South Africa's 32-year ANC led transition into chaos

Credit: Research, written and compiled by Tony Stone



The African National Congress (ANC), a black majority government, have been in power for 32 years, since the dawn pf democracy in 1994. The ANC's performance has been mixed but with a skewness to the abysmal in the last decade. While successfully establishing a CODESA driven democratic constitution and initially expanding basic services like housing, water and electricity to millions of additional consumers, mainly in townships, the party's governance has been marred by systemic and epidemic corruption, and, of late, severe electricity and water crises, failing infrastructure, and persistently high unemployment.

A bottom-line breakdown of their performance highlights the following:

Social and Political Successes

Transitioned South Africa from apartheid to a constitutional democracy, protecting fundamental human rights and establishing a free press and independent judiciary. Significantly expanded access to basic amenities. Electricity, piped water, and formal sanitation have been rolled out to millions of previously marginalized citizens. Established an expansive social grant system that currently supports over 27 million vulnerable citizens, preventing extreme poverty for many. Increased enrolment in primary and secondary schools, and expanded free access to healthcare and schooling for poorer communities.

Economic and Governance Failures

Decades of underinvestment and mismanagement of state-owned enterprises resulted in chronic electricity shortages (load-shedding) and deteriorating road and rail networks, severely stunting economic growth. The misuse of state resources and systemic patronage networks—particularly during the Jacob Zuma era—depleted public funds and hollowed out key state institutions. South Africa continues to suffer from one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, with youth unemployment and economic inequality widening. Many municipalities have suffered from financial mismanagement and a failure to maintain basic water and waste infrastructure. Their failure to carry out repairs and maintenance has been their greatest shortcoming.

Political losses

From a landslide victory of 62.65% in South Africa's first democratic election, the ANC's 30-year outright majority came to an end in the 2024 general election, where their vote share dropped to just over 40%. This historic decline reflected deep voter frustration with corruption and failing public services. Consequently, the ANC was forced to form a multiparty Government of National Unity to continue leading the country. Today, the ANC, in 2026, holds between 33% and 35% of the national vote.

South Africa's transition

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy was a delicate balancing act. While the ANC inherited a state with racially segregated Black townships and homelands, a limiting Bantu education system, and, after years of international sanctions, a struggling economy, it transformed into governmental incompetence—characterized by systemic corruption, cadre deployment, and state capture—that has severely worsened. The trajectory of the transition and its subsequent management by the ANC can be mapped across three critical areas of developmental need. These were:

1. The Group Areas Act forcibly separated populations, resulting in sprawling, underdeveloped townships far from economic hubs. Today, poor South Africans still spend a disproportionate amount of their income on basic transport.
2. The Bantu Education system was intentionally designed to provide Black South Africans with inferior education. The ANC inherited a massive skills gap that continues to obstruct economic advancement and effective public administration.
3. Wealth was heavily concentrated in the hands of the white minority. While the ANC has facilitated the growth of a Black middle class, overall wealth redistribution has been slow, perpetuating an "economic apartheid".

The Negotiation Compromise (1990–1994)

The negotiated settlement granted political liberation but necessitated the white minority to retain control over the economy, not due to restrictive, discriminatory laws, which had been abolished, but to a lack of knowledge, experience and qualifications of the majority of Black people. South Africa's economy was also suffering from foreign credit depletion, a national debt of 45% of Gross Domestic Product (now 78,9% of GDP), negligible economic growth resulting from its apartheid policies and international sanctions. This collectively limited the ANC's immediate rollout of social services and township and homeland infrastructure.

ANC Governance and the Crisis of Competence

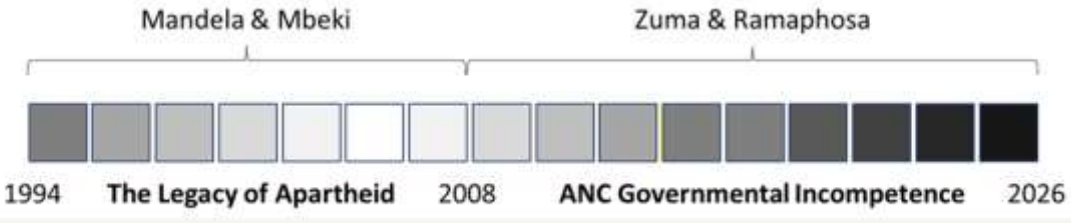
Regardless of the fact that ANC cadres lacked knowledge, qualifications and experience, the ANC adopted a policy of deploying loyal party members to key positions in the civil service and state-owned enterprises (SOEs). This policy frequently prioritized political allegiance over merit and technical expertise, directly contributing to institutional decay.

