

## Amid insurgency, Mozambicans express fear, growing disapproval of government response

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 484 | Jaynisha Patel**

### Summary

In Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado, the insurgent group Ahlu-Sunnah Wa-Jama'a (ASWJ) has spearheaded debilitating attacks on the state and local populations. Since 2017, the group – known locally as al-Shabaab – has consolidated its presence, seized key infrastructure and transport routes, and killed at least 3,382 civilians (Rambourg & Njanji, 2021; Risk Bulletin, 2020; Faria, 2021; Cabo Ligado, 2021).

The group's origins, operational support structures, and financing are largely unknown; while some researchers point to an affiliation with the Islamic State (Estelle, 2021), others believe that the conflict system remains localized (Lucey & Patel, 2021).

Cabo Delgado, home to long-standing ethnic and religious divisions, is characterized by underdevelopment, informal economies, illicit trade, recently discovered liquid natural gas, and widespread government corruption (Lucey & Patel, 2021; Nkomo & Buchanan-Clarke, 2020; Haysom, Gastrow, & Shaw, 2018). Together, these realities create weak spots for a violent extremist group to exploit.

In its early response to the insurgency, the state sought military support from private companies such as the Wagner Group and Dyck Advisory Group. The heavily militarized response has been a topic of heated public debate, with local groups reporting abuses at the hands of national and private military personnel (Amnesty International, 2021). After initially preventing intervention by regional bodies, President Filipe Nyusi's government took the issue to the Southern African Development Community (SADC). As of October, the SADC Mission in Mozambique has an estimated 1,000 troops on the ground, including 300 from the South African National Defence Force, and has extended its operations in Cabo Delgado indefinitely (Fabricius, 2021).

Apart from the militarized response, little has been done to address underlying factors such as economic and social marginalization and a lack of job opportunities for youth (Faria, 2021). Speaking at a press conference in September 2021, Nyusi rejected narratives attributing the emergence and consolidation of the insurgency to grievances (YouTube, 2021). Yet many locals continue to experience a dearth of opportunities while their livelihoods remain tied to the informal economy, now at increased risk of disruption from the conflict.

Insecurity in Cabo Delgado prevented Afrobarometer's most recent national survey from collecting data in rural parts of the province. But findings from the rest of the country show that a quarter of Mozambicans feared violence from extremists during the past two years. Citizens believe that support for violent extremist groups in Cabo Delgado comes from other Islamist groups as well as ordinary people, and they say that recruitment is most often based on promises of material enrichment or on force.

Public disapproval of the government's response to the insurgency has increased sharply, though many citizens express confidence in the ability of the government, SADC, and the

African Union (AU) to resolve the conflict. Views on the best strategies to address the crisis vary widely, from increased military power to negotiation with the extremists, with only a small minority prioritizing job creation and other economic interventions.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Mozambique, led by Ipsos Mozambique, interviewed 1,110 adult Mozambicans in May-July 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Mozambique in 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2018.

The Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural parts of the Cabo Delgado province, comprising about 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity in the province and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting data in this area.

## Key findings

- One-third (32%) of Mozambicans say they feared violence from extremists during the previous two years, including 6% who report having personally experienced such violence.
- The main reasons that respondents cite for why people join an extremist group are for personal enrichment (24%), because they are forced to do so (22%), to escape poverty (13%), and because of a lack of education (12%). Only 4% cite religious beliefs.
- A slim majority (53%) of citizens say the government is doing a poor job of preventing and resolving violent conflict, a significant increase from 35% in 2018.
- Half (50%) of Mozambicans express "a lot" of confidence in the government's ability to resolve the Cabo Delgado conflict, and around four in 10 say the same about SADC (44%), the AU (42%), and South Africa (38%).
- Views on how best to address the conflict are divided between military solutions (39%) and negotiating with the extremists (21%) or working with local leaders (10%).

