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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRUCTURAL IMBALANCE AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF OWERRI ZONE IN IMO STATE GOVERNORSHIP POSITION

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ABSTRACT

The persistent structural imbalance and perceived marginalization of the Owerri zone in Imo State's governorship position underscore the deep-rooted inequities embedded in the state's political structure. Since the creation of Imo State in 1976, the governorship has been predominantly occupied by candidates from the Orlu and Okigwe zones, while the Owerri Zone remains largely excluded from holding the highest political office, despite its significant population and political presence across many of the State's 230 wards. This imbalance reflects not only the uneven distribution of political power but also the systemic marginalization of a substantial demographic and territorial constituency within the state. The study interrogates the historical, political, and socio-structural factors that have perpetuated this disparity, including elite domination, ethnic cleavages, patronage politics, and the absence of institutional mechanisms to guarantee equitable rotation of power. Using a qualitative approach grounded in the theory of structural functionalism, the paper explores how political exclusion has fostered a sense of alienation, weakened inter-zonal cohesion, and undermined democratic consolidation in Imo State. The findings reveal that the lack of inclusivity in power distribution hampers social justice, equitable representation, and sustainable development across the state's diverse communities. The study concludes that deliberate political restructuring, adherence to the principles of fairness, and the institutionalization of power rotation are imperative for restoring balance, unity, and long-term stability in Imo State's governance system.

Keywords: Structural imbalance, marginalization, governorship, political exclusion, power rotation.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The question of structural imbalance and marginalization in the distribution of political power has remained a persistent feature of Nigeria's federal and sub-national politics. Within Imo State, this issue is exemplified by the continued exclusion of the Owerri Zone from occupying the governorship position since the state's creation in 1976.

Researches have shown that despite being one of the three senatorial zones alongside Orlu and Okigwe Owerri has consistently faced political marginalization, as successive governors have predominantly emerged from the Orlu Zone, with brief interruptions from Okigwe (Okereke, 2018; Nwosu, 2021). This imbalance has not only generated political discontent but has also deepened inter-zonal distrust and weakened the sense of shared belonging among the people of the state.

Structural imbalance, in this context, refers to the uneven allocation of political power and opportunities across constituent units or groups, resulting in unequal representation and participation (Ayoade, 1982; Suberu, 2001). Such disparities often emerge from elite manipulation, patronage networks, and the absence of institutionalized frameworks for power-sharing or rotation. Consequently, marginalized zones like Owerri experience political alienation, economic neglect, and weakened bargaining power within the state's governance structure (Ikeanyibe, 2016).

The marginalization of the Owerri Zone raises critical questions about equity, justice, and inclusivity in Nigeria's democratic governance. It highlights the need for deliberate political reforms that ensure balanced representation and strengthen the legitimacy of the state's leadership. Addressing these issues is essential for promoting unity, fostering sustainable development, and consolidating democratic governance in Imo State.

2.0. CONCEPTS, THEORY, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Power Rotation

Power rotation is a political arrangement designed to ensure equitable distribution of key political offices among different groups, regions, or zones within a political entity. It is often employed as a mechanism for fostering inclusivity, managing diversity, and preventing domination by a particular group or region (Suberu, 2001). In Nigeria, power rotation has become an informal yet significant political practice aimed at balancing representation across ethnic, regional, and religious lines (Ayoade, 1998). The principle operates at both the federal and state levels, ensuring that leadership positions alternate between different groups to maintain a sense of fairness and unity.

Power Rotation and Political Equity

The idea of power rotation in Nigeria emerged as a response to persistent feelings of exclusion and domination in a multi-ethnic federation. The 1979 and 1999 constitutions, though not explicitly mentioning zoning, laid the foundation for federal charactera principle designed to ensure equitable representation in governance (Elaigwu, 2005). Political parties later adopted internal zoning arrangements to reflect this ethos, thereby promoting rotational leadership between the North and South or among senatorial districts at the state level (Omotola, 2010). In Imo State, the governorship position is ideally expected to rotate among the three senatorial zones—Orlu, Okigwe, and Owerri—to prevent prolonged domination by one zone. However, the repeated emergence of governors from the Orlu Zone since 1999 has disrupted this informal power-sharing equilibrium (Nwosu, 2021).

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Power rotation serves as a conflict management strategy in divided societies. According to Horowitz (2000), such mechanisms enhance political stability by assuring all groups that they will have periodic access to power. This promotes trust and reduces the incentives for exclusionary politics. However, critics argue that while power rotation promotes inclusivity, it may also entrench mediocrity by prioritizing geographic balance over competence (Ikeanyibe, 2016). Nonetheless, in contexts like Nigeria, where ethnic and regional identities strongly influence politics, power rotation remains an essential tool for managing diversity and fostering coexistence.

In the Imo State context, implementing rotational governorship across zones would not only correct historical imbalances but also strengthen inter-zonal harmony. Institutionalizing the principle through party constitutions or legislation could enhance political fairness and prevent elite manipulation. As Suberu (2001) emphasizes, the sustainability of Nigeria's democracy depends on deliberate mechanisms that ensure equitable access to leadership and minimize domination. Thus, power rotation represents both a political necessity and a moral imperative for inclusive governance in plural societies.

Political equity: Political equity refers to the principle of fairness and justice in the distribution of political power, rights, and opportunities among all citizens and regions within a political system. It emphasizes the equal participation of individuals and groups in governance and decision-making processes, irrespective of ethnicity, region, religion, or social status (Rawls, 1971; Dahl, 1998). Political equity ensures that no group is systematically disadvantaged or excluded from political representation and that all have access to the institutions and processes that shape their lives (Held, 2006).

In democratic societies, political equity is a cornerstone of legitimacy and stability. It implies that governance should not favor any particular group but must reflect a balance of interests that ensures inclusivity and social justice (Young, 1990). In Nigeria, however, the challenge of achieving political equity has been complicated by deep-rooted structural imbalances and elite dominance. Despite the adoption of the federal character principle to promote equitable representation, power and resources remain concentrated in the hands of a few regions and political elites (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 1998).

