

The Uncertain Future of Asian Democracy: Shared Challenges in Europe and Asia

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In recent years, it has been pointed out that numerous countries throughout the world, including Asian countries, face a “crisis of democracy.” Japan has been working to strengthen its ties with other Asian countries in a variety of areas, including military affairs; understanding how the concept of democracy is reflected in the foreign and security policies of these countries therefore represents an urgent issue for Japan's future.

In considering the crisis of democracy in Asian countries, we can identify three common threads with European politics. The first is the dissolution of the existing political order. In European countries, the existing two major political parties are losing support due to issues such as globalization and the hollowing-out of domestic industry. This dissolution and transformation of the party order can also be seen in Asian countries. Second, we can observe an expansion of populist politics, which rejects rule “from above” and seeks to institute a politics “from below.” Populism as a force has recently been gaining ground in Europe and the United States, mobilizing support among unaffiliated voters for anti-establishment politics and political parties. A similar trend can be seen in countries such as Pakistan and Thailand. The third common thread is the political role of religion. In many European countries, Christian democratic parties are the dominant political parties, and Christian views regarding society and the state have been reflected in their policies. Religion has a similar political importance in Asian countries, but in countries such as India and Myanmar, an increasing “religionization” of politics is leading to religious chauvinism.

Given that Asia is a major center of growth, political instability in the region has an international impact. How Japan engages with Asia, and how it appeals to and develops the concept of democracy will be the key to the nation's future.

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1. The Dissolution of the 20th Century Order

Today, the political and economic presence of Asian countries is only increasing. In 2023 it was widely reported that India's population was now the highest in the world; in terms of GDP, it is predicted that in 2050 India and Indonesia will rank third and fourth in the world, following the United States and China. This rapid economic growth is astonishing when we recall that India's GDP was only the 10th largest in the world in 2014, when Narendra Modi was elected Prime Minister. In addition, by 2075, more than half of the countries in the top 10 of GDP are expected to be from the global south, and in particular Asia.

While the dynamism of these Asian countries is attracting attention, it has been pointed out that a "crisis of democracy" is occurring in many countries around the world, including countries in Asia. A trend toward authoritarianism, which represents a hollowing-out of democracy, has been observed in a number of countries, and future developments are unpredictable. Japan is strengthening its military ties with Asian countries, as evidenced, for example by its conducting of trilateral joint military training with the U.S. and the Philippines (Note 1). Taking into consideration as one example the fact that in the Philippines the administration's opposition to China has the support of many citizens, in considering Japan's future, it is an urgent matter to understand in what form the idea of democracy is reflected in the foreign and security policies of other countries.

In this paper I would therefore like to present and discuss certain perspectives that can be seen to be important in considering the subject of democracy in Asia. I will attempt to deepen discussion of Asian democracy by means of comparison with European politics. I adopt this approach not only because I am a specialist in European political history and European comparative politics, but also because the comparison with European politics offers a convenient standard for evaluation.

First, I would like to consider the dissolution of the existing political order, in particular the party order that remained in place until the beginning of the 21st century.

Today, we are seeing a marked weakening of established political parties and a collapse of the existing political order in Europe, the United States, and Asia. This trend is particularly noticeable in Europe, which is regarded as the birthplace of modern politics and modern political parties. Put plainly, the party order that was formed in the latter half of the 20th century and which had shown a certain degree of stability has been significantly undermined.

In the postwar period, the political space in most European countries has been dominated by two major parties, the moderate center-right and the moderate center-left; with occasional changes of government, one or the other of these parties has been in power for the majority of the time. The center-right parties have been Christian democrats in many continental European countries and conservatives in the United Kingdom, while the center-left parties have been social democrats in most countries. Although there were differences between the center-right and center-left parties, with the former being more market-oriented and the latter more welfare-state oriented, the basic lines of policy were broadly the same. Both parties broke with the past of fascism and Nazism, while at the same time championing capitalism and rigidly confronting the communist countries, and both were oriented toward a liberal international order led by the United States. Domestically, this arrangement saw the advancement of gradual social reforms and cooperation between labor and management rather than class conflict, and it realized stable politics and promoted economic development under the “postwar consensus.” European integration was based on this type of shared consensus among the moderate actors in each country.

