al-Ghazali's Ethical Framework for Strengthening Political Integrity in Malaysia towards Society 5.0

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Abstract

As societies move toward Society 5.0, technological advancement is increasingly shaping political decision making. In Malaysia, this shift unfolds alongside the Madani vision, which places strong emphasis on integrity, trust, and human dignity. This article argues that the main challenge in realising an ethical Society 5.0 is not technological readiness, but the persistent problem of political integrity. To address this concern, the article turns to the ethical thought of al Ghazali and proposes a leadership framework grounded in *tazkiyah al-nafs* (spiritual purification), *niyyah* (ethical intention), and '*adl* (justice). Rather than treating these concepts as abstract ideals, the study shows how they can guide contemporary political leadership in navigating the ethical pressures of techno-governance. The key contribution of this article lies in connecting classical Islamic ethical insights with present day governance challenges, offering a model that speaks both to moral responsibility and practical leadership. It concludes that integrating this al-Ghazalian ethical approach into Malaysia's political culture is vital for ensuring that technological progress remains aligned with human values and the broader aspirations of the Madani framework.

Keywords: al-Ghazali; Society 5.0; Madani; Political Integrity; Ethical Leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Society 5.0, first envisioned by Japan, represents a paradigm shift in human development where advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and the

Internet of Things (IoT) are integrated to create a human-centric society (Fukuyama 2018; Deguchi et al. 2020). While technological advancement promises efficiency and prosperity, it also brings forth profound ethical challenges, especially in governance and political leadership. In Malaysia, issues of corruption, abuse of power, and declining public trust continue to undermine the integrity of political institutions (OECD 2021; Transparency International 2023). Indeed, this issues not only affects contemporary social life but also involves moral concerns, political crises, and tarnishes the image of MADANI (Mahadi et al, 2025). Addressing these challenges requires more than regulatory frameworks; it necessitates a return to ethical and moral principles that can anchor leadership in integrity.

al-Ghazali (1058–1111), a seminal figure in Islamic philosophy and ethics, articulates a framework of thought that remains highly relevant to contemporary governance and leadership. Beyond theological discourse, al-Ghazali's contributions have been engaged in conceptual studies on management philosophy. For instance, Mahadi et al, (2023) examines al-Ghazali's management theory as grounded in the principle of Tawhid, highlighting four core managerial functions such as planning, organization, supervision, and leadership, as ethically infused practices rather than value-neutral techniques. Al-Ghazali's major works, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and *al-Tibr al-Masbuk fi Nasihat al-Muluk,* underscore the primacy of ethical conduct, sincerity (*ikhlas*), accountability and justice as the moral foundations of leadership (Fakhry, 2002; Griffel, 2021). Central to this framework is the emphasis on *tazkiyat al-nafs* (spiritual purification) and the cultivation of virtuous character, positioning ethical self-discipline as the cornerstone of just governance. When situated within the Malaysian political context, these principles offer a compelling ethical lens through which persistent challenges such as corruption and declining public trust may be critically addressed and institutional legitimacy restored. This study argues that al-Ghazali's ethical framework provides a robust foundation for strengthening political integrity in Malaysia as it transitions towards Society 5.0. By aligning technological development with spiritual-ethical governance, Malaysia can balance innovation with accountability. This integration is critical for without ethical anchoring, technological progress risks amplifying existing inequalities and corruption rather than resolving them.

Accordingly, this paper pursues three objectives. First, to examine the challenges of political integrity in Malaysia within the context of Society 5.0. Second, to analyse al-Ghazali's ethical framework and its relevance to political leadership. The third is to propose an integrated model of ethical-political governance for Malaysia that harmonizes al-Ghazali's principles with the aspirations of Society 5.0. By situating Malaysia's political challenges within the broader discourse of technology and ethics, this study contributes to both the literature on Islamic governance and contemporary debates on ethical leadership in the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Society 5.0 was introduced by the Japanese government as a corrective to the productivity driven orientation of Industry 4.0, advancing a human centred integration of cyber and physical systems aimed at enhancing social well-being, justice, and human agency rather than economic output alone (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2016; Keidanren, 2016; Fukuyama, 2018). Central to this paradigm is the recognition that technological advancement devoid of ethical governance

risks entrenching inequality, eroding public trust, and diminishing human autonomy. Accordingly, subsequent scholarship converges on the view that the success of Society 5.0 hinges not merely on technological readiness but on ethical leadership, institutional integrity, and value embedded governance capable of responsibly managing digital platforms, data infrastructures, and algorithmic decision-making (Shiroishi, Uchiyama, & Suzuki, 2018; Gladden, 2019; Wright, 2024).

