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## **FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL : POPULAR PROTESTS IN LATIN AMERICA DURING 2011-2015**

*Binay Prasad*

### **Abstract**

*Pink tide were implicitly seen or projected as an opposition to neo-liberal policies, however, what emerges during 2011-2015 suggests that the reason are linked to the local concerns. One can examine these either in reference to the regions or the nature of demands and the outcomes. Further, the protests emanate from the sectors for which these countries have been well known the world over, for being the best. Chile and Colombia, both under the right-wing governments (2014), the students were calling for more state intervention in education. In fact, Chile resembled the best in education. Similarly, in Colombia coffee growers protested against free trade agreements. Bolivia and Ecuador, both under the new- left (2014) was backed by indigenous masses; the very sections that protested against them. Street protests in Brazil (2014) were for the reasons beyond a mere transport fare hike, but encompass governance issues too. Indeed, Brazil was seen as a perfect case of governance and poverty alleviation. Surprisingly, the sectors which have remained a government priority for decades are not an exception to the ever rising discontent. This may give an indication; discontent in other sectors might be even deeper and wider.*

**Keywords:** Latin America, protests, street protests, neo-liberal agenda

## Introduction

Public protests in Latin America are neither new nor surprising. Leave troubled times, Countries in the region have witnessed protests even during some of the most brutal regimes in history (Carey, 2006, p. 3). In fact, Latin America has witnessed protests in various phases of its transition ranging from socio-economic to political transitions. In reference to the contemporary time, Latin America is in a stage of strengthening democracy and consolidating its institutions, and the present time is no exception to it (protests!). Those on the left have successively replaced right wing governments one after another, all across the Latin America. This was universally accepted as in response to the deep resentment among Latin Americans with the previous so-called pro market 'right-wing and neo-liberal' regimes.

Whatever may be the type of new regimes, they are undoubtedly more socially inclined than their predecessors were<sup>1</sup>. New social and economic programmes like *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil and *Oportunidades* in Mexico were introduced despite the disagreements with the pro-market lobby in the respective countries. The impact of such programmes has been widely acknowledged and replicated worldwide. Hence, this might have reduced a probability of nationwide resistance from the general public, but the same does not stand true. This is so as the protests with local or global agenda seems to have taken Latin America aboard. The protests during the period 2011-2015 are, however, a surprising thing as for over a decade, Latin America has been experiencing changes in governments and governance pattern and an environment of wide optimism had prevailed.

## Why Protest?

Be it the Deep South Andean region of Chile, or top north Mexico, people were on the streets everywhere. In South America, be it Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia or Venezuela, people were out on the streets with one demand or the other. It is, however, confusing that the said protests were often clubbed with the past phenomenon usually associated with the victory of Hugo Chavez (1999) and the successive victory of similar regimes all over South America. To be simple, as the rise of leftist leaders was projected to be a Latin American way of protesting

against the policies of United States, so were the protests during the period in consideration<sup>2</sup>.

It is in fact an irrefutable point that Latin America drawing its subjugation from the dependency thesis which existed both in theory as well as in reality, did on a massive scale protest against the free market policies and neo-liberal elements (Frederick Solt, 2014), however such agendas cannot and should not be associated with each and every protest that took place in the recent times, more specifically in the last one decade, as the sole reason. It must be agreed that the very nature of neo-liberal policies does feature as an element, but it cannot form the sole basis of all the popular protests. However, analysis of the latter is yet to find a place in the academic discourse. It is surprising that articles on anti-government protests of recent times have largely appeared in the Latin American, American and western presses and for that very reason it was being seen as a conspiracy against the populist leaders in LAC.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the rise of 'left-of-the-centre' leaders starting from Chavez (1999) and Lula (2002), also coincided with the Latin American boom, which has eventually ended. Undoubtedly, the charm of populist leaders whose rise after a long period of political control under the so- called 'right' over the state, was on the downfall. With the conditions deteriorating on the economic front, protests against Rafael Correa over the rise in oil prices acts as the perfect example to it. Added to it, the anti-mining protest against Evo Morales' government in Arequipa in Peru also shows that resentment exists with the way the government is acting, that too in the sections that form the support base. Added to it, corruption, which more or less a norm in Latin America has become intolerant, so as to invite massive and disruptive protests, like the protests in May 2015 in Guatemala City.

### **Local versus Global**

As discussed earlier, the paper intends to distinguish between local and global agendas embedded with the protests. Coming down to the street protests (2011-2015), neither miners in Ecuador or Bolivia can be said to be protesting against the neo-liberal policies alone, nor are the Brazilians on the streets for the opposition

of neo-liberal policies ‘propagated by United States’, World Bank or IMF. Similarly, teachers in Mexico are against the education policies implemented by the Mexican government and not by anyone else beyond its frontiers. It is to say that despite the broad feature of all the protests in the Latin American region to be transnational, it is the local agenda that matter as that is what that concerns the people on day to day basis.