More recently, however, these two major political parties have been weakening in many countries. As the support bases that have sustained both parties have shrunk, the established parties have come under intense scrutiny, being viewed as the mouthpieces of vested interests. Having actively embraced European integration and globalization, they have embraced another aspect of globalization and European union – the hollowing out of domestic industries and the acceptance of an influx of immigrants and refugees - and are now subject to criticism as elites who neglect their own citizens. The established parties have had difficulty adapting to the new problems of the 21st century, and have found their support declining in every election; in the 2020s in countries such as the Netherlands and France, the two major parties suffered a setback when their share of the vote in major elections dropped to single digits. The traditional party order, which had previously appeared stable, is clearly crumbling.

This development is perhaps most evident in India. As Professor Kazuya Nakamizo of Kyoto University’s Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies observes, India, known as the world’s largest democracy, has held regular elections and changed administrations for more than 70 years since independence, and the number of people living under a democratic system in the country far exceeds the number in the United States, Europe, and Japan. It is of considerable interest that the Indian National Congress Party (“the Congress Party” below) has been a stable player in postwar politics in India, just as moderate centrist parties upheld

political stability in European countries in the latter half of the 20th century, backed by the support of a diverse range of people. As Nakamizo notes, the Congress Party succeeded in establishing stable rule in post-independence India. As the inheritor of the mantle of Gandhi, the architect of independence, the Congress Party was able to build a one-party system of rule, known as the “Congress system,” as an umbrella party that attracted broad support from every stratum of society. The Congress Party can be considered to have played a role similar to that of the major centrist parties in Europe, in that it has been able to maintain democracy over the long-term by distinguishing itself from radicals on the left and right and by implementing moderate political management backed by a stable base of support.

There are, of course, significant differences between Europe and India when it comes to the substance of parties’ base of support. The base of the center-right in Europe has been Christian organizations and conservative groups such as economic and agricultural organizations, while in the case of the center-left it has been labor unions. By contrast, as Nakamizo points out, the Congress Party’s main base of support has been upper-caste landowners, who form the elite of rural society. With 80% of the population living in rural areas, it was essential for the Congress Party to win the support of the landowners in order to ensure that it could attract votes from these areas. The Congress Party offered patronage, including parliamentary positions, to the landowners, in return for political support. In this sense, the stability in Indian politics that the party established was basically stability under elite rule.

At the same time, it is undeniable that Europe's postwar democracy also had a strong aspect of elite rule. In postwar Europe, people were generally negative about referendums and popular “participation from below,” partly as an effect of Nazism, political parties and influential organizations basically rejected pressure from below, seeking instead to maintain stable elite rule. The most important example of elite rule was the once-popular concept of “consociational democracy.” A handful of “superior” elite leaders, upheld by the subservience of the masses, were entrusted with the responsibility of running the country for the people, and engaged in politics with a sense of mission; this was considered a characteristic of countries in which consociational democracy held sway. Elite rule in itself was not regarded as a problem even under democracy. Rather, there was a strong sense that it was desirable for a democracy to have a “superior elite” that skillfully controlled the outpouring of popular demands and maintained a stable political system.

However, from the end of the 20th century through the 21st century, elite rule centered on established political parties in both Western Europe and India has been severely undermined.

First, in Europe, the end of the Cold War decisively transformed the axis of left-right confrontation that had been premised on that conflict. In postwar Europe, reflecting the East-West confrontation, the center-right, which was oriented toward free markets, and the center-left, which was oriented toward economic intervention, constituted the broad axis of political opposition and served as the basis for political identity in political parties and organizations. This was particularly evident among social democrats, the main allies of the center-left. After the collapse of the Cold War structure, however, both the center-right and the center-left fell into an identity crisis. The established parties generally lacked effective ways to respond to the emergence of new conditions, such as globalization and the information society, and failed to retain their support. In India, the influence of the Congress Party, which was based on elite rule, was clearly weakened in the 1990s after what Nakamizo describes as “a period of democratization during which power was wrested from the upper castes.” Behind this lay the advancement of political independence among the lower castes and the emergence of a Hindu religious identity. The political consequences of this were the downfall of the Congress Party and the expansion of the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party; BJP) and its seizure of power. In this sense, the Hindu-first authoritarian rule of the recent Modi government was born out of the flow of Indian democratization. This can certainly be pointed to as an example of the “paradox of democratization.”