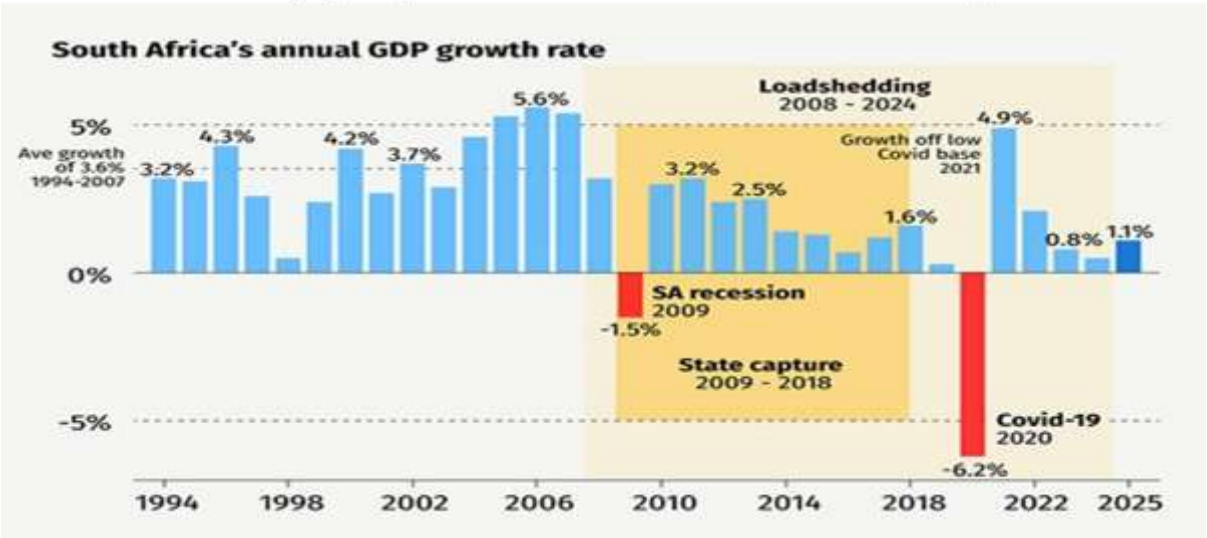
This led to **w**idespread embezzlement, particularly during the Zuma era, hollowed out the state's resources. The landmark State Capture Commission exposed how billions of rands meant for public services and energy infrastructure were systematically looted.

Municipalities across the country struggled with crumbling infrastructure, chronic water outages, and rolling blackouts. These failures are primarily tied to maladministration and a lack of maintenance rather than the historical legacy of apartheid.

The quality of education delivered was also allowed to lapse.

This led to the current state of governmental failure that has resulted in South Africa having one of the highest inequality rates globally. The ANC's overwhelming dominance post-1994 has gradually eroded, culminating in a drop below 40% in the national vote, forcing the party into a Government of National Unity to maintain power. From Mandela to Ramaphosa, South Africa's legacy of apartheid transitioned into gross governmental incompetence. Its effect on the economy can be seen below.





The interplay between apartheid's historical legacy and contemporary ANC governance failures has uniquely crippled South Africa's **education**, **energy**, and **healthcare** sectors. While the roots of these crises lie in the deliberate disparities of the past, decades of mismanagement, lack of accountability, and state-level corruption have systematically deepened the damage.

From Bantu Education to Institutional Decay

The education sector represents a direct line from historical oppression to modern systemic failure. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 explicitly underfunded Black schools to restrict non-white children to manual labour roles. It created a dual system: world-class infrastructure for white students and vastly under-resourced schools for everyone else. But it did not prevent a black student from attaining a better education if driven to do so. Several Black scholars, professionals, and activists achieved extraordinary educational and intellectual heights before 1994

Since 1994, and despite receiving a massive portion of the ANC's national budget, SA's basic education system remains highly unequal. Infrastructure failures are rampant, with thousands of schools still lacking basic sanitation or safe facilities.