This inequity is evident in Imo State, where the governorship position has been monopolized by certain zones, leaving others—such as the Owerri Zone—politically disadvantaged (Nwosu, 2021).Political equity goes beyond numerical representation; it involves creating conditions that allow all groups to participate meaningfully in governance. According to Beitz (1989), fairness in political arrangements requires the inclusion of marginalized voices in policymaking and leadership selection. Without such inclusivity, democracy risks degenerating into a system that serves elite interests rather than collective welfare. Therefore, institutional frameworks—such as zoning, affirmative action, and proportional representation—are necessary to promote political equity in divided societies (Ake, 1996; Held, 2006).

In the context of Imo State, achieving political equity demands a conscious redistribution of political opportunities among the three senatorial zones. This would involve both formal and informal mechanisms that guarantee fair access to the governorship and other key offices. When political equity is institutionalized, it enhances legitimacy, strengthens social cohesion, and promotes sustainable development. As Rawls (1971) argues, justice is the first virtue of social institutions; without it, the foundations of democracy become unstable. Hence, fostering political equity in Imo State and Nigeria at large is essential for achieving enduring peace, unity, and democratic consolidation.

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2.2. Theoretical Framework: Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism is a sociological and political theory that views society as a complex system composed of interrelated structures working together to promote stability, cohesion, and social order. The theory posits that every institution, norm, and practice within a society serves a particular function necessary for the maintenance and continuity of the whole system (Parsons, 1951). Originating from the works of early sociologists such as Émile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer, and later expanded by Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton, structural functionalism emphasizes the idea that social systems operate through interdependent parts, each contributing to the overall equilibrium of society (Durkheim, 1895/1982; Merton, 1968).

According to Parsons (1951), societies are organized systems that must fulfill four key functional prerequisites adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (known as the AGIL framework). These functions ensure that social institutions such as family, government, economy, and religion contribute to the system's stability and continuity. When one part of the system fails to perform its role effectively, dysfunction emerges, potentially destabilizing the entire social order. In this sense, stability and harmony are the desired states of any social system, and imbalance or dysfunction threatens the collective equilibrium (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). In political analysis, structural functionalism provides a valuable lens for understanding how political institutions interact and sustain governance.

Almond and Coleman (1960) applied the theory to political systems, arguing that political structures such as legislatures, executives, and judiciaries perform functions essential to system maintenance, including interest articulation, rule-making, and enforcement. Structural functionalism helps explain how political imbalance or exclusion, such as the marginalization of certain regions or groups, can disrupt integration and threaten political stability (Suberu, 2001). In the context of Nigeria, where ethnic and regional diversity poses governance challenges, structural functionalism suggests that equitable representation and balanced institutional performance are critical for maintaining unity and preventing conflict (Ayoade, 1982).

Furthermore, the theory highlights that societal stability depends on functional interdependence. When some components—such as regions, ethnic groups, or political actors—are excluded from participating in governance, systemic disequilibrium occurs. This imbalance can lead to alienation, resistance, or even secessionist tendencies, as marginalized groups seek alternative means of achieving recognition and inclusion (Osaghae, 1998). Thus, structural functionalism underscores the importance of inclusive governance and fair distribution of power to preserve social and political order.

Merton (1968) expanded the theory by distinguishing between manifest functions (intended outcomes) and latent functions (unintended consequences) of social actions. This distinction is particularly relevant in political analysis, where institutional arrangements like federal character or zoning policies may have the manifest goal of promoting inclusion but produce latent dysfunctions when manipulated by elites for personal or regional advantage. In such situations, the system risks losing legitimacy as its structures no longer perform their integrative functions effectively. Applying structural functionalism to the political dynamics of Imo State provides a theoretical lens for understanding how the marginalization of the Owerri Zone in the governorship position disrupts the equilibrium of the state's political system.

According to structural functionalism, every component of a social or political system performs a role necessary for maintaining order, integration, and stability (Parsons, 1951). In the context of Imo State,

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the three senatorial zones—Owerri, Orlu, and Okigwe constitute interdependent parts of the political structure, each expected to contribute to the balance and functionality of the whole. When one of these zones, such as Owerri, is consistently excluded from holding the governorship, it creates a dysfunction that weakens political cohesion and erodes trust in the state's governance process (Nwosu, 2021).

Structural functionalism posits that stability is sustained when social and political institutions operate harmoniously and inclusively, ensuring that no group is alienated from the benefits and responsibilities of governance (Durkheim, 1895/1982; Merton, 1968). However, when power and privileges are disproportionately concentrated in one zone, as has been the case with the Orlu Zone's dominance of the governorship since 1999, the system becomes imbalanced. This imbalance generates tensions, feelings of marginalization, and potential political apathy among excluded groups (Ayoade, 1982). Consequently, the state's political system begins to exhibit signs of dysfunction, manifesting in inter-zonal rivalry, weakened legitimacy of leadership, and a decline in citizens' confidence in democratic institutions. Merton's (1968) distinction between manifest and latent functions is particularly useful in explaining the political situation in Imo State. The manifest function of electoral politics is to promote democratic participation and representation, while its latent dysfunction emerges when electoral outcomes perpetuate inequality and exclusion.

In Imo State, elite manipulation of political structures and party machinery has produced the latent effect of regional domination, contradicting the functionalist ideal of balance and integration (Ikeanyibe, 2016). The inability of the political system to equitably distribute leadership positions across the three zones reflects a structural failure that threatens the state's political equilibrium. Furthermore, the theory underscores the role of integration in maintaining social harmony. Parsons (1951) argued that integration one of the four essential functions of a social system ensures unity among interdependent parts. The exclusion of Owerri Zone from power disrupts this integrative function by fostering disaffection and alienation, thereby destabilizing the system. From a functionalist perspective, political inclusion through mechanisms such as power rotation is essential to restoring equilibrium and reinforcing the legitimacy of governance (Suberu, 2001).