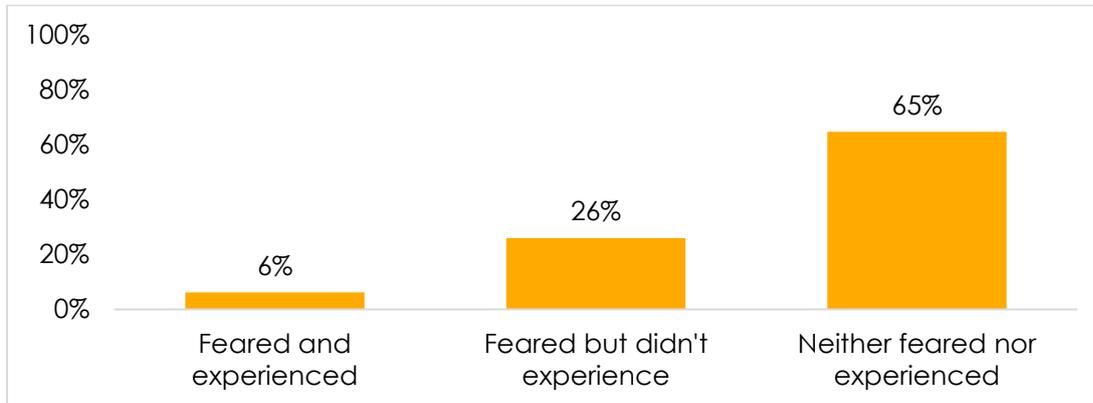
## Fear and experience of violent extremism

Insecurity prevented Afrobarometer survey teams from collecting data in rural Cabo Delgado, so our findings probably under-report fear and experience of violent extremism in Mozambique. But even in the rest of the country, one in four citizens (26%) say they feared extremist violence, and about one in 20 (6%) say they experienced such violence, during the past two years (Figure 1).

On average, reported fear and experience of extremist violence vary little by demographic group. Citizens who are economically well off (i.e. who experienced no lived poverty) and those with post-secondary education are less likely to report having experienced extremist violence than their poorer and less-educated counterparts, although levels of fear are similar across the board (Figure 2).

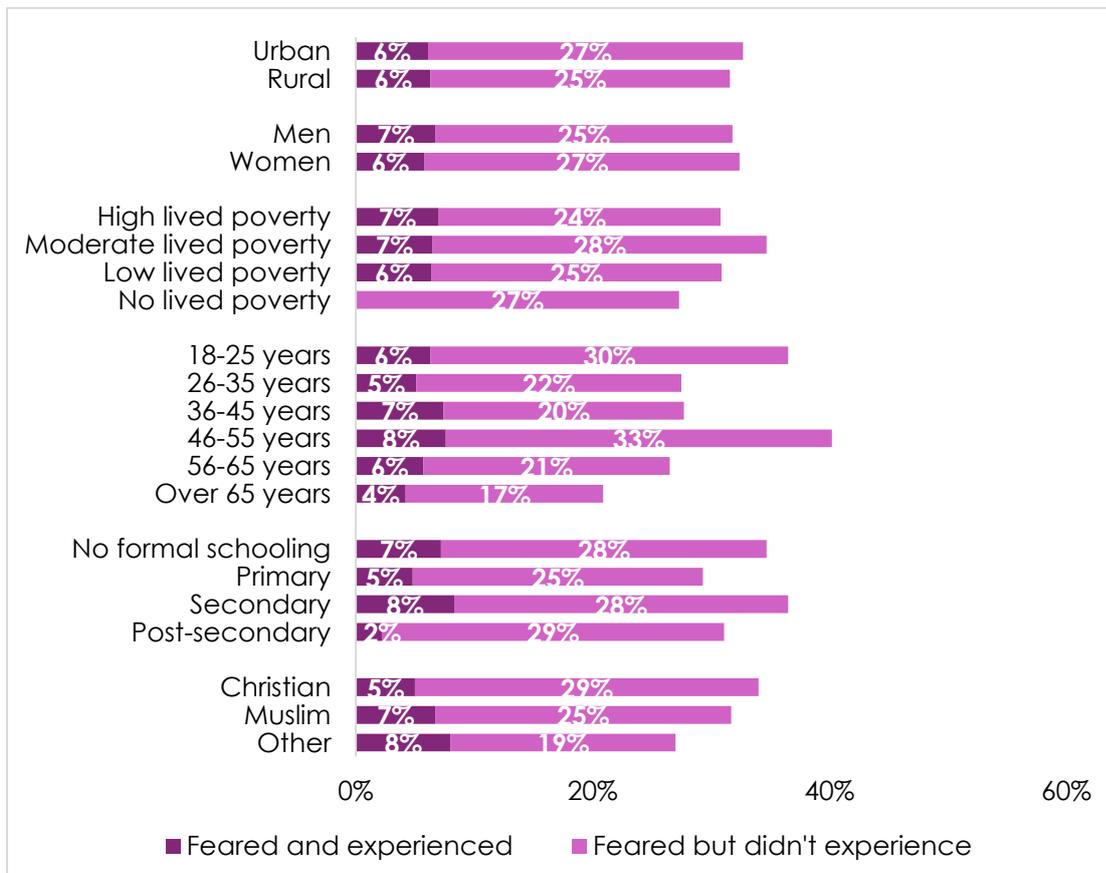
While the insurgent group ASWJ grew out of a religious organization (West, 2018) and seeks a return to ancient teachings and practices of Islam (Turner, 2010), Christian and Muslim respondents express similar levels of fear and experience of extremist violence.