Within governance and political leadership studies, integrity is consistently identified as the cornerstone of ethical authority. For example, in Malaysia, the issue of integrity is a very serious concern. Integrity issues involving public servants, particularly authorities such as the police, are frequently highlighted as a primary focus of research in studies on integrity. (Zam Zam Yunus & Nik Ahmad Sufian 2023). International assessments by the OECD (2017) and Transparency International (2023) demonstrate that digital governance tools such as online or internet procurement systems, AI-assisted decision-making, and data-driven public services can enhance accountability only when leaders possess a substantive moral commitment to ethical norms. Absent such integrity, technology may instead amplify surveillance, manipulation, and elite capture. Critical governance theorists therefore caution against the assumption that ethics can be embedded solely through institutional design or regulatory frameworks, arguing that moral responsibility must ultimately be embodied by political actors themselves (Kane & Patapan, 2012; Rhodes, 2018). The literature thus converges on a fundamental insight: ethical deficits in leadership undermine even the most sophisticated governance architectures.

These concerns are particularly salient in the Malaysian context, where public trust in political institutions remains closely tied to perceptions of leaders' moral character rather than policy performance alone (Siddiquee, 2010; Ahmad, 2018). The MADANI framework, introduced in 2023, represents a normative attempt to re-centre governance on civilizational values such as sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust, and compassion, thereby moving beyond procedural governance toward moral legitimacy (Prime Minister's Office, 2023; Rahman & Hashim, 2023). This value-oriented agenda is institutionally supported by the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019–2023; however, official evaluations reveal uneven implementation and persistent structural constraints (SPRM, 2022). Malaysia's Corruption Perceptions Index score, which stagnated at 50/100 in 2024 (57th of 180 countries), further reflects enduring deficits in public confidence. These limitations are especially problematic as Malaysia advances toward digital public services, algorithmic governance, and large-scale data integration consistent with Society 5.0.

In addressing this ethical deficit, Islamic political philosophy offers a rich yet underutilized resource. Classical thinkers such as al-Mawardi and Ibn Khaldun emphasized justice and moral restraint as prerequisites of political legitimacy, but their insights have been largely marginalized within contemporary governance discourse (Kamali, 2010). Among Islamic scholars, al-Ghazali provides a particularly compelling ethical framework due to his integration of spiritual formation, political authority, and social responsibility. In works such as *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, *Mizan al-'Amal,* and *al-Mustasfa*, al-Ghazali locates political corruption in the moral corruption of the self, arguing that no external regulation can substitute for inner ethical discipline (*tazkiyah al-nafs).* Integrity, in this view, is grounded in justice *('adl),* intentionality (*niyyah*), and moral self-accountability, forming the basis of legitimate leadership and public trust (al-Ghazali, 1997).

Contemporary scholars have revisited al-Ghazali's virtue ethics to address modern crises of leadership, highlighting the centrality of intention and moral self-regulation in contexts of expanding power and discretion (Al-Attas, 1993; Aydin, 2021). This internalized ethical model is particularly relevant to digital governance environments, where algorithmic opacity and data asymmetries intensify ethical risk. However, much of the emerging literature on Islamic AI ethics has focused on operationalizing maqasid *al-shari'ah* and *qawa'id fiqhiyyah* as regulatory safeguards (Ali, 2025). While normatively important, these approaches often under theorize virtue cultivation and the moral accountability of leaders and administrators who design and govern AI-enabled institutions. As a result, Islamic ethical discourse remains insufficiently connected to the lived realities of techno-political governance.