The structural imbalance in Imo State's governorship position exemplifies how dysfunction within one part of a political system can affect the whole. The persistent marginalization of Owerri has not only reduced inter-zonal trust but has also undermined the moral and functional foundation of the state's democratic process. As Osaghae (1998) observes, political exclusion in multi-ethnic or regionally diverse societies often triggers instability and weakens the bonds of collective identity. Therefore, applying structural functionalism to this case suggests that the sustainability of Imo State's political system depends on restoring balance through equitable power-sharing among all zones.

Therefore, structural functionalism provides a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing and addressing the issue of political imbalance in Imo State. By emphasizing interdependence, equilibrium, and integration, the theory reveals that inclusive governance and fair distribution of power are vital for maintaining systemic stability. Ensuring that the Owerri Zone participates equitably in the governorship position would not only fulfill the functional requirements of political harmony but also strengthen democratic legitimacy and foster enduring peace and development in the state.

2.3. Literature Review

Structural imbalance refers to the systematic and enduring inequalities embedded within the political, economic, or social framework of a society, leading to uneven distribution of power, resources, and

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opportunities among its constituent units or groups. In political science, the term is used to describe conditions where certain groups or regions enjoy institutional advantages over others due to historical, administrative, or policy-driven arrangements (Ayoade, 1982; Suberu, 2001). Structural imbalance is often a product of deliberate political engineering or unintended consequences of governance structures that fail to promote equity and inclusivity. It manifests in disproportionate access to decision-making positions, unequal representation in public institutions, and persistent socio-economic disparities (Osaghae, 1998).

In the Nigerian context, structural imbalance is closely linked to the federal character and zoning principles that aim to ensure equitable participation of diverse ethnic and regional groups in governance. However, these mechanisms have often been inconsistently applied, resulting in the domination of certain regions or elites over others (Suberu, 2001; Elaigwu, 2005). According to Ikeanyibe (2016), structural imbalance in Nigeria has been reinforced by patronage politics and elite manipulation, which distort the ideals of representational justice and equitable power-sharing. This imbalance creates systemic barriers that exclude some regions or social groups from fair access to leadership positions, as seen in the marginalization of the Owerri Zone in Imo State politics.

From a theoretical standpoint, structural imbalance can be analyzed through structural functionalism, which views society as an interdependent system whose stability depends on the equitable performance of its parts (Parsons, 1951). When some units or structures dominate others, the equilibrium is disrupted, leading to dysfunctions such as political alienation, social discontent, and regional agitation. Similarly, elite theory posits that political power is concentrated in the hands of a few dominant actors who control access to state resources and institutions (Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956). Under such a system, marginalized groups remain structurally disadvantaged, as the governing elite perpetuate institutional arrangements that sustain their dominance.

In governance and development discourse, structural imbalance also denotes the misalignment between institutional design and the socio-political realities of plural societies. As noted by Ake (1996), Nigeria's structural imbalance stems from the colonial legacy of uneven regional development and the postcolonial state's failure to redress inherited inequalities. This has produced a scenario where political offices and infrastructural development are concentrated in select regions, leaving others politically marginalized and economically underdeveloped (Ibeanu, 2008).

Ultimately, structural imbalance undermines the principles of fairness, justice, and inclusivity, which are vital for democratic stability. It breeds resentment among excluded groups, erodes trust in political institutions, and fuels agitation for power rotation or restructuring (Nwosu, 2021). Addressing structural imbalance, therefore, requires deliberate institutional reforms aimed at redistributing power and ensuring proportional representation across regions. In the case of Imo State, such reforms must prioritize equitable access to the governorship position among the three senatorial zones to restore confidence, unity, and participatory governance.

On its own part, marginalization refers to the systematic exclusion of certain individuals, groups, or regions from access to political power, economic resources, and social opportunities. It is a condition in which people or communities are relegated to the periphery of political and socio-economic systems, thereby limiting their participation in decision-making and development processes (Ibeanu, 2008). In the political sphere, marginalization manifests in the underrepresentation of certain groups in governance structures, leading to inequitable distribution of public offices, resources, and development projects (Ayoade, 1982). Such exclusion often arises from structural factors, including historical injustices, elite dominance, ethnic favoritism, and weak institutional mechanisms for inclusion (Suberu, 2001).

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Situating marginalization with the Nigerian context, it has been a recurring theme in both national and subnational politics. The country's multi-ethnic composition and uneven federal structure have created persistent tensions among regions competing for political representation and access to state resources (Osaghae, 1998). Despite constitutional provisions for federal character and quota systems intended to promote inclusivity, certain regions and groups continue to experience systemic political exclusion. For instance, the prolonged absence of the Owerri Zone in the governorship position of Imo State illustrates subnational marginalization, where elite bargaining and patronage have favored other zones, thereby deepening regional inequality (Nwosu, 2021).

Marginalization not only undermines democratic governance but also erodes citizens' trust in political institutions. According to Ake (1996), political exclusion reinforces socio-economic disparities and contributes to instability by generating feelings of alienation and resentment among excluded populations. When specific regions perceive consistent denial of political representation, they may resort to agitation, protests, or even secessionist tendencies as means of asserting their rights (Ikeanyibe, 2016). Therefore, addressing marginalization requires more than symbolic inclusion; it demands institutional restructuring, transparent political processes, and equitable access to leadership positions.

In essence, marginalization weakens national and subnational cohesion by fostering disunity and distrust among constituent groups. Overcoming it requires adherence to principles of fairness and representation, where all zones or regions have equitable opportunities to occupy political offices. The marginalization of the Owerri Zone in Imo State, for example, symbolizes a microcosm of Nigeria's broader challenge of political inequality. Redressing such imbalances through inclusive governance mechanisms would not only strengthen democracy but also promote peace, unity, and sustainable development.

4.0. DIMENSIONS AND DISCOUSES

Historical Background of Political Power Distribution in Imo State

Imo State, located in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, was created on February 3, 1976, by the military administration of General Murtala Mohammed following the nationwide restructuring that resulted in the establishment of seven new states. The creation of Imo State was part of a broader federal policy aimed at administrative decentralization and regional balance after the Nigerian Civil War (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 1998). The state was carved out of the former East Central State and initially comprised three major zones that would later become the political and administrative senatorial districts of Owerri, Orlu, and Okigwe. Each zone possesses distinct ethnic, cultural, and demographic characteristics, yet they share close socio-linguistic affinities rooted in the Igbo ethnic identity.