With regard to the transformation of the existing political order, the course of Singaporean politics also presents a very interesting case. Under the de facto one-party dictatorship of the People's Action Party (PAP) led by Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore curbed domestic conflict and strongly promoted nation-building centered on economic development. Lee Kuan Yew's model of governance, characterized by rigorous design, control, efficiency, and utility, enabled rapid industrialization through the development of “state capitalism” under which government-owned enterprises controlled a wide range of major domestic industries, but it also imposed strict restrictions on civil society, such as the Internal Security Act.

However, the overwhelming dominance of the People's Action Party, which embodied this model, has been diminishing in recent years. In the 2011 general election in particular, the People's Action Party's share of the vote fell to around 60%, far below expectations, causing a shock. As noted by Dr. Ryoichi Hisasue of the Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO), this was due not only to accumulated dissatisfaction with the government's socioeconomic policies, but also to a movement among young people who were not satisfied with the nation's conventional policies of social control and had become able to freely express critical opinions through social media. Since then, the government, recognizing the

growing dissatisfaction of the people, has acknowledged the need to change in line with social change, and has been putting into effect measures such as enhancing policies for economic redistribution to the people. Based on these developments, Hisasue concludes that “Singapore is slowly but steadily moving in a liberal direction.” Support for the People's Action Party has still not recovered, and the party struggled in the July 2020 general election, again winning only about 60% of the vote. The Lee Kuan Yew model, which prioritized economic development and controlled the lives of citizens against the background of the People's Action Party's overwhelming dominance, is coming to an end. Internationally, Singapore is seen as a country with a rock-solid system, under which authoritarian rule has maintained stability to the present, but in fact, a “quiet revolution” appears to be slowly but surely underway.

However, as the example of Myanmar shows, authoritarian rule does not end easily. Myanmar's democratization appeared to be progressing smoothly, with the long-ruling military regime coming to an end and the nation making a transition to civilian rule in 2011, and Aung San Suu Kyi's government coming to power in 2016. In 2021, however, the military seized power in a coup d'état, and the push towards democratization withered away. However, as Professor Yoshihiro Nakanishi of Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies indicates regarding recent developments in the nation, the question remains as to whether Myanmar's “democratization” in the 2010s - which was highly regarded internationally, in part due to Aung San Suu Kyi's overwhelming popularity - was actually genuine democratization. Myanmar's long-term military rule has given the military influence over various sectors of the economy and society, including companies affiliated with the military, making it an extremely strong presence in society. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to promote democratization without taking the presence of the military into account, and it appears that change must be gradual.

2. The Growth of Populist Politics

Next, The second point I would like to focus on is the growth of populist politics (which is to a significant extent the other side of the coin of the first point above). In this respect also, a comparison can be drawn with European politics.

As is well known, populist parties have become increasingly influential in Europe and the United States in recent years, gaining momentum from opposition to existing politics and existing political parties. These parties have taken advantage of the weakening of the established political parties, as described above, to mobilize support among unaffiliated voters

by identifying the major parties of the center-right and center-left with vested interests and criticizing them collectively as “political elites” who monopolize power, and in many countries they have expanded their influence beyond that of the established parties. In Europe, there are two patterns of populism, right-wing populism and left-wing populism; of the two, right-wing populism attracts the most attention. Right-wing populist parties, which advocate xenophobic and nation-first stances, opposing immigration, the acceptance of refugees, globalization, and membership of the EU, are threatening, and in some cases surpassing, existing conservative parties on the right in a number of countries. The victory of the Leave camp in the UK referendum on leaving the EU in 2016, and the subsequent realization of Brexit in 2020, shocked the world, but right-wing populist parties have been increasing their presence in most of the countries of Europe. The National Rally led by Marine Le Pen and the Brothers of Italy led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni emerged as the leading populist parties in the European Parliamentary elections held in June 2024. Following this, to the world’s surprise, French President Macron, alarmed by the National Rally’s rapid progress, forced the dissolution of the National Assembly and called a general election. In this general election, which was described as resembling a “game of Russian roulette,” the National Rally was ultimately prevented from coming to power because of the successful electoral cooperation between Macron’s centrist faction and leftist factions. However, the National Rally secured the largest number of seats in the National Assembly, well over 100, and is expected to increase pressure on Macron’s administration from the right in the future. In terms of people’s voting behavior, those who belong to the “upper” strata of society are more likely to support Macron’s ruling party, while those who belong to the “lower” strata are more likely to support the National Rally. This indicates that the rivalry between the established parties and populist parties is based more on a conflict between “upper” and “lower” than between right and left.