**Figure 1: Fear and experience of violent extremism** | Mozambique | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence: An armed attack by political or religious extremists? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?

**Figure 2: Fear and experience of extremist violence** | by socio-demographic group | Mozambique | 2021

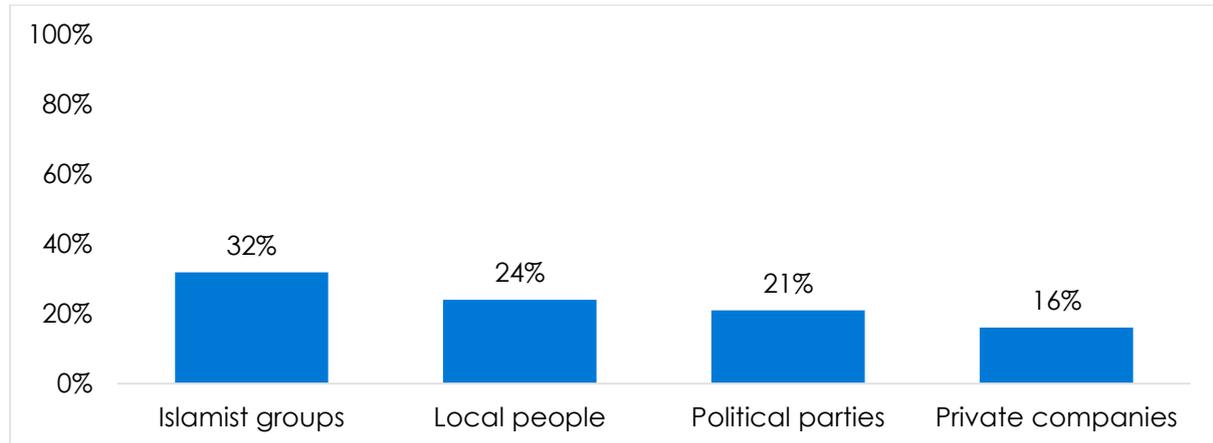


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### Propping up the insurgency

Support for and recruitment into the insurgency have been shrouded in speculation. Asked about the extent to which they think selected groups of people are involved in supporting extremist activity, 32% of respondents cite Islamist groups, followed by local residents (24%), political parties (21%), and private companies (16%) (Figure 3).