The Owerri Zone comprises Local Government Areas (LGAs) such as Owerri Municipal, Owerri North, Owerri West, Mbaitoli, Ikeduru, Ngor-Okpala, Aboh Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise, Ezinihitte Mbaise, and others. The Okigwe Zone includes LGAs like Okigwe, Onuimo, Isiala Mbano, Ehime Mbano, Obowo, and Ihitte/Uboma, while the Orlu Zone, the largest in terms of population—consists of LGAs such as Orlu, Orsu, Ideato North, Ideato South, Oru East, Oru West, Oguta, Ohaji/Egbema, and Njaba (Nwosu, 2021). This senatorial division was designed to promote administrative balance and equitable political representation within the state. However, in practice, the distribution of political power, particularly the governorship, has remained skewed in favor of the Orlu and Okigwe zones, leaving the Owerri Zone largely marginalized since the state's inception.

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Chronology of Governorship Positions from 1976 to 2026

Since its creation, Imo State has witnessed a succession of civilian and military administrations, with governorship power largely alternating between Orlu and Okigwe zones. The first governor of the state, Ndubuisi Kanu (1976–1977), was a military administrator from the old Anambra area, serving under a national military framework rather than a zonal political arrangement (Elaigwu, 2005). He was succeeded by Adekunle Lawal (1977–1979), another military administrator. With the return to civilian rule in 1979, Samuel Onunaka Mbakwe, from the Okigwe Zone, became the first elected civilian governor under the Nigerian People's Party (NPP). Mbakwe's tenure (1979–1983) is widely regarded as one of the most developmental in the state's history, especially in infrastructural and educational reforms (Okereke, 2018).

Following the 1983 military coup, a succession of military governors administered the state until 1991, when Abia State was created from parts of Imo, thereby redefining its boundaries and political composition. During this period, governors included Ike Nwachukwu, Amadi Ikwechegh, and Anthony Oguguo, none of whom emerged through electoral processes or reflected zonal representation. The return to democracy in 1999 under the Fourth Republic marked a turning point in Imo politics. Achike Udenwa (1999–2007), from Orlu Zone, became governor under the People's Democratic Party (PDP). His two-term administration consolidated Orlu's dominance in state politics.

In 2007, Ikedi Ohakim from Okigwe Zone was elected governor under the Progressive Peoples Alliance (PPA), later defecting to the PDP. His tenure (2007–2011) was notable for infrastructural expansion but politically turbulent, ending after one term when Rochas Okorocha from Orlu Zone succeeded him in 2011. Okorocha's two-term administration (2011–2019) further entrenched Orlu's political supremacy, both through his personal political influence and his establishment of extensive patronage networks.In 2019, Emeka Ihedioha from the Owerri Zone was declared governor after a keenly contested election under the PDP. However, his administration lasted only seven months, as the Supreme Court annulled his victory and declared Hope Uzodinma, from Orlu Zone, as the duly elected governor (Supreme Court of Nigeria, 2020). Uzodinma's emergence extended Orlu's dominance in the governorship, marking nearly two decades of political control by the zone since 1999. The trajectory of governorship positions from 1976 to date demonstrates a stark imbalance: Okigwe Zone has held power for approximately eight years (1979–1983; 2007–2011), Orlu Zone for nearly twenty years (1999–2007; 2011–present), and Owerri Zone for less than one year.

Factors that Favored Orlu and Okigwe over Owerri

Several structural, demographic, and political factors have contributed to the dominance of the Orlu and Okigwe zones over Owerri in Imo State's governorship distribution. First, demographic advantage plays a significant role. The Orlu zone is the most populous, with the highest number of LGAs (12 out of 27), which translates into greater voting strength and electoral influence (Okereke, 2018). This demographic dominance provides Orlu politicians with a structural advantage during elections, enabling them to mobilize more votes and resources than their counterparts from the other zones.

Second, the historical legacy of political organization and elite coordination in Orlu and Okigwe zones has been stronger than in Owerri. Leaders from these zones have historically maintained cohesive political alliances, often forming strategic networks that cut across party lines (Ikeanyibe, 2016). In contrast, the Owerri Zone has suffered from internal fragmentation, elite rivalry, and lack of consensus on political representation, weakening its bargaining power during party primaries and general elections (Nwosu, 2021).

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Third, patronage politics and incumbency advantages have reinforced the dominance of Orlu elites. Governors from Orlu have used state resources to consolidate their political bases, reward loyalists, and build networks of political control extending into other zones (Osaghae, 1998). This cycle of political patronage has created an enduring structure of power that disadvantages zones without access to the state's political machinery.

Fourth, the weak institutionalization of zoning and power rotation principles within party structures has undermined equitable representation. Unlike some Nigerian states where power rotation is enshrined in political party constitutions, Imo's political parties have largely treated zoning as an informal and negotiable convention rather than a binding rule (Suberu, 2001). As a result, dominant elites manipulate party primaries to favor candidates from zones with stronger financial or organizational influence typically Orlu and Okigwe.

Finally, electoral manipulation and judicial interventions have occasionally altered democratic outcomes in ways that perpetuate imbalance. The 2020 Supreme Court judgment that removed Emeka Ihedioha (Owerri Zone) and installed Hope Uzodinma (Orlu Zone) exemplifies how judicial processes can reshape political representation and reinforce structural dominance (Nwosu, 2021). These dynamics collectively explain why Owerri remains marginalized despite its historical and demographic significance.