Political integrity has emerged as a critical challenge in contemporary governance, particularly in Malaysia's transition towards Society 5.0, which emphasises human-centred and value-driven technological advancement. Despite the existence of institutional integrity mechanisms, issues such as corruption, abuse of power and declining public trust indicate the need for a deeper ethical foundation in political leadership and governance. Accordingly, this literature review analyses selected studies on Al-Ghazali's ethics, governance integrity, ethical leadershipand public sector morality to examine their relevance in strengthening political integrity in Malaysia within the context of Society 5.0, as systematically presented in the following literature review matrix:

Table 1: Literature Review Matrix al-Ghazali's Ethical Framework for Strengthening Political Integrity

Author(s) / Year	Focus of Study	Key Concepts / Findings	Theoretical Contribution	Relevance to Current Study
Mardonov et al. (2025)	Ethical communication in Sufism based on Al-Ghazali	Ethical regulation of speech, silence, sincerity (*Ikhlas)*, and moral self-discipline	Applies Al-Ghazali's Sufi ethics to social interaction and moral conduct	Supports ethical political communication and integrity in digital-society governance (Society 5.0)
Wahab (2025)	Moral education framework of Al-Ghazali and Kant	Three-dimensional ethics: rational, spiritual and moral cultivation	Integrates rational and supra-rational ethics	Provides a holistic ethical framework for political leaders in technologically advanced societies

Huberts & van der Wal (2014)	Values in politics and public administration	Integrity, accountability, transparency, moral professionalism	Normative theory of public sector integrity	Serves as governance benchmark to contextualize Al-Ghazali's ethics in modern political systems
Valangattil Shamsudheen & Rosly (2019)	Ethical decision-making model grounded in Islamic philosophy	Religious-humanistic ethics, moral intention (*niyyah*), accountability	Operationalization of Islamic ethics in modern institutions	Demonstrates applicability of Al-Ghazali's ethics beyond theology into governance decision-making
Al-Daghistani (2021)	Al-Ghazali's concept of moral beauty	Integration of virtue (*fadilah*), beauty and ethical character	Ethical-aesthetic framework of morality	Reinforces ethical leadership by linking integrity with moral excellence and public trust
Mahadi et al. (2023)	Ethical economic thought of Al-Ghazali	Justice, happiness (*saadah*), Shariah-compliant conduct	Islamic moral economy rooted in spirituality	Supports ethical public policy and political economy within Society 5.0
Huberts (2014)	Al-Ghazali's ethical management theory	*Tawhid*, leadership ethics, supervision, responsibility	Islamic ethical management model	Applicable to political institutions and integrity-based leadership
Venter (2016)	Governance and integrity theory	Ethics as compliance with moral norms, rules and public values	Integrity systems framework	Strengthens conceptual linkage between ethics and governance integrity

Yahya et al. (2023)	Ethics in democratic governance and corruption control	Accountability, ethical restraint of power, anti-corruption tools	Ethics as safeguard against abuse of power	Aligns with Al-Ghazali's emphasis on moral self-control (*mujahadah al-nafs*)
Masrom et al. (2024)	Public trust and integrity of Royal Malaysia Police	Perceived misconduct, transparency deficits	Empirical integrity perception in Malaysia	Demonstrates urgency for ethical reform grounded in spiritual-ethical frameworks

Based on table 1, the reviewed literature demonstrates that Al-Ghazali's ethical framework rooted in spiritual purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs),* moral intention, justice, and accountability remains highly relevant to contemporary governance challenges. While modern integrity frameworks emphasize transparency and compliance (Huberts, 2014; Venter, 2016), Al-Ghazali contributes a deeper internal ethical dimension, aligning well with Society 5.0, which prioritizes human-centred, value-driven technological advancement (Wahab, 2025). In the Malaysian context, empirical studies on public trust (Yahya et al., 2023) and integrity training (Masrom et al., 2024) reveal a growing need for spiritually grounded ethical governance, making Al-Ghazali's framework a strong normative foundation for strengthening political integrity.

Empirical evidence from Malaysia reinforces the urgency of this gap. Studies indicate significant variation in public officials' understanding and internalization of integrity, underscoring the limitations of compliance driven reforms and the need for sustained ethical education and leadership development (Izawati Wook et al., 2022). When viewed alongside stagnant CPI scores and the partial realization of NACP objectives, these findings suggest that structural and procedural interventions alone are inadequate. As digital transformation expands discretionary authority and concentrates power within data and platforms, governance integrity increasingly depends on the moral formation of political leaders.

