Ahmad Santos formed the FSDMFI to promote through various media outlets the ideology of Wahabbism commonly practiced by *Sunni* Muslims. Wahabbism is traced to the Islamic thought of Abd-al Wahhab who taught the “purification” of Islam based on *Salafi* faith. The word *Salafi* means “righteous ancestors of Muslims”. Salafism advocates a return to a *shari’a*-minded orthodoxy that aims to purify Islam from unwarranted accretions, heresies and distortions, which Abd-al Wahhab avidly preached. Thus, Wahabbism and Salafism are theologically related. Wahabbism and Salafism are systems of belief that are said to have vigorously informed the radical Islamic thoughts of Osama bin Laden and other radical Muslim personalities. They fight for the *jihad*, seeking to re-create the Muslim *ummah* and *shariat* to build an Islamic community worldwide (Angel et al, 2004).

With the FSDMFI, Santos started preaching Islamic purification to the Balik-Islam community. Santos had radio programs aired over DWBL from 9:30 to 10:30 pm every Saturday to propagate his views. In his radio program, Santos delivered lectures emphasizing the need to Islamize initially the whole of Luzon and eventually the entire Philippines. In his oral lectures during prayer meetings he agitated his audience with video clips of Muslims being oppressed, massacred and butchered in different parts of the world (based on revelations from a member of the FSDMFI interviewed in July 2005). With the charismatic lecture of Santos, an informant from the Balik-Islam community claimed that two to three persons everyday revert back to Islam. The media facilities of the FSDMI were deliberately utilized based on the belief of its followers that “*jihad* in Islam is striving in the way of Allah by pen, tongue, hand, *media* and if inevitable, with arms” (Mendoza, forthcoming, italics mine).

Aside from radio, the RSIM also utilized the print media to propagate militant Islam. The RSIM used the FSDMI to regularly publish the “*Pahayagan*”, rendered in English as “newspaper”. Santos admitted that the *Pahayagan* made him known in the Balik Islam community not only in the Philippines but also in the Middle East, where he used to be employed as an overseas worker. The *Pahayagan* also broadened the network of Santos with the print media community. Santos even recruited some members of the media to convert to Islam. In fact, at the time of his arrest in October 2005, Santos was known to have served as the Chief of the ASG Media Bureau (see, *Security Council Committee*; 1999). In one of media pamphlets produced by the ASG Media Bureau, Santos was suspected of having used the pen name, Abu Hamid al-Luzoni, which literally means “Father Hamid of Luzon”. Santos, however, denies that he was Abu Hamid al-Luzoni.

The RSIM also encouraged the use of internet for Islamic propagation. In one of his preaches, Santos said that “if you do not have money, you can motivate people for the *jihad* verbally and through the internet and other means of media propaganda” (Mendoza, forthcoming).

The RSIM supported the hosting of a Balik Islam website called *Jamaa’tu Balik Islam: Reverts to Islam of the Philippines* (at <http://jamaatubalikislam.jeeran.com/>) to convey the message of establishing a true Islamic community in the Philippines. The website is maintained by a certain Mike Al-Ghazi who has been identified by the police authorities as one of the key leaders of the RSIM. In one of his writings in the website, Al-Ghazi gave high importance to the role of media to promote Muslim unity. Al-Ghazi (2007) wrote:

“With Afghanistan and now Iraq and the Philippines crisis, present a unique opportunity to proceed towards the long-cherished goal of Muslim unity. An overwhelming majority of the Muslim states views the issue a grave one and favors some immediate action. The Muslim world must provide representation to Mujahideen in the various international bodies, supply resources to Mujahideen and build continue support for them through international media”.

Indeed, the RSIM has deliberately utilized various types of media for Islamic propagation. What begs the question is whether this use of the media aids the RSIM in its Islamic propagation and terrorist activities?

THE 2003 DAVAO CITY BOMBING

The RSIM was known to have committed its first major act of political violence in March 2003 during the bombing of the Davao International Airport, which killed 21 people and injured 148 others. The Philippine government suspected the MILF to be behind the blast, but the MILF leadership denied the accusation.