Elite Networks and Political Alliances in Imo State

The concentration of political power in Orlu and Okigwe zones is further sustained by elite networks and inter-zonal alliances that shape electoral outcomes and governance patterns. Elite theory posits that a small group of influential actors—comprising politicians, business magnates, and bureaucrats—dominates access to power and decision-making (Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956). In Imo State, this elite circle is disproportionately composed of individuals from Orlu and Okigwe, who leverage wealth, incumbency, and political godfatherism to determine leadership succession. Orlu's dominance can be traced to the political machinery established under Achike Udenwa and later consolidated by Rochas Okorocha. These leaders cultivated extensive patron-client networks that penetrated local and state institutions, enabling them to control party structures and influence electoral outcomes (Ikeanyibe, 2016). Okorocha's ability to install loyalists in strategic political positions, including the House of Assembly and local government councils, entrenched Orlu's grip on power.

By contrast, the political elites in Owerri Zone have often lacked cohesion. Elite rivalry and divided loyalties across different political parties—PDP, APC, APGA, and Labour Party—have weakened the zone's collective bargaining position. Attempts to forge a unified front for power rotation, such as the Owerri Zone Political Leaders Forum (OZOPOLF), have repeatedly faltered due to conflicting interests and lack of institutional support (Nwosu, 2021). Consequently, the fragmentation of the Owerri political elite contrasts sharply with the strategic unity demonstrated by Orlu's leadership class. Elite alliances between Orlu and Okigwe further reinforce the existing imbalance. These alliances often operate through informal agreements and cross-zonal endorsements during party primaries and general elections. Political elites from Okigwe, despite having limited tenure in the governorship, maintain influence through key appointments and coalition-building with dominant Orlu actors. This mutually beneficial relationship ensures the perpetuation of their collective dominance while marginalizing the Owerri bloc.

In sum, the historical distribution of political power in Imo State reflects the interplay of demographic advantage, elite dominance, weak institutional frameworks, and fragmented opposition. The Owerri Zone's marginalization is not merely an electoral accident but the outcome of entrenched structural

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and political dynamics that have favored Orlu and Okigwe. Redressing this imbalance requires deliberate political restructuring, strengthened zoning frameworks, and a renewed commitment to equitable power rotation among all three zones.

Empirical Analysis of the Extent of Exclusion Faced by Owerri Zone

The marginalization of the Owerri Zone in the distribution of political power in Imo State reflects a pattern of structural imbalance that has persisted since the creation of the state in 1976. Empirically, governorship positions in Imo have been distributed unequally across the three senatorial zones Orlu, Okigwe, and Owerri. Out of more than four decades of the state's existence, Orlu Zone has produced governors for over twenty years, Okigwe Zone for about eight years, while Owerri Zone has held the position for less than one year (Nwosu, 2021; Okereke, 2018). This disproportionate access to executive leadership underscores a deeply rooted political exclusion that contradicts principles of fairness and representational balance.

Statistical records from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and analyses by political scholars show that, despite Owerri Zone's comparable population size and electoral participation, candidates from the zone consistently face institutional disadvantages during party primaries and general elections (Ikeanyibe, 2016). These disadvantages include weak elite coordination, lack of access to campaign resources, and marginalization in intra-party decision-making. For instance, in the 2019 gubernatorial elections, Emeka Ihedioha's brief tenure—terminated by the Supreme Court ruling in favor of Hope Uzodinma (Orlu Zone)—symbolized not only judicial controversy but also the fragility of Owerri's political foothold (Supreme Court of Nigeria, 2020).

The empirical pattern, therefore, reveals that Owerri Zone has been systematically excluded from consistent executive representation, reflecting an imbalance reinforced by socio-political structures, elite manipulation, and uneven institutional arrangements. This exclusion undermines the equitable rotation of power envisioned under Nigeria's broader principle of federal character and subnational zoning conventions (Suberu, 2001).

Socio-Political and Economic Implications of Marginalization

The continued exclusion of the Owerri Zone from the governorship has significant socio-political and economic implications. Politically, it erodes public confidence in democratic equity and inclusivity. Citizens from the zone increasingly perceive governance as skewed in favor of other regions, which fosters political apathy, regional resentment, and disillusionment with the electoral process (Nwosu, 2021). This sense of exclusion also weakens inter-zonal trust, reducing the effectiveness of state-building efforts and aggravating regional polarization within Imo State (Osaghae, 1998).

Economically, marginalization has tangible developmental consequences. Political scientists have long observed that regions with greater access to executive power tend to attract more infrastructure, public investment, and social amenities due to the politics of resource allocation and distributive patronage (Suberu, 2001; Elaigwu, 2005). Consequently, Orlu Zone having produced multiple governors—has witnessed significant infrastructural growth and strategic siting of projects, while parts of Owerri Zone remain underdeveloped, particularly in rural areas such as Ngor-Okpala and Mbaise. The imbalance has also stifled equitable development planning, concentrating economic power in zones with political advantage.

Socially, the marginalization of Owerri contributes to growing inter-group tension and political agitation. Movements advocating for zoning justice have emerged, with local leaders and civic organizations demanding a rotation of power to restore fairness and inclusion. These demands are not

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only political but also moral appeals grounded in the pursuit of social justice and shared governance. In effect, the exclusion of Owerri Zone disrupts the social contract between citizens and the state, weakening democratic consolidation and promoting regional discontent (Ikeanyibe, 2016).

Role of Political Parties, Godfatherism, and Patronage in Sustaining Imbalance

Political parties in Imo State play a decisive role in sustaining the structural imbalance that marginalizes the Owerri Zone. Despite rhetorical commitments to zoning and inclusion, major political parties particularly the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) have failed to institutionalize zoning in their internal constitutions (Okereke, 2018). Consequently, party primaries are often dominated by financial and elite interests, allowing aspirants from Orlu and Okigwe zones, who possess stronger political networks, to outmaneuver candidates from Owerri.

God-fatherism and patron-client networks further entrench this imbalance. Political godfathers—often former governors or influential financiers dictate candidate selection, campaign funding, and political appointments. These networks perpetuate Orlu and Okigwe dominance by controlling party structures and marginalizing dissenting voices (Ikeanyibe, 2016). For instance, Rochas Okorocha's political empire continues to wield significant influence in Orlu, shaping party dynamics across the state. Such entrenched patronage systems not only undermine merit-based politics but also discourage credible leaders from Owerri Zone from pursuing governorship ambitions due to limited access to financial backing and political endorsement.