Government policy enforces mother-tongue learning for early grades, but shifts abruptly to English in Grade 4. Due to the ANC shutting down teacher training colleges, millions of pupils face an academic barrier that heavily deflates literacy and mathematics proficiency from an early age. The decision to close teacher training colleges deeply disrupted the supply pipeline of South African educators. While universities have significantly ramped up graduate numbers in recent years, the structural shift has created a highly imbalanced, complex crisis of mismatched skills, geographic gaps, and systemic bottlenecks.

Political appeasement has allowed powerful teacher unions, such as the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), to wield immense influence over appointments, often prioritizing political leverage over educator merit and performance accountability.

Energy: From Strategic Isolation to Eskom's Collapse

The energy crisis has been the single greatest bottleneck to South Africa's economic development, driven directly by institutional mismanagement.

The apartheid state built a centralized power grid via Eskom designed strictly to feed mining industries and affluent white suburbs, mostly bypassing Black townships and rural areas. The fundamental limiting factor of South Africa's pre-1994 energy policy was the mandate of "separate development" (apartheid). By restricting energy access to the privileged minority and industrial sectors, the policy artificially suppressed domestic demand while heavily insulating the Minerals-Energy Complex (MEC).

Post-1994, the ANC successfully expanded the electrical grid to millions of households but completely failed to invest in new generation capacity to meet the demand. Warned as early as 1998 that the grid would run out of power by 2007, the government delayed building new power stations.

When massive mega-projects like the Medupi and Kusile power stations were finally commissioned, they were plagued by design flaws, severe delays, and rampant corruption tied to ANC-linked entities. Years of intense "load shedding" (rotational blackouts) devastated small businesses and halted economic growth.

South Africa has experienced a prolonged pause in load shedding. However, this relief is largely driven by a massive, citizen-led migration to private rooftop solar power—which has heavily reduced overall demand on Eskom's grid—alongside intensive, costly short-term plant maintenance under the Generation Recovery Plan.

Healthcare: A Stark Two-Tier System

South Africa's healthcare system accurately reflects the deep economic divide between the rich and the poor. Healthcare was strictly segregated by race, heavily under-resourced in Black communities, and fractured across 14 separate administrative departments.

While the ANC unified the departments, public healthcare has severely deteriorated due to severe under-resourcing and poor budget management within provincial governments leading to maladministration, corruption in equipment procurement, and a chronic shortage of medical staff. Academic hospitals frequently suffer from critical maintenance backlogs and drug stockouts.

In an attempt to address the inequality between public healthcare and the world-class, privately funded medical aid sector, the government pushed forward the National Health Insurance (NHI) Act. But, because of the maladministration and endemic corruption, the implementation of the NHI is effectively frozen. The Constitutional

Court is dealing with intense legal battles from medical associations, business groups, and opposition parties over funding feasibility, public consultation failures, and worries about state-run fund corruption.

Service delivery protests

An exact cumulative total for all service delivery protests across the 32 years of ANC governance (1994–2026) does not exist because systematic statistical tracking only began in 2004**.**

However, credible data compiled by research bodies like Municipal IQ (via their *Municipal Hotspots Monitor*) and the South African Police Service (SAPS) Incident Registration Information System (IRIS) indicate that South Africa has experienced approximately 18,000 registered public protests tied to service delivery since the dawn of democracy.

The progression of these protests highlights distinct historical shifts:

The Early Democratic Years (1994–2003): Very low (dozens per year). Immediately following the 1994 transition, communities afforded the ANC a "honeymoon period" as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) rolled out. Public sentiment leaned toward patience as institutional frameworks were unified.

The Great Escalation (2004–2014): Over 3 000 major localized uprisings. Patience evaporated as municipal failures, lack of adequate housing, and poor sanitation became entrenched. This era gave rise to the label "The Protest Capital of the World." In 2014 alone, major service delivery protests tracked by local indices spiked to historic peaks as communities voiced anger over unfulfilled electoral promises.