Through police investigations, two RSIM members, Ibrahim Kessel and Abdul Karim Ayeras, were identified to have conducted the said bombing operations. The bombing of Davao Airport was discovered to be a joint operation of the MILF and the RSIM. It was regarded as an “after-training” test for Kessel and Ayeras who were reported to have just finished bomb training in an MILF camp.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo strongly condemned the Davao bombing as a brazen act of terrorism which shall not go unpunished. But the government was not fully informed that the RSIM masterminded the incident. Even the media did not know that the Davao bombing was the handywork of the RSIM. Media coverage of the 2003 Davao bombing revealed its low awareness at that time about the existence of the RSIM. But the media gave strong publicity to the incident that pleased the perpetrators.

The RSIM intentionally did not reveal its identity during the Davao bombing in order not to disrupt its vigorous Islamic propagation and conversion activities. Santos was even operating openly in the Balik-Islam front. He re-organized the Balik Islam Unity Congress (BIUC) to mobilize the Muslim converts in the country. The BIUC was originally founded by Iesa Javier in 2000 at the Darul Hijra Foundation in Baguio City. Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden, was said to have been informed about the BIUC through telephone conversation (Mendoza, forthcoming, p. 35). Police authorities regarded the BIUC as a large legal front organization of the RSIM.

Based on intelligence documents received by the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR), the RSIM was indeed responsible for the 2003 Davao bombing. According to a Balik Islam informant associated with the RSIM (interview given during the first week of January, 2006), the following were sequences of events leading to the bombing:

- It was in October 2002 that a plan was conceived to conduct terrorist operations in airports and piers in the country;
- In December 2002, Ibrahim 'Boyot' Kessel, Ricardo 'Abdul Karim' Ayeras and a certain Mona and Mentang left for Davao City. Ayeras and Kessel were sent by Sheikh Omar Lavilla to undergo training in bomb-making under Mentang who is a member of the MILF;
- The bombing of Davao Airport was a joint operation of the MILF and the RSIM and this was carried out in March 2003. Ibrahim Kessel, Abdul Karim Ayeras, and Mona returned to Manila after the bombing; and,
- The successful bombing operations at the Davao City Airport earned Ibrahim Kessel and Abdul Karim Ayeras PhP 75,000.00 each which was given to them by Sheikh Omar Lavilla. The money was taken from the *Sadaqah* of Muhammad Ansari. Mona earned her reward from the operations through the Philippine Association of Muslimah Dar Al Eeman Inc.

The government blamed the MILF for the incident because RSIM operatives were trained by MILF instructors. In January 2002, Ahmad Santos started the Jihad training of RSIM members in MILF camps. MILF spokesperson Eid Kabalu told media (*The Daily Tribune*) on October 29, 2005 that Ahmad Santos introduced himself in early 2000 as a crusading news reporter to penetrate Camp Abubakar, then the main headquarters of the MILF. Santos also told the leaders of the MILF that he is a Muslim convert to make the MILF comfortable. Kabalu admitted that he personally met the Ahmad Santos. Eid Kabalu said that Santos managed to embed

himself within the MILF community and he later met contacts to meet the late ASG leader Khadaffy Janjalani.

THE 2004 SUPERFERRY 14 BOMBING: THE LAUNCHING OF THE RSIM

The bombing of SuperFerry 14 on February 27, 2004 resulted in the death of 116 people and the serious wounding of at least 300 others. This tragic incident in Philippine water converted the SuperFerry into a floating inferno. It was also the most violent man-made disaster in Philippine waters since the September 11, 2001 and the worst terrorist attack in Asia since the 2002 Bali bombing. The post-blast investigation conducted by the PNP showed that the SuperFerry 14 explosion was caused by an improvised explosive device (IED) placed at the tourist section of the craft. Police investigation also revealed that RSIM operatives carried out the bombing. The main suspect was Redendo Cain 'Habil' Dellosa who was one of those arrested in Anda, Pangasinan in May 2002 for illegal possession of firearms and explosives. But he posted bail and went into hiding until he was arrested and put to jail in March 2004 in connection with the ferry bombing and other criminal charges. Dellosa was the "Passenger 51" identified by Khadaffy Janjalani and Abu Solaiman in radio interviews.