Moreover, the patronage system distorts the democratic process by transforming politics into a transactional enterprise, where loyalty and financial allegiance outweigh competence or representational equity (Osaghae, 1998). This system sustains elite dominance, creating a cycle where political power remains concentrated within the same geographical and socio-economic networks. Until party systems are restructured to promote internal democracy and fairness, the marginalization of zones like Owerri will persist as a structural feature of Imo's political landscape.

Public Perception and Regional Sentiment toward the Zoning Issue

Public perception within Imo State reflects a growing frustration with the persistent exclusion of the Owerri Zone from the governorship. Surveys and media analyses show that residents of Owerri and neighboring areas increasingly view the imbalance as a deliberate political injustice, perpetuated by elite conspiracy and institutional neglect (Nwosu, 2021). This perception has fueled a strong regional consciousness and mobilization around the principle of "it is Owerri's turn", echoing similar rotational justice campaigns seen in other Nigerian states such as Enugu and Delta (Suberu, 2001).

Among the broader Imo populace, opinions are divided. While citizens from Orlu and Okigwe tend to justify the status quo based on electoral competitiveness and majority strength, others acknowledge that continued exclusion could destabilize political harmony and inter-zonal cooperation. Media commentaries and civic forums in recent years have amplified calls for an equitable power shift to Owerri Zone in the interest of justice, balance, and unity (Okereke, 2018). This public discourse underscores the link between representation and legitimacy, suggesting that without inclusive governance, Imo's democracy risks becoming regionally fragmented and elitist.

Furthermore, the sentiment of marginalization has extended into the state's diaspora and youth communities, who increasingly perceive Imo politics as an elite monopoly disconnected from popular will. This perception has spurred advocacy for political reforms, grassroots mobilization, and the

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strengthening of local institutions to ensure fairer political representation. The public's growing awareness of zoning injustice signals a potential shift in political behavior that could reshape future elections, especially if Owerri Zone consolidates a unified political strategy.

As such, the structural imbalance and marginalization of the Owerri Zone are not isolated political accidents but deeply rooted phenomena sustained by demographic disparities, elite dominance, and weak institutional frameworks. The persistence of this imbalance challenges the democratic ideals of fairness, representation, and inclusivity, underscoring the need for deliberate policy and political reforms to restore balance in Imo State's governance.

Implications of Structural Imbalance for Governance and Development in Imo State

The exclusion of the Owerri Zone from the governorship position in Imo State has profound implications for political stability, representation, and democratic legitimacy. In a democratic system, equitable representation across regions strengthens citizens' confidence in governance structures and fosters a sense of belonging among diverse political constituencies. However, the persistent marginalization of Owerri Zone has eroded this sense of political inclusion, generating growing resentment and distrust toward the state's leadership process (Nwosu, 2021).

Political stability is directly linked to the perception of fairness in power distribution. When a particular region continuously dominates political offices, excluded groups tend to feel alienated, leading to inter-zonal tension and competition rather than cooperation. This imbalance undermines social cohesion a critical element of democratic governance (Suberu, 2001). For Imo State, the dominance of Orlu and Okigwe zones has fostered a form of elite monopoly that excludes large segments of the population from active participation in leadership decisions. This has increased the risk of political volatility, especially during election cycles, as marginalized communities seek to challenge the status quo.

From a representational standpoint, exclusion weakens the capacity of the political system to accommodate diverse voices. The Owerri Zone, despite being home to the state capital and significant socio-economic activity, remains underrepresented in executive decision-making structures (Okereke, 2018). This imbalance affects policy priorities, as state development plans often reflect the interests of the ruling zone's elite rather than the collective welfare of the entire citizenry (Osaghae, 1998).

The exclusion also diminishes the legitimacy of the political system. A government perceived as regionally biased faces difficulties in mobilizing broad-based support and legitimacy, which are essential for effective governance (Akinola, 2015). When citizens perceive leadership as the monopoly of a single region, it delegitimizes the moral authority of the state and breeds skepticism about the fairness of democratic processes. Thus, the marginalization of Owerri Zone not only distorts political representation but also undermines the foundational principles of democracy—equity, justice, and inclusiveness—that sustain political stability.

Impact on State Development and Inter-Zonal Relations

The imbalance in political leadership distribution within Imo State extends beyond representation—it has tangible implications for state development and inter-zonal relations. Development in Nigeria, as in many federal systems, is often shaped by political access and the control of state resources (Suberu, 2001). Consequently, zones that dominate executive power tend to enjoy disproportionate infrastructural development, public investments, and human capital enhancement.

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Empirical observations show that during the administrations of governors from the Orlu Zone, significant infrastructural projects—such as road networks, industrial layouts, and educational institutions—were concentrated within their local constituencies (Ikeanyibe, 2016). Similarly, Okigwe's brief governorship under Sam Mbakwe (1979–1983) and Ikedi Ohakim (2007–2011) saw increased development within Okigwe town and its environs. By contrast, several communities in the Owerri Zone, particularly rural localities such as Ngor-Okpala, Ezinihitte, and Ahiazu Mbaise, remain underdeveloped and lack basic infrastructure (Okereke, 2018).

This uneven development pattern has deepened inter-zonal mistrust and competition. Zones excluded from executive leadership perceive development projects as politically motivated rewards rather than public goods, eroding the cooperative fabric necessary for collective progress (Osaghae, 1998). The result is a climate of suspicion and rivalry, where regions view political power not as an instrument of public service but as a means of economic domination. Such an environment discourages inter-zonal collaboration, weakens state unity, and threatens the long-term prospects of inclusive development.

Moreover, the absence of balanced representation disrupts equitable resource allocation. Budgetary priorities often reflect regional biases, with capital projects unevenly distributed to favor politically dominant zones (Elaigwu, 2005). This leads to policy distortions, as underrepresented areas are deprived of developmental opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and social inequality. Ultimately, political marginalization translates into developmental marginalization, reinforcing the structural underdevelopment of already disadvantaged zones.