This type of populist movement can also be observed in other Asian countries.

First, in Pakistan, as noted by Kazunori Matsuda, a Specially Appointed Researcher at Kyoto University, the Pakistan Movement for Justice, a populist party that criticized the established political parties and took a clear stance against elites and vested interests, came to power for the first time after winning the general election in 2018. The party was founded in 1996 by former cricketer Imran Khan, and expanded its support with an anti-corruption platform. However, in Pakistan, the military has historically been a powerful force against the backdrop of conflict and tension with neighboring India; the Pakistan Movement for Justice lost the support of the military as relations deteriorated due to its attempts to intervene in military personnel matters, and Imran Khan was eventually ousted from power.

In Thailand, the Move Forward Party, an emerging populist force, became the largest party in the House of Representatives in the 2023 general election. As Associate Professor Ayako Toyama of University of Tsukuba describes, Thailand's political structure, in which vested interests such as the monarchy and the military are firmly entrenched and capitalists with ties to them are given preferential treatment, and Thai-style democracy based on “rule from above,” have become targets of criticism; the desire for citizen-led democratic politics has been expressed through the progress of the Move Forward Party. The party called for reform of the monarchy, the military, and the judiciary, and sought to change the fundamental structure of Thailand's political society. Looking towards the general election, the party advocated the abolition of *lèse majesté*, the abolition of military service and the establishment of civilian control, and the elimination of monopolies and oligopolies in the market. The fact that the party was explicitly oriented toward reform of the monarchy, and that it nevertheless gained support, was a particular cause for surprise, being understood as an indication of a change in people's view of the monarchy. Many of the supporters of the Move Forward Party were young people, and their familiarity with social media therefore also played a significant role in the election campaign. In addition, many of the “red shirts,” individuals with populist tendencies who joined the Thaksin faction, which attracted strong support in the early 21st century, also drifted towards support of the party. Recent election results can be seen to reflect the rejection of “top-down” authoritarian rule and the growing desire for a “bottom-up” political system.

However, it is also the case that such “support from below” can be associated with or actively support coercive rule. This is a negative aspect of populism. In the Philippines, for example, recent years have seen a succession of presidents such as Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. who, while enjoying strong support from a wide range of voters, have imposed authoritarian rule in opposition to “vested interests.” As Duterte's nickname “the Trump of the Philippines” suggests, they certainly possess the characteristics of populist leaders. As Professor Wataru Kusaka of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies shows, in the Philippines, the reality of historically-formed socioeconomic inequality and the concentration of power in the hands of a small elite has led the majority of the population, regardless of class, to view the existing liberal democracy as nothing more than a mechanism to gloss over the fact of elite rule and as something to be overthrown. Therefore, even if authoritarian, a leader with the integrity to eliminate corruption and the discipline to rein in political and social turmoil is regarded by a wide range of people as fulfilling their wishes. As a result, as Kusaka notes, “Rather, what has come into being is an ‘illiberal democracy’ in which populists who win overwhelming support from the majority in elections infringe on the freedom and human rights of the minority.”