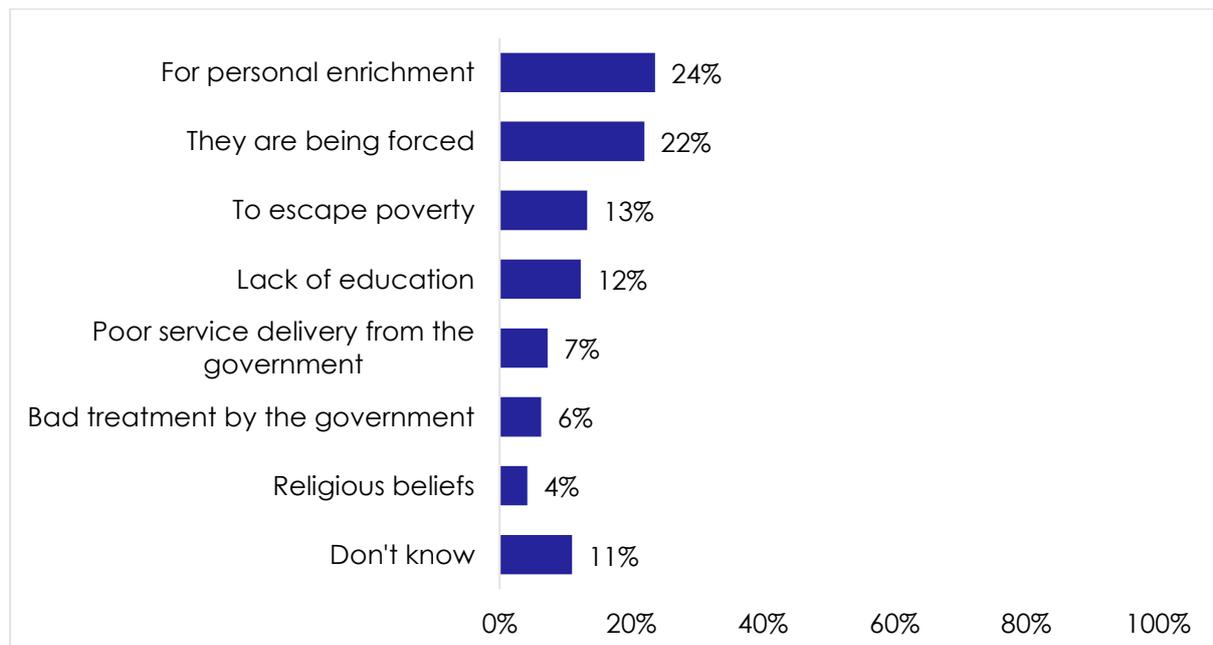
**Figure 3: Who is involved in supporting extremist groups? | Mozambique | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in supporting and assisting the extremist groups that have launched attacks and kidnappings in Cabo Delgado, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Mozambicans offer a wide variety of reasons why people might join armed extremist groups, including for personal material gain (24%), because they are forced to (22%), to escape poverty (13%), and because of a lack of education (12%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Reasons for joining extremist groups | Mozambique | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** There are many reasons why people join armed extremist groups in Cabo Delgado. In your opinion, what is the main reason people join extremist groups in our country?

Despite long-standing neglect of the country's northern provinces by the state, only 6% cite poor treatment by the state as the main reason why people join extremist groups. And despite the religious underpinnings of the insurgency, even fewer (4%) cite religious beliefs, a finding that is in line with a United Nations Development Programme (2021) conclusion that religious beliefs are not a major factor in decisions to join a violent extremist group.