The Era of Deepening Crisis (2015–2024): Roughly 200 to 300 *major* structural disruptions annually, alongside thousands of smaller local blockades. Protests became increasingly organized, disruptive, and violent. SAPS data frequently recorded intensive periods of unrest—such as over 900 crowd-management incidents in just a single six-month window between late 2020 and early 2021—as water outages and Eskom's rolling blackouts reached critical levels. By 2022, Municipal IQ noted a dramatic bounce-back to high pre-pandemic protest rates.

The Modern Landscape (2025–2026): Data released heading into 2026 recorded 229 major service delivery protests for the prior calendar year, meaning a major, disruptive localized uprising occurs on average two out of every three days in South Africa.

While categorized under the umbrella of "service delivery", independent academic field studies indicate that community anger is consistently sparked by four specific failure points:

- **Housing (21% of grievances):** Protesters citing decades-long delays on RDP waiting lists or incomplete, defective state housing structures.
- **Electricity (11% of grievances):** Anger over lack of basic grid connections or unannounced local infrastructure blackouts.
- **Water & Sanitation (10% of grievances):** Dysfunctional local sewage systems and dry taps due to unmaintained municipal water pumps.
- **Political Arrogance (58%):** A widespread public sentiment that municipal counsellors do not listen or respond to peaceful communication, leaving violent street blockades as the only way to force accountability

The Zondo Commission

The Zondo Commission concluded that South Africa's state apparatus was systematically hijacked for private enrichment, implicating former President Zuma and the Gupta family in a coordinated criminal enterprise. The final report detailed R57 billion in tainted funds, with the vast majority concentrated in SOEs like Eskom and Transnet, leading to recommendations for over 1,400 criminal prosecutions.

As of 2026, only four major trials stemming directly from the State Capture Commission have been concluded with guilty verdicts. While the Zondo Commission's evidence implicated over 1,400 individuals and companies, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) converted these findings into a specific list of roughly 218 targeted criminal investigation recommendations.

The actual progress on prosecuting these recommended targets highlights why critics and former Chief Justice Raymond Zondo himself have condemned the pace of justice as being painfully slow:

The Current Prosecution Breakdown

Only four state-capture-related cases have fully concluded, all resulting in convictions.

51 Individuals and 27 Companies are in Court. There are currently 11 major trials actively enrolled on court dockets. High-profile trials scheduled through 2025/2026 include the Free State asbestos case, SA Express, and massive Transnet looting contracts.

Over 100 cases are still Under Active Investigation**:** Roughly half of the criminal recommendations remain trapped in the investigation stage by the NPA's Investigating Directorate Against Corruption (IDAC) and the Hawks.

Why are there so few prosecutions?

Under South African law, testimony given at a Commission of Inquiry cannot simply be copy-pasted into a criminal trial. The NPA has had to painstakingly re-interview witnesses and rebuild the forensic evidence from scratch to meet the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard required for criminal court.

The very institutions tasked with investigating these crimes (the NPA and the Hawks) were systematically defunded, stripped of skilled personnel, and compromised during the state capture era. Rebuilding their forensic and financial prosecution skills has taken years.

A major point of public frustration is that while mid-level bureaucrats and external contractors have faced charges, very few sitting Cabinet members or top-tier ANC political elites implicated by Zondo have actually stepped foot inside a criminal dock.

While criminal convictions are severely lagging, the government has found much quicker success through asset recovery and financial forfeiture:

- **Over R11 billion** in stolen public funds has been successfully recovered.
- **R13 billion** in assets related specifically to state capture has been frozen.
- **71 former directors** of state-owned enterprises (such as Eskom and Transnet) have faced delinquency proceedings to ban them from ever directing a company again.

The Madlanga Commission

The Madlanga Commission, formally known as the *Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Criminality, Political Interference, and Corruption in the Criminal Justice System,* is an ongoing investigation focused on the infiltration of organized crime syndicates into South Africa's law enforcement, judiciary, and intelligence structures. Established by President Cyril Ramaphosa following explosive public allegations by KZN Police Commissioner Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, public hearings began on 17 September 2025 and are actively proceeding. The commission is chaired by retired acting Deputy Chief Justice Mbuyiseli Madlanga.