Inter-zonal relations, once defined by shared Igbo cultural identity, are increasingly strained by political injustice. The inability to rotate leadership equitably fuels resentment and regional polarization, weakening the collective identity of Imo State. Sustainable development, therefore, cannot thrive in the absence of social justice, political fairness, and regional cooperation.

Link between Marginalization and Voter Apathy or Civic Discontent

Marginalization also manifests in the political behavior of citizens through voter apathy and civic discontent. When a zone feels persistently excluded from meaningful political representation, citizens within that region may lose faith in the efficacy of the electoral process. Studies have shown that political exclusion diminishes voter turnout and participation, as individuals perceive elections as predetermined contests that do not reflect their interests (Aiyede, 2019).

In the context of Imo State, the Owerri Zone exhibits growing signs of political disengagement. Electoral participation data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) indicate declining voter turnout in Owerri-dominated LGAs between 2015 and 2023, despite population growth (INEC, 2023). This trend suggests widespread frustration and alienation among voters who view the political system as dominated by entrenched elites from Orlu and Okigwe (Nwosu, 2021). The perception that "votes do not count" has become pervasive, further weakening civic participation and democratic accountability.

Civic discontent in the Owerri Zone also finds expression in public protests, media advocacy, and regional mobilization movements demanding zoning justice. Civil society organizations, youth groups, and traditional institutions have increasingly called for power rotation to restore balance and foster unity (Okereke, 2018). However, the inability of successive administrations to address these grievances reinforces cynicism toward government institutions, thereby deepening the democratic deficit.

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Furthermore, voter apathy and civic disillusionment have broader implications for governance quality. When citizens withdraw from political engagement, accountability diminishes, allowing corruption and maladministration to thrive. Active civic participation is a cornerstone of good governance, but sustained marginalization erodes this foundation by alienating a significant portion of the populace (Osaghae, 1998). Consequently, Imo's democratic governance suffers from a legitimacy crisis that undermines both administrative efficiency and citizen trust.

In sum, the relationship between marginalization and civic disengagement forms a vicious cycle: exclusion breeds apathy, apathy weakens accountability, and weakened accountability perpetuates exclusion. Breaking this cycle requires deliberate efforts to institutionalize power rotation, promote equitable representation, and rebuild citizens' confidence in the political process. Only through inclusive governance can Imo State overcome structural imbalance and achieve sustainable political and developmental progress.

Strategies for Addressing Structural Imbalance

The key strategies for addressing Structural Imbalances are outlined and discussed in what follow.

Propose Equitable Power Rotation or Zoning Mechanisms

One of the most viable strategies for addressing structural imbalance in Nigeria is the institutionalization of equitable power rotation or zoning mechanisms across political and administrative structures. Structural imbalance in Nigeria is largely a product of perceived and actual marginalization of certain ethnic, regional, or religious groups in access to political power and public resources (Suberu, 2019). The Nigerian federation, since independence, has struggled with the concentration of political authority in certain regions, particularly the North, thereby deepening feelings of exclusion and resentment in other zones (Ogunnoiki, 2021). Power rotation, also referred to as zoning, is therefore designed to ensure a fair distribution of political leadership positions among the six geopolitical zones and major ethnic groups, thereby reinforcing national unity and inclusion.

Power rotation was first formally recognized during the Fourth Republic through the People's Democratic Party (PDP)'s internal arrangement to alternate the presidency between the North and South (Omotola, 2010). While not constitutionally entrenched, this model promoted a sense of belonging and reduced ethno-regional tensions, at least in its early years. Institutionalizing such a mechanism across all political parties and public offices could serve as a stabilizing factor in Nigeria's democracy. It would provide predictable access to power and encourage every zone to participate actively in governance. As Suberu (2023) notes, equitable zoning mechanisms promote legitimacy, reduce political violence, and mitigate secessionist tendencies by giving marginalized regions a fair opportunity to lead.

Moreover, the principle of rotation should not only be applied at the federal level but extended to state and local governance structures to ensure representation for minority communities within states. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political parties could codify these arrangements into their frameworks to prevent elite manipulation or selective application. Furthermore, rotational mechanisms should be complemented by merit-based criteria to maintain competence while promoting inclusion. Thus, the zoning system must strike a balance between equity and efficiency, ensuring that structural imbalance is reduced without compromising governance quality (Ibeanu & Momoh, 2015).

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Strengthen Institutional Frameworks (e.g., Party Constitutions, Local Governance Reforms)

A critical step in redressing structural imbalance lies in strengthening Nigeria's institutional frameworks. Weak institutions have historically enabled the concentration of power, poor accountability, and manipulation of federal structures for parochial gains (Adele, 2020). Strengthening institutional frameworks—especially political parties, electoral bodies, and local government systems—would enhance inclusivity, accountability, and equitable resource distribution. Political parties serve as vehicles for representation and recruitment of leaders; hence, their constitutions should be restructured to enforce inclusivity in leadership composition and candidate selection. Parties must internalize democratic values and ensure gender, regional, and generational representation at all levels. As Omotola (2010) emphasizes, reforming party structures to reflect Nigeria's diversity will help democratize access to power and curb structural dominance by elite factions.

Local governance reforms are equally essential. The current federal structure is overly centralized, with the federal government controlling most fiscal resources and political authority. This concentration undermines subnational development and weakens grassroots representation (Agunyai, 2018). Granting local government's fiscal and administrative autonomy will promote balanced development and reduce overdependence on the federal tier. Effective decentralization can ensure that marginalized groups at the local level benefit from governance processes.

Moreover, strengthening anti-corruption and judicial institutions is vital for ensuring that public resources are distributed based on fairness and need rather than patronage. The National Assembly should also amend relevant laws to guarantee the independence of key institutions like INEC, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and the Fiscal Responsibility Commission. These bodies play critical roles in promoting equity, accountability, and inclusion (Suberu, 2019). By creating resilient institutions that can mediate competing interests fairly, Nigeria can move closer to achieving structural balance and sustainable national integration.