A similar phenomenon is occurring in Indonesia. As Professor Jun Honna of Ritsumeikan University's Graduate School of International Relations clearly shows, while Joko Widodo, who served as president from 2014 to 2024, was popular with the Indonesian public, democracy actually regressed under his administration. Originally, Widodo was not a member of the conventional political elite backed by political parties, the bureaucracy, the military, or religious leaders, but an ordinary citizen who operated a furniture store in Surakarta, Central Java. However, he aspired to politics, and by winning the support of ordinary people, he steadily climbed the ladder to power, first as mayor of Surakarta and then as governor of Jakarta, until he was noticed by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle led by former President Megawati and ran as a candidate in the presidential election, in which he was successful. In this sense, Widodo's inauguration as president represented the completion of Indonesia's democratization following the collapse of the authoritarian Suharto regime at the end of the 20th century. However, after his inauguration, Widodo's administration began to take control of the military and police through nepotistic appointments, and he also put pressure on groups and parties critical of him, in particular Islamic organizations. Speech in civil society was subject to aggressive policing, and critical elements were suppressed through the use of the Electronic Information and Transactions Law with environmental activists in particular targeted individually. Furthermore, Widodo exerted influence on politically independent administrative organizations, and the Constitutional Court, and significantly diluted their powers. Moreover, he succeeded in bringing a variety of political parties into the ruling party's side in the House of Representatives to form a huge ruling coalition, which resulted in the virtual absence of opposition parties and decisions on huge projects, such as the relocation of the capital, which had been seen as problematic, being made without any substantive debate. As a result of these developments, as Honna states, it has been pointed out that there has been a retreat of democracy in Indonesia, and a marked decline in the democracy index has been observed.

3. Religion and Democracy

The third point worth noting is the role of religion. In considering the context of recent political changes in various countries, it seems highly significant to pay attention to the role played by religion. Religion has also played a considerable role in the 21st century as the locus of people's identities and as a powerful channel for social and political participation. In order to capture the state of democracy in Asia today, it is essential to focus on the unique imprint of religion.

Even in the "advanced" countries of Europe, the relationship between religion and democracy is

a deep one. As mentioned above, especially in continental European countries, until the end of the 20th century, the largest ruling party in many countries was a Christian democratic party, and its policies reflected views of society and the state derived from Christianity in various ways. Conservative policies on divorce, abortion, and homosexuality were typical examples, while corporatism, with its emphasis on labor-management cooperation, was also actively promoted as an embodiment of the Christian organic view of the state. Considered in this light, it would be one-sided to view European nations as possessing a well-advanced separation of church and state.

Of course, as I have already explained, the presence of Christian democratic parties has been declining in many countries since the beginning of the 21st century, and they are in danger of being overtaken as a conservative force by right-wing populism. “Christian” policies on issues such as divorce and abortion have been significantly weakened, at least in Western Europe. On the other hand, for example, the longtime German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union), who grew up as a pastor's daughter and entered politics as a convinced Christian Democrat, accepted one million refugees from Syria in the mid-2010s despite being a conservative politician. One can point to Merkel's Christian background as lying behind this decision.

In current European politics also, the prominence of “Christian” female politicians is attracting attention. Ursula von der Leyen, who has served as President of the European Commission from 2019 and continued in the position following the 2024 European Parliament elections, is from Germany's Christian Democratic Union and is a close ally of Merkel's. As the “face” of the European Union, she is well known internationally. In the right-wing populist movement, which is generally regarded as secular, both Giorgia Meloni of Italy and Marine Le Pen of France have declared themselves to be Christians and have acted as if they are defenders of Christian values. The xenophobia exhibited by right-wing populism is centered around opposition to the “Islamic threat” and the attempt to “defend” European civilization. Grounding one's party in Christian values and traditions nurtured in Europe, and positioning oneself as a defender of these values and traditions, is an effective means of political mobilization.

This political importance of religion is also true of Asian countries. India is a prime example. Modi, a prominent figure among radical Hindu groups, is said to have instigated the riots that killed many Muslims, and after becoming prime minister, he has enforced a Hindu-first policy, such as by stripping autonomy from Kashmir, which has a large Muslim population. In his clear goal to make India a “Hindu state,” the direction of Modi's policies differs significantly from that

of the secular Congress Party, which led Indian politics in the 20th century and sought to achieve interreligious harmony. In the case of India, the “religionization” of politics can be seen to be progressing in the 21st century.