Taken together, the literature reveals a critical theoretical and practical lacuna. Although Society 5.0 and MADANI articulate explicitly human-centric and value driven visions, they lack an operational moral psychology capable of guiding leadership conduct within technologically mediated governance systems. Malaysia's integrity framework remains predominantly compliance oriented, privileging external controls over virtue development, while Islamic ethics scholarship continues to emphasize legal-objective paradigms at the expense of moral formation.

This article responds to these limitations by advancing an internally coherent ethical framework for political leadership grounded in al-Ghazali's virtue ethics and tailored to the governance demands of Society 5.0. By moving beyond normative abstraction, it seeks to

demonstrate how ethical leadership can be operationalized in contexts characterized by algorithmic decision making, data intensive governance, and expanding technological authority. In doing so, the study contributes to governance theory and Islamic political ethics by offering a philosophically grounded and culturally resonant model aligned with Malaysia's MADANI aspiration for humane, trustworthy and innovative leadership.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual research design, which is appropriate for scholarly inquiries that aim to generate theoretical insights rather than empirical findings (Jaakkola, 2020). Conceptual research enables the development of new frameworks by synthesizing and critically interpreting existing knowledge. The methodology combines three complementary approaches: integrative literature analysis, hermeneutic interpretation, and comparative conceptual mapping.

First, an integrative literature review was conducted across multidisciplinary sources, including Islamic philosophy, ethics, leadership studies, governance, and Society 5.0 discourses. This method was selected because it allows for the synthesis of diverse perspectives and the identification of theoretical gaps, without being restricted to the rigid inclusion/ exclusion criteria of systematic review (Synder, 2019). Key databases consulted included Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar.

Second, a hermeneutic analysis was applied to the writings of Imam al Ghazali, particularly *Ihya Ulum al Din*, and *al Mustafa min Ilm al Usul,* focusing on his treatment of integrity (*sidq),* trust (*amanah),* justice (*adl*), and leadership ethics. Hermeneutics is appropriate here because it facilitates the contextual interpretation of classical texts and their normative relevance to contemporary issues (Palmer, 1969).

Third, a comparative conceptual mapping was conducted to align al Ghazali's construct with modern leadership integrity models, Malaysia's governance challenges, and the ethical imperatives of Society 5.0. This comparatives step enables the bridging of classical Islamic insights with contemporary policy discourses, particularly in relation to digital transformation, human centric governance, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

By triangulating these methods, the study constructs a normative ethical framework that is both faithful to Islamic intellectual heritage and responsive to the integrity challenges of Malaysia's political leadership. The outcome is not an empirical test, but a conceptual model intended to inform future policy, academic debate, and leadership practice in the era of Society 5.0.

DICUSSION

The concept of Society 5.0, first articulated in Japan, envisions a super smart society in which advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and the Internet of Things are seamlessly integrated to enhance human well-being (UNESCO News, 2019). While this vision emphasizes human-cantered development, much of the existing literature remains technologically determinism, if ethical outcomes will naturally follow from sophisticated system design (Fukuyama 2018). This assumption is deeply problematic. Technology, by its very nature, is morally neutral; its ethical quality depends entirely on the intentions, values, and

integrity of those who govern and deploy it. Consequently, the transition to Society 5.0 does not resolve ethical deficits in political leadership but instead magnifies them. The shift to Society 5.0 demands both ethical fortitude and technologies preparedness. This problem is made worse in Malaysia by ongoing worries about political integrity, which have long eroded institutional credibility and public trust (Welsh 2021; Pepinsky 2019).