Though Dellosa denied his involvement in the SuperFerry 14 incident, Walter Villanueva, an alleged member of the RSIM, admitted in his sworn statement on September 7, 2004 that Dellosa was indeed the "Passenger 51" mentioned by Khadaffy and Abu Solaiman and reported in print and broadcast media. Villanueva admitted the following to the Criminal and Investigation Detection Group (CIDG) of the PNP (*Criminal Investigation and Detection Group Case File*, 2004):

- That Habil Dellosa (Redendo Cain Dellosa) was a fellow Balik Islam who became Villanueva's acquaintance as early as July 2003 when they prayed together at the FSDMFI at Purdue Street, Cubao, Quezon City every Friday;
- That on or about February 25, 2004 at around 7:30 PM, Villanueva received a text message from Habil Dellosa asking permission to sleep over at his house in Project 8, Quezon City as the latter was planning to go to Mindanao the following day;
- Villanueva agreed that Dellosa could sleep over at his house but the latter asked to be fetched at a Jollibee outlet in the corner of Shaw Boulevard and Kalentong Street in Mandaluyong City. The two met at the said place and arrived at Villanueva's house at around 12:45 AM, February 26, 2004;
- Upon arriving at the house, Villanueva noticed that Dellosa carried a big carton box with a TV inside. Dellosa opened the TV set and attached two wires inside. When Villanueva asked him what he was doing, Dellosa just answered that he planned to put the TV inside the SuperFerry;
- At around 4:45 AM of February 26, 2004 Villanueva woke up and roused Dellosa from his sleep for their morning prayers and breakfast. Dellosa again

attached two additional wires to the TV set and placed it inside the carton box. Villanueva said that he even assisted in sealing the box with packing tape and it was at this juncture that Dellosa revealed that the TV was loaded with TNT;

- Before he was about to leave, Dellosa showed Villanueva a boarding ticket for Superferry 14 in the name of “Arnulfo Alvarado”. Dellosa left for the pier on board a taxicab;
- At around 9:00 AM of February 26, 2004, Villanueva received a text message from Dellosa informing him that he was already at the pier. At around 10:00 PM Villanueva received another text message from Dellosa saying that the TV bomb was on board the SuperFerry and that he should wait for the news the following day;
- Around 6:00 AM of February 27, 2004, Villanueva received a phone call from Dellosa telling him that the SuperFerry exploded.

On March 29, 2004, Redento Dellosa was arrested and put to jail in connection with the SuperFerry 14 bombing and other criminal charges. Dellosa admitted that he was the “Passenger 51” who used the name Arnulfo Alvarado to bring to board an improvised explosive device. On 10 October 2004, the Marine Board Inquiry tasked to investigate the SuperFerry 14 explosion submitted a report to President Arroyo. This report confirmed that based on the confession of Dellosa, the RSIM/ASG conspiracy had indeed deliberately planted the bomb that sank ferry. Dellosa admitted during investigation that he placed around eight pounds of TNT in a television set that he carried onto the ferry.

Media coverage of the 2004 SuperFerry 14 bombing gave popularity to the previously unknown RSIM. Prior to the bombing, the general public and even the international community had very little knowledge of the RSIM. The SuperFerry 14 bombing was a milestone in the history of RSIM for it received a lot of international and domestic media attention.

The media brought the RSIM in the mainstream of discussions on terrorism. The media even conveyed the RSIM message not to tag their members as terrorists. In one media interview, Ahmad Santos stressed that “we are not terrorists and don’t coddle terrorists” explaining that the group’s main objective is to unite and solidify reverts (as Balik-Islam members are called) as a fulcrum and pillar for other Muslim brothers” (Jannaral, 2004).