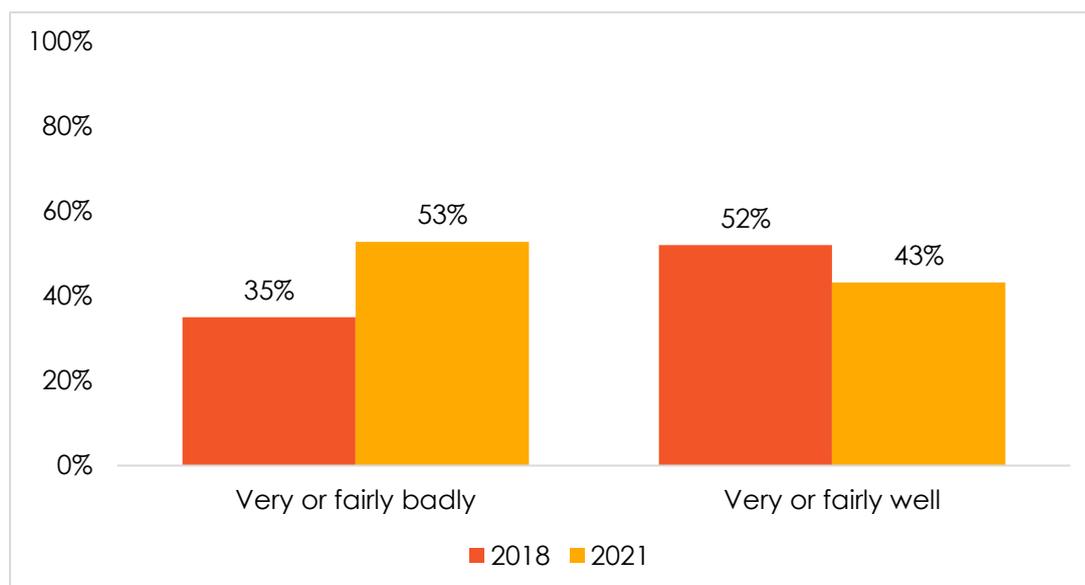
However, residents of Cabo Delgado have described instances in which members of mosques used an offer of business loans to recruit youth into extremist groups (Haysom, 2018), exemplifying recruitment using material incentives through religious channels.

### Managing violent extremism

Managing the insurgency is a critical policy issue for the Mozambique government and the larger region. To date, most of the response has been heavily militarized and largely managed through outside private military groups.

A slim majority (53%) of Mozambicans say the government is doing "fairly badly" or "very badly" at preventing and resolving violent conflict, up from 35% in 2018 (Figure 5). The proportion of citizens who approve of the state's performance on the issue has dropped to 43%.

**Figure 5: How is the government doing at preventing and resolving violent conflict?**  
 | Mozambique | 2018-2021

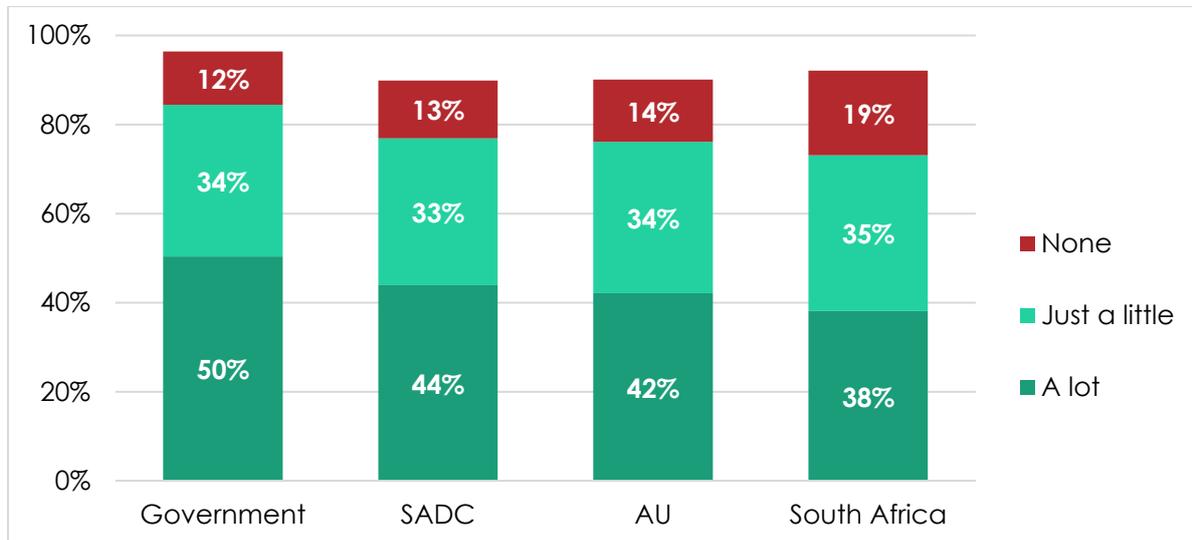


**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Preventing or resolving violent conflict?

But half (50%) of Mozambicans say they have "a lot" of confidence in their government to resolve the conflict in Cabo Delgado, while another 34% express "just a little" confidence. Only 12% say they have no confidence at all in their government on this issue (Figure 6).