Promote Civic Education, Advocacy, and Elite Consensus

Addressing structural imbalance also requires broad-based civic education, policy advocacy, and elite consensus on national values and goals. Civic education empowers citizens to understand their rights, responsibilities, and the importance of participation in governance. A politically conscious and active citizenry is less susceptible to elite manipulation and ethnic chauvinism (Ojo, 2020). By promoting national identity and civic responsibility through the educational curriculum and media programs, Nigeria can nurture a generation that values inclusion and justice over narrow ethno-regional interests.

Advocacy from civil society organizations (CSOs), think tanks, and the media remains critical in holding leaders accountable to principles of equity and fairness. These actors can mobilize public opinion to demand reforms, promote dialogue, and challenge policies that perpetuate imbalance. According to Akinola (2021), effective advocacy networks can influence policy formulation and ensure that federalism is practiced in ways that benefit all regions equally.

Furthermore, elite consensus is indispensable in addressing structural inequities. Nigeria's political elites wield significant influence in shaping the distribution of power and resources. The absence of a shared elite consensus on national unity has often intensified competition along ethnic lines. Building a consensus around key national ideals—such as rotational leadership, fair revenue allocation, and inclusive governance—would reduce structural tension and strengthen political stability (Ayoade, 1982). Such consensus should be institutionalized through national conferences or constitutional

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review processes that allow diverse stakeholders to negotiate and commit to equitable arrangements. Educational institutions, religious organizations, and community leaders can also promote civic values that encourage tolerance and inclusivity. When elites and citizens alike understand and prioritize collective interests over parochial gains, the structural imbalances in Nigeria's political system can be mitigated sustainably.

Encourage Inclusive Governance and Transparent Political Processes

Inclusive governance and transparency are fundamental pillars for addressing structural imbalance in Nigeria's federal system. Inclusive governance ensures that all groups—ethnic, regional, gender, and religious are adequately represented in decision-making and public administration. Transparent political processes, on the other hand, help to prevent the manipulation of political institutions to favor dominant interests. Together, they create trust between the government and citizens, reinforcing social cohesion and legitimacy (Ake, 1996).

To achieve inclusivity, deliberate policies such as affirmative action, proportional representation, and quota systems can be introduced in political appointments and public service recruitment. This would address long-standing grievances of exclusion, particularly among minorities and women. For instance, the federal character principle enshrined in the 1999 Constitution aimed to ensure fair representation, but its implementation has often been politicized or superficial (Suberu, 2019). Strengthening oversight mechanisms and promoting merit-based yet regionally balanced appointments would make the principle more effective.

Transparency in political processes requires open governance practices, including access to information, participatory budgeting, and credible electoral management. INEC must guarantee fair elections free from manipulation, vote-buying, and violence. The adoption of technology in elections—such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) has shown promise in enhancing transparency and restoring public confidence in democratic institutions (Ojo, 2020).

Furthermore, inclusive governance should go beyond political representation to include equitable resource allocation, education, healthcare, and infrastructural development across regions. The implementation of the National Development Plan should be guided by fairness and evidence-based needs assessment to correct regional disparities. Ultimately, promoting inclusive and transparent governance will help to reduce structural grievances, foster national integration, and enhance Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This paper examined strategies for addressing structural imbalance within Nigeria's federal framework, with particular relevance to subnational contexts such as Imo State. The findings reveal that structural imbalance—both nationally and within Imo State—arise from inequitable power distribution, weak institutional capacity, elite dominance, and exclusionary governance practices. These factors have collectively fostered regional rivalry, political alienation, and declining public confidence in government institutions.

The study identified four key strategies for mitigating these challenges: equitable power rotation or zoning to promote inclusivity; strengthening institutional frameworks to ensure fair representation;

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promoting civic education and elite consensus to foster collective responsibility; and encouraging inclusive and transparent governance to enhance accountability and social cohesion. Overall, it reaffirms that fairness, inclusion, and structural balance are essential for political stability and sustainable development, particularly in Imo State, where unity and equity are prerequisites for deepening democratic governance.

5.2. Recommendations

Imo State should adopt a formal power rotation or zoning arrangement among its three senatorial zones Owerri, Orlu, and Okigwe to promote fairness and a sense of belonging among all regions. When such an arrangement is clearly defined within political party constitutions and enforced through transparent regulations, it can reduce perceptions of domination by any particular zone. This would help ensure a more balanced distribution of leadership opportunities and promote peaceful transitions of power. Institutionalizing rotation at the state level would therefore enhance political stability and legitimacy while preventing intra-state marginalization.

Political parties in Imo State also need to reform their internal structures to ensure inclusivity and representation across gender, generational, and zonal lines. By revising party constitutions and adopting transparent candidate selection processes, parties can uphold democratic norms and prevent elite capture. Establishing internal monitoring committees will further help to guarantee compliance with these standards and promote trust among party members. Strengthened party institutions are essential for ensuring that leadership recruitment reflects the state's diversity and supports equitable governance.

In addition, civic education and advocacy should be prioritized to promote political awareness and participatory governance. State institutions, civil society organizations, and educational agencies should collaborate to sensitize citizens about their rights, responsibilities, and the value of inclusive leadership. Such programs can shift political culture away from ethnic or zonal loyalty toward merit-based, issue-driven participation. At the same time, political and traditional elites in Imo State should build consensus through periodic dialogues and peace summits. A shared understanding of fairness and power rotation principles will reduce political tension and promote unity in governance.

Furthermore, the state government should strengthen local government autonomy, ensure transparency, and mainstream gender and youth inclusion. Local councils need greater fiscal and administrative independence to deliver grassroots development equitably and be accountable through open budgeting. The government should adopt participatory governance initiatives, such as public consultations and open-data systems, to enhance accountability and citizen trust. Gender and youth representation should also be institutionalized by reserving a fair share of leadership positions to ensure inclusivity. A robust judiciary and legislature must reinforce these efforts through strong oversight to safeguard fairness and constitutional balance. By implementing these measures, Imo State can model transparent, equitable, and inclusive governance that strengthens unity and sustainable development.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.

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