Unlike the Zondo Commission (which focused heavily on procurement fraud and corporate "state capture"), the Madlanga Commission focuses on violent crime networks capturing the state from the ground up. It is tasked with probing:

- The infiltration of criminal syndicates into the South African Police Service (SAPS), Hawks, National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), and the judiciary.
- Political interference in high-profile criminal investigations and the deliberate shutting down of dedicated anti-crime task teams.
- Sabotage within the intelligence and correctional services sectors.

As the commission progresses through its hearings, several major criminal networks and specific high-profile scandals have emerged:

- The commission has uncovered a highly sophisticated criminal network operating primarily out of Gauteng. This syndicate is heavily involved in high-stakes tender fraud, drug trafficking, hijackings, and orchestrated contract killings. WhatsApp records and leaked communications have exposed deep financial links between syndicate bosses and senior officials.
- Striking early evidence was brought forward regarding the KZN Political Killings Task Team. Testimony revealed that political actors deliberately worked to compromise and eventually disband dedicated police units that were getting too close to uncovering political sponsors behind assassinations.
- The commission has heard shocking testimony regarding rogue, staged search-and-seizure operations orchestrated by senior metro police officials. A primary example under fire is a 2023 raid involving the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Police Department (EMPD), where R14.9 million worth of precious sugilite stones were "confiscated" and subsequently vanished from police custody.
- Intensive hearings have focused on a massive 2021 cocaine seizure at a warehouse in Aeroton. Cross-examinations of alleged informants and traffic police chiefs have exposed a dark, parallel network where law enforcement officials were actively bribed to help transport and protect multi-million-rand drug shipments moving from Durban ports into Johannesburg.

Ramaphosa formally received an interim report from Justice Madlanga, which led to immediate referrals to independent law enforcement bodies for accelerated criminal investigations and disciplinary actions against compromised officials.

The commission is currently holding active public hearings, continuing to grill high-ranking law enforcement commanders, politicians, and private security bosses.
The overarching pattern emerging from the Madlanga Commission is that South Africa's systemic governance breakdown has evolved from administrative corruption into a profound public safety crisis, where parts of the policing and justice network actively protect and facilitate organized crime.

Bottom-line summary of the ANC's performance

The African National Congress (ANC) has a deeply mixed performance record: while successfully establishing a democratic constitution and vastly expanding basic services like housing, water, and electricity to millions, the party's governance has been marred by systemic corruption, severe electricity and water crises, failing infrastructure, and persistently high unemployment.

A bottom-line breakdown of their performance highlights the following:

ANC social and political successes

- Transitioned South Africa from apartheid to a constitutional democracy, protecting fundamental human rights and establishing a free press and independent judiciary.
- Significantly expanded access to basic amenities. Electricity, piped water, and formal sanitation have been rolled out to millions of previously marginalized citizens.
- Established an expansive social grant system that currently supports over 27 million vulnerable citizens, preventing extreme poverty for many.
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ANC economic and governance failures

- Decades of underinvestment and mismanagement of state-owned enterprises resulted in chronic electricity shortages (load-shedding) and deteriorating road and rail networks, severely stunting economic growth.
- The misuse of state resources and systemic patronage networks—particularly during the Jacob Zuma era—depleted public funds and hollowed out key state institutions.
- South Africa continues to suffer from one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, with youth unemployment and economic inequality widening.
- Many municipalities have suffered from financial mismanagement and a failure to maintain basic water and waste infrastructure.

As a consequence of the 2024 general elections, their successes and failures, the ANC was forced to form a multiparty Government of National Unity to continue leading the country. The Government of National Unity (GNU) has been moderately successful, acting as a critical stabilizing force for South Africa. It has achieved significant breakthroughs in energy stability and economic sentiment, but remains deeply constrained by internal ideological gridlock, a bloated cabinet, and slow progress on core crises like unemployment.

The Government of National Unity (GNU)

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The bottom-line results can be split into three distinct categories:

GNU successes:

The grid has achieved unprecedented stability, surpassing over 300 consecutive days without blackouts. This was driven by aggressive energy sector reforms and massive deployment of private solar energy.