In many countries, efforts to counter violent extremism rely extensively on international support. Despite the Mozambican government's initial reluctance to involve regional or multilateral agencies (Vines, 2021), more than four in 10 citizens say they have "a lot" of confidence in the ability of SADC (44%) and the AU (42%) to help resolve the conflict, in addition to one-third who express "just a little" confidence. Slightly fewer (38%) put "a lot" of faith in South Africa.

**Figure 6: Confidence in ability to resolve the conflict in Cabo Delgado**  
 | Mozambique | 2021



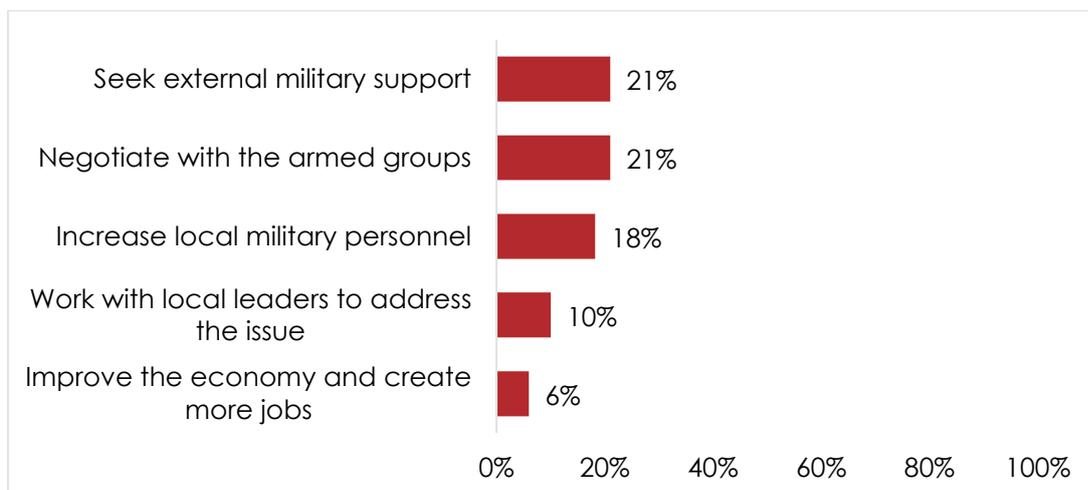
**Respondents were asked:** How much confidence do you have in each of the following actors to resolve the conflict in Cabo Delgado?

Public opinion on strategies to address the conflict is sharply divided. One in five Mozambicans (21%) say the best strategy is to seek external military support, and another 18% would prioritize increasing the local military presence (Figure 7).

But one in five (21%) would instead opt to negotiate with the armed extremists, and 10% advocate working with local leaders to address the issue.

When it comes to addressing root causes of the conflict, only 6% of Mozambicans highlight improving the economy and creating more jobs as a way to resolve the conflict. This finding stands in contrast to the large share of respondents who believe that people join the insurgency for material gain or to escape poverty (Figure 4).

**Figure 7: Best strategy to address the conflict in Cabo Delgado** | Mozambique  
 | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, what do you think would be the best strategy the government can use to address the conflict in Cabo Delgado?

## Conclusion

As ASWJ grows in confidence and operational capacity, effective policy solutions have become an urgent need. Mozambicans across the country report fearing violence from extremists, and a growing number disapprove of the government's response.

But very few have given up on the government's ability to prevent and resolve violent conflict. Many are also open to support from SADC and the AU.

And while few survey respondents prioritize economic interventions to address the conflict, the view that many recruits to extremist groups are motivated by the promise of material gain suggests that strategies that support inclusive development and build community resilience may need to be part of the mix.

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