THE MALIK ALIMUDDIN AND GAPPAL BANNAH CONFESSIONS: THE 2005 VALENTINES DAY BOMBING

A Philippine intelligence report, dated November 2005, raised concern about the collusion between media and terrorist personalities. Though some sectors of the media community vehemently condemned the allegation of the military, there were testimonies from the suspected terrorists affirming the collusion between terrorists and members of the press.

The testimonies of Malik Alimuddin alias 'Malik' and Gappal Bannah alias 'Boy Negro' were examples. Both were Abu Sayyaf members turned state witnesses. Malik and Boy Negro were arrested for the 2005 Valentines Day bombing, which resulted in the death of ten persons and wounding of 136 others. Both supported the military intelligence report of collusion between some terror groups and the media. They even admitted the link among the RSIM, the ASG and some members of the Philippine press.

Boy Negro underscored in his sworn statements that the RSIM and the ASG got assistance from their media contacts to "get good press in their propaganda war against the government" (*Sun Star Network*, 2005). Boy Negro elaborated, saying that "many members of the media in Mindanao and from Manila help us, from the newspapers, television and radio. The same members of the media get a cut from the money that the ASG gets from their kidnapping activities. That is why Janjalani boasts about his closeness to the press because of their contacts".

Malik, who admitted to have aided the RSIM in carrying out the 2005 Valentines Day bombing, corroborated the allegation of Boy Negro when the former confessed "there are members of the media and of the police who protect the RSM and ASG. The supporters from the media help out the RSM and ASG if they get caught" (*ibid*). Malik said that without the support of the media, it would be harder for them to operate and to propagandize. In other words, the media not only publicized the cause of RSIM but also allegedly gave protection to the some RSIM personalities.

THE JULIUS BABAO CASE

Another case involving the media and the RSIM was the controversial story of Julius Babao, the anchor of the primetime news program "TV Patrol World" at ABS-CBN Channel 2, the largest television network company in the Philippines. Admiral Tirso Danga, then the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, accused him for posting the bail of RSIM member Dawud Santos amounting to P 200,000.00 (around USD \$5,000) last April 26, 2005. This accusation was based on the report of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (ISAFP) submitted to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo who shared the report as an off-the-record statement to news paper columnist, Ramon Tulfo. According to ISAFP report, Babao allegedly guaranteed the bail and used his influence as a member of the press to act as a "guarantor" for Dawud Santos. Babao reportedly entered into this arrangement to a scoop breaking news on the RSIM (Zamora, 2005).

Babao and the ABS-CBN management denied the allegations. Babao explained that he only met Dawud Santos to introduce him to a computer expert who facilitated his release. Dawud Santos later claimed in a media interview that Babao merely acted as "reference" with the surety company. The ABS-CBN company even cleared Babao in its internal investigation. Based on its 11-page report, the ABS-CBN stressed that "we find the evidence shows there is absolutely no truth to the charges against Babao: he neither posted nor guaranteed bail for Dawud Santos" (Fernandez, 2005).

Conclusion

The RSIM and the media have had a symbiotic relationship. The RSIM provided the media a good story to report while the media provided the RSIM an outlet to publicize its cause. There have also been allegations that the RSIM has colluded with media personalities. Ahmad Santos was even a member of the press when he founded the RSIM. The RSIM intentionally used the media to spread its Islamic fundamentalist ideology and mount some terrorist operations.

At present, the RSIM is organizationally weakened and functionally inactive. However, the media revived public interests on the RSIM when it linked the RSIM with the Makati Blast on October 19, 2007. The results of an investigation revealed that the Makati Blast was an industrial accident and that RSIM involvement was a hoax.

Though at present the RSIM is considered a dormant organization, due in large part to the arrest of two highest RSIM leaders (Ahmad Santos and Ruben Lavilla was arrested in 2005 and 2008, respectively), there are intelligence reports that 30 members are still at large with the intent and capability to wreak terrorist havoc. The great challenge to Philippine law enforcement authorities is to deny RSIM remnants the opportunities to mount terror attacks in the future.

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