Figure 1: al-Ghazali's ethical framework aligned with the MADANI philosophy

Based on Figure 1.0 above, it clearly demonstrates that al-Ghazali's ethical framework can be aligned with the MADANI philosophy in shaping ethical political leadership. In the Malaysian context, this challenge is particularly acute. Malaysia's aspiration to embrace digital governance and innovation is framed by the Madani philosophy, which foregrounds values such as justice, compassion, trust, and human dignity. Although compassion, trust, and innovation are outlined as national values in the government's Madani philosophy (Prime Minister's Office Malaysia 2023), these goals need a stronger moral basis to resist the temptations of power and the challenges of techno governance. Conceptually, Madani aligns closely with the human centric ideals of Society 5.0. However, the persistence of governance challenges especially those related to integrity, accountability and public trust reveals a structural disjunction between ethical ideals and political practice. This disjunction suggests that ethical governance cannot be sustained through policy declarations, institutional reforms, or technological oversight alone. Rather, it requires a deeper moral foundation that addresses the ethical constitution of the political actor. According to this study, al-Ghazali's ethical framework provides a basis that can strengthen political integrity in the pursuit of Society 5.0.

This study argues that the primary obstacle to realizing an ethical Society 5.0 in Malaysia is not technological readiness but the unresolved problem of political integrity. Contemporary governance models tend to externalize ethics through compliance mechanisms, legal frameworks and digital monitoring systems. While necessary, these measures remain insufficient because they regulate behaviour without transforming moral intention. This limitation has been widely acknowledged in political ethics literature, which increasingly recognizes that systemic corruption and abuse of power are rooted in individual moral failure rather than institutional design alone (Klitgaard 1988).

Al Ghazali's belief that moral decay in people, particularly leaders, is the root cause of corruption in society is reflected in his emphasis on soul purification (*tazkiyah al-Nafs)* (al Ghazali 1997). This principle demands self-control, humility, and proactive fight against greed and ignorance, which are the main contributors to abuse of power in political leadership. This idea is supported by contemporary political ethics research, which demonstrates that leaders who exhibit strong moral self-regulation are more likely to oppose systematic corruption (Johnston 2019). The *al-Ghazalian* emphasis on spiritual accountability is an essential safeguard against the abuse of technological power in the digital governance of Society 5.0, where artificial intelligence and data systems speed up decision making.

Al Ghazali further emphasizes the moral orientation of actions with his concept of intention (*niyyah*) (al-Ghazali 1993). Sincere intention-based leadership guarantees that policies are driven by the public interest rather than partisan or personal benefit. This is in the line with recent research on ethical governance, which emphasizes that trust in political systems can only be established when intentions are transparent (Fukuyama 2014; Kim & Kim 2021). Sincerity is positioned as a crucial factor in determining political legitimacy within Malaysia's Madani framework, where *niyyah* is consistent with the *amanah* (trustworthiness) principle.

Justice *(adl),* which al Ghazali considered to be a moral and social balance required for a just polity is equally important (al Ghazali, 1998). In the framework of Society 5.0, justice includes safeguarding vulnerable populations from digital exclusion, guaranteeing fair access to technology and avoiding data exploitation by corporations or elites. This reflects contemporary discussions in international ethics, where managing technological changes is thought to require distributive justice (Floridi 2016; Coeckelbergh 2020). The implementation of "*adl"* in Malaysia necessitates both institutional changes and a cultural change in which leaders embrace justice as a divine precept rather than a political commodity that can be bought or sold.

A comprehensive model of moral leadership is offered by combining *tazkiyyah*, *niyyah* and *adl* with the requirements of Society 5.0. The *al-Ghazalian* paradigm combines moral behaviour with spiritual mindfulness, in contrast to Western secular ethics that prioritize procedural fairness or technocratic models that prioritize efficiency. With dual orientation, which is referred to spiritual and pragmatic, technology will always be a servant, not a master to human dignity. By integrating moral principles into political systems, such a framework promotes trust and fortitude in the face of swift digitalization, which directly advances the Madani vision. However, both structural and cultural changes are needed to make this integration a reality. To ensure that leadership conduct is evaluated based on moral integrity as well as results, Malaysia must structurally improve its institutional mechanisms for ethical oversight. To restore the moral legitimacy of politics, cultural leaders must adopt *al-Ghazalian*

principle of ethical self-cultivation. Without this kind of integration, Malaysia runs the risk of developing technologically while maintaining its ethical brittleness, which could undermine Society 5.0.