On the other hand, the presence of Islam is important in Indonesia. In the past, under the Suharto regime, religions including Islam were under government control, making it difficult for Islamic parties to act independently politically, but with the progress of democratization, a number of Islamic parties have emerged in the 21st century, and continue to attract a certain amount of support. In addition, the broadly popular ethnically Chinese governor of Jakarta (himself a Christian) was strongly criticized for apparently “blasphemous” comments in relation to Islam, which led to a mass mobilization of Islamic groups and others to oppose his administration, ultimately resulting in the governor being sentenced to prison in 2017. This case was a clear demonstration of the decisive political impact of representations of Islam.

In the case of Pakistan, Islam is the state religion, and, given also the nation’s military rivalry with neighboring India, the relationship between politics and Islam is deep. The military has also been linked to Islamic radicals and extremists, and under the military regime, Islamization policies were enforced, such as requiring adherence to halal rules and prayer five times a day. There are also several Islamic parties active in the democratic system, and they often participate in government. In the general election held in February 2024, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz faction (PML-N) became the leading party, and Shahbaz Sharif, the younger brother of party leader Nawaz Sharif, was re-elected as prime minister.

In the case of Thailand, Buddhism has played an important political role while being deeply connected with the monarchy. It should be noted, however, that Thailand’s pattern differs from that of the other countries mentioned above, where the influence of religion becomes tangible in association with a specific political party. In Thailand, where the majority of the population is Buddhist, the king has powerful authority as a defender of Buddhism, as noted by Ayako Toyama. Although Thailand is a country that encompasses diverse languages and ethnic groups, the nation has attempted to unify its people with Buddhism and the king as the two major symbols. Under the authority of the king, autocratic rule has often been justified based on a unique view of democracy termed “Thai-style democracy.” The King is positioned as a “virtuous and all-powerful being” who “has the power to save the people” by acting as a mediator in times of political turmoil. In fact, successive kings have entered monasteries for a certain period of time in order to gain experience in ascetic practices. The powerful political influence of the king’s authority can be attributed to the fact that the people share this religious background founded

on Buddhism.

Myanmar is another country with a Buddhist majority. In Myanmar, as in Thailand, Buddhism plays an important role in national unity rather than being linked to a political party or a specific political group, and it has a strong influence as the national religion. The military government has also taken a protective stance toward Buddhism, and as a result, parts of the Buddhist community have strong ties to the military and represent its support base. Behind the Rohingya refugee crisis originating in western Myanmar's Rakhine State lies an unstable situation in which the Muslim Rohingya have long been regarded as "outsiders" and have no nationality in Buddhist-majority Myanmar. As is well known, recent years have seen a massive refugee problem, with tens of thousands of Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh as a result of military "clearance operations" and civilian violence. Despite international concern and condemnation, the military regime has not relaxed its oppressive stance, and there has been no indication that Rohingya refugees will return to Myanmar.

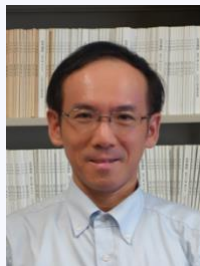
4. Conclusion

The discussion above has contrasted European and Asian countries from a number of perspectives, comparing their situation with developments in European politics. While Asian countries are the object of international attention as major centers of growth with expanding populations and economies, they also face destabilizing factors such as religious and ethnic conflicts within their countries, the strengthening and transformation of authoritarian rule, and military pressure from China, Russia, and other countries outside their borders. Asia is a dynamic region, and the outcome of these conflicts will have an international impact. How will Japan interact with these other Asian countries and how will democracy resonate and develop in the region? What we can say with certainty is that Japan's future lies in Asia.

For more detail regarding political trends in the Asian countries introduced here, please refer to the NIRA research report, "The Future of Democracy in Asia: The Dissolution of the Political Order and the Expansion of Populist Politics (in Japanese)."

Notes

[1] The most recent concrete example of the development of security cooperation is the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement, which was signed by the relevant ministers in both countries in July 2024. This agreement will facilitate reciprocal travel between Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines and promote cooperation between the two forces, simplifying procedures such as obtaining visas for members of each to enter the other country and bring in arms and ammunition. For Japan, this is an important milestone in positioning the Philippines as its third “quasi-ally” (after the United Kingdom and Australia).



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