The coalition averted political chaos, causing a "GNU rerate" where investor confidence returned, the Rand strengthened, and GDP growth forecasts ticked upward towards 1.6%.

In specific ministries, such as Home Affairs, there have been noticeable improvements in visa processing, immigration controls, and cutting administrative red tape.

GNU weaknesses and failures

Deep-rooted policy disagreements between the ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA) over the National Health Insurance (NHI), the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act, and economic policies have caused frequent gridlock.

Instead of cutting state expenditure, the GNU expanded the cabinet to a record size of 32 ministers and 43 deputy ministers to accommodate various coalition partners, costing taxpayers billions.

The broad, systemic issues affecting ordinary South Africans have barely improved. Extreme youth unemployment remains unresolved, while consumers face steep, rising electricity tariffs despite a stable grid.

GNU political durability

Despite public friction, budget deadlocks, and warnings from opposition parties like Action4SA labelling it a "Government of National Underperformance," the GNU has proven shaky but structurally stable. The coalition partners have consistently chosen compromise over collapse because the political alternative—dissolving parliament—is a risk no major party wants to take.

Why South Africa is not a failed state

South Africa is not a failed state, nor is it close to a civil war, though it continues to experience severe institutional strain and localized instability. Leading political analysts, economists, and global indexes categorize South Africa as a "fragile state" or a country under an "elevated warning," rather than one facing an imminent systemic collapse. The structural realities keeping the country anchored, alongside the distinct flashpoints that prevent absolute stability, outline South Africa's current standing.

A failed state is defined by a total loss of territorial control, the collapse of law and order, and an inability to provide basic governance. South Africa remains far from this threshold due to several deeply resilient pillars. The South African Revenue Service (SARS) effectively collects taxes, the judiciary remains fiercely independent, and the banking sector is globally sophisticated and stable. A truly failed state cannot sustain public infrastructure; conversely, South Africa successfully administers social grants to over 27 million people every month. The 2024 election and the subsequent formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) proved that political transitions happen via the ballot box, not through coups or armed conflict. On the global Fragile States Index by the Fund for Peace, South Africa typically sits around 80th out of 179 nations. This places it in the "Warning" zone—comparable to peer emerging markets like Brazil—but nowhere near the "High Alert" or "Alert" states like Somalia or Afghanistan.

Why people use the "failing state" label

While the state as a whole has not collapsed, localized governance has deteriorated dramatically. This dynamic is often described as **"**failing pockets**"** within a functioning nation. Yes, Dozens of local governments have functionally failed, leaving towns without clean drinking water, reliable sewage systems, or pothole-free roads. With exceptionally high homicide and extortion rates, the state has lost its monopoly on violence in certain neighbourhoods, forcing citizens and businesses to rely heavily on the private security industry. Though the electricity grid has stabilized, the state rail and port logistics network (Transnet) remains a severe bottleneck to economic growth.

The likelihood of a civil war

The probability of South Africa erupting into a conventional civil war is extremely low. The country lacks the primary drivers of civil warfare, such as distinct insurgent armies, regional secessionist movements with military backing, or major religious fractures.

However, the real threat is not a civil war, but rather chronic civil unrest and localized lawlessness. This manifests in specific ways:

- Highly localized, volatile protests over water, housing, and electricity occur regularly.
- The July 2021 riots demonstrated that high unemployment, political factionalism, and poverty can be weaponized into massive, short-term civil unrest.
- Syndicates, such as the "construction mafia," use violence to disrupt economic activity, acting as localized criminal disruptions rather than ideological rebel forces.

In short, South Africa is undergoing a slow, turbulent navigation of its socioeconomic crises. The risk is not a sudden, cataclysmic collapse into warfare, but rather the ongoing struggle against institutional inefficiency and high unemployment. The danger, of course, is that organisations such as the EFF and MKP will exploit this situation to create an environment conducive to overthrowing the government in pursuance of their ideological objectives. The lessons we learned from KZN July 2021, and Gauteng, should not be ignored. Starting an unauthorized or volatile protest is incredibly easy due to high socio-economic frustration that exists. So far, at least 10 people (including Malawian and Mozambican nationals) have been killed. The 30 June 2026 is around the corner.

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