Integrating al Ghazali's ethical paradigm into contemporary techno-governance does not entail rejecting modernity or technological advancement. Rather, it disciplines innovation by subordinating it to moral purpose. This integration aligns with broader calls in global ethics scholarship for value-based governance frameworks that combine technological competence with moral responsibility (Floridi et al. 2018). In the Malaysian context, such an integration would provide Madani with a substantive ethical engine rather than leaving it at the level of aspiration rhetoric.

All things considered, this conversation confirms that al Ghazali's ethical system is a useful tool for modern governance rather than an idealistic religious concept. The country can guarantee that the path towards Society 5.0 stays human-cantered, spiritually based, and in line with the Madani goal of creating a society that is compassionate, reliable, and inventive by firmly establishing Malaysia's political integrity in the values of purification, intention, and justice. Critically, this study also contends that adopting an *al-Ghazalian* ethical framework is not optional if Society 5.0 is to remain genuinely human centric. Technology accelerates both virtue and vice where integrity is weak, it accelerates corruption faster than reform. Therefore, the failure to address the moral formation of political leaders renders any technological governance project ethically fragile. This conclusion is consistent with both classical Islamic political thought and contemporary political ethics, which converge on the insight that moral character is the foundation of just governance.

In conclusion, this discussion reinforces the article's central claim that political integrity is the decisive in the variable in the ethical realization of Society 5.0. Al Ghazali's ethical philosophy provides a coherent, rigorous and contextually resonant framework capable of grounding Malaysia's Madani aspirations in moral reality. Without such grounding, Society 5.0 risks becoming a technologically advanced yet ethically hollow project. With it, Malaysia has the potential to demonstrate that authentic progress lies not in the supremacy of technology, but in the moral steadfastness of those who govern it.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued, without equivocation, that the ethical deficit in political leadership constitutes the most decisive barrier to the realization of a genuinely human-centric Society 5.0 in Malaysia. While technological readiness, policy sophistication, and institutional reform are frequently foregrounded in national discourse, these elements remain structurally fragile when detached from a coherent moral foundation. The Madani framework, with its emphasis on compassion, trust, and innovation, provides an important normative direction; however, its transformative potential is significantly constrained if political integrity is treated as an aspirational ideal rather than an operational principle.

By grounding ethical leadership in the *al-Ghazalian* paradigm, particularly through *tazkiyah al-nafs, niyyah* and *adl,* this article demonstrates that ethical governance cannot be reduced to compliance mechanisms, digital transparency tools or procedural accountability alone. Al-Ghazali's moral philosophy insists that ethical action begins with the inner self, where

purified intention disciplines power, restrains ego and orients decision-making toward the common good. In the context of techno-governance, this insight is critical: advanced technologies amplify both virtue and vice. Without morally anchored leaders, digital systems risk entrenching injustice, normalizing surveillance, and instrumentalizing citizens rather than empowering them.

From a first-principles perspective, the integration of al-Ghazali's ethics restores the original purpose of governance such *as riayah al-maslahah* (the protection of public interest) within an age of algorithmic decision-making. Acting as the "tenth man," this framework challenges the uncritical assumption that technological sophistication naturally produces ethical out-comes. As a devil's advocate, it exposes the uncomfortable reality that corruption, abuse of power, and moral negligence can be digitized as efficiently as public services. Logically, therefore, ethical leadership must precede technological deployment, not follow it as an after-thought. From the standpoint of an unconventional implementer, embedding *al-Ghazalian* ethics into leadership training, political culture, and policy evaluation offers a practical pathway to operationalizing Madani values beyond rhetoric. As a critical friend, this study under-scores that Malaysia's aspiration toward Society 5.0 will ring hollow if moral reform is not pursued with the same seriousness as digital transformation.

In conclusion, the *al-Ghazalian* ethical framework is not merely a philosophical supplement to Society 5.0, but a necessary corrective to its potential excesses. Integrating this paradigm into Malaysian political culture is essential to ensure that technological progress re-mains subordinate to human dignity, justice, and spiritual responsibility. Without such integration, Society 5.0 risks becoming technologically advanced yet ethically impoverished. With it, Malaysia can offer a distinctive model of governance, one in which technology serves humanity, leadership is disciplined by conscience, and the Madani vision is realized not only in policy documents, but in moral practice.

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