It implies that even on the academic framework a different approach, i.e. moving away from the lenses of neo-liberalism could throw fresh insights into the issue. It is one way to analyse on the continental level the Latin American protest against neo-liberalism. It is another way to look if there are some local issues involved in such protests that are more significant. Added to it, one must look at the composition of masses at protests or the sectors that are protesting and whether these sectors represent the popular sectors of the country. In case, they represent the popular sector, why is it the case that sectors, which were considered to be the best and well off as well as remained a government priority at least for the current regimes, are protesting?<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the class to which protesters resemble ranges from general public to police officials, from students to teachers and from indigenous communities to coffee plant growers and other agricultural workers. The issues that sparked such protests are common issues of corruption, incompetence of governments, discriminatory economic and social welfare policies (Jose Enrique Arrioja, 2015). It is high time to recognise the point that, the set of protests mark a significant turn in emphasising that the issues have become more localised (Reiter, 2010). In a span of over sixteen years (from 1998 i.e. victory of Chavez), people have become more concerned with the local

policies that deprive them, than a long span of dependency and under-development that was determined by external factors.

In this context, the resistance by people is to reclaim their rights (Fabian Machado, 2009, p. 8) than mere resistance to the implications of neo-liberal policies. Just as a matter of fact, would protest by miners in Bolivia and Ecuador be directly related to neo-liberal policies? Alternatively, neo-liberal policies do not have any linkage with the protest of indigenous communities in Bolivia or anti-government protests in Venezuela. Nor does discontent owing to neo-liberal policies can in anyway explain the reason for the protests by teachers in Mexico or protest by police officials in Bolivia. In part, it is true as in reference to the students' protests in Chile and Colombia or protests by coffee plant growers and farmers in Colombia, but states' own failure cannot and should not be undermined. Why Chile, a politically strong, for over a decade seen and presented as a perfect case of globalisation witnessed and still is witnessing a nationwide student' protests? Adding to the point, Chile by several standards fares better in education in Latin America to most others and if students are protesting then something must be wrong with the Chile's education policy rather than the neo-liberal policies of the United States or the World Bank. It is argued; weak states often witness more protests than the strong ones (Arce, 2010). It is to be ascertained that strong and weak states alike are witnessing protest from their citizens; hence the reasons for the same seem to be more related with the local problems than a global one.

As an area of research, public protests have more come to the focus, when such protests took place in 'non-democratic regimes' like China or repressive regimes like the one of Pinochet's Chile<sup>5</sup>. It is however equally important to study when such methods of dissent expression are adopted by the people in democratic regimes. The question has come a long way, why do people protest but not its answer. It has always been an area of study by scholars, why some regions protest more than the other do and why people in some countries protest the way they do (Arce, 2010). A consensus on the same is that protest sometimes remains the sole way of showing disagreement with the governments' policies or expressing their discontent over the prevailing circumstances. The positive thing about the protest

is that a healthy democracy witnesses protests more often; as it shows peoples' trust on the method deployed to bring about a change in the governance pattern and their grievances be addressed (Quantana, 2013). To say the other way round, people would not protest, if they think it is useless and the government remains rigid enough to listen to their demands. The scale and the size of protest are also dependent on various factors irrespective of either the country's size or its population. Drawing lessons from the protests by labour unions during the period of the 50s and 60s be it Latin America or the world-over shows that the more organised group a protest group represents, the more massive a movement can be and hence better in position to receive concessions from the government (Tenorio, 2014). In context of the political system, the permeability of the system determines the scale of resistance it would experience i.e. the state having more decentralised structure would have more massive protest as people feel they can penetrate into the system from more openings and attack it from all sides to get their voices heard (Quantana, 2013). Hence, people in the centralised states protest less as it is harder to penetrate the system than otherwise. In conceptual terms, it is also a significant point that, people who are near to the system protest more often than those who are far. In the context of Latin America, it is important to emphasise here that, in the fast changing Americas, the sections that are protesting the most are likely the ones, which are or are becoming electorally important.

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw propping up of leftist governments in Latin America one after another so called as the 'new left'. Be it Chile or Bolivia, Brazil or Ecuador all are or have been in the said times, under a 'some' kind of new left. This is also surprising from the fact; over two-third of governments during the period 2014-15 in Latin America are under Pink tide a term coined by Larry Rohter<sup>6</sup> for this phenomenon. Several groups, which were not electorally important, become a significant determinant of electoral victory due to the emergence of such regimes. Communities like indigenous groups and women have come to the fore and their issues are being taken seriously in the changed environment. It is important to see that the sectors that actually voted the leaders to powers are the ones who are protesting not very far from the seat of powers of the executive.

### ***Indigenismo***

An important change that has been witnessed with the rise of new left is the corresponding empowerment of indigenous politics in Latin America (Puig, 2010). An ideal example would be of Bolivia that constitute over 60 percent share of the indigenous population. The indigenous people played a strong determinant in voting Evo Morales to power in 2006, who himself belongs to an indigenous group. Morales, an indigenous with *Aymara* descent became the first indigenous president of Bolivia. He belongs to a family of coca plant growers; had championed the cause for the uplift of the marginalised sections of Bolivian society. The *Movimiento al socialismo* (MAS) initiated by him, brought various indigenous groups in mainstream politics under his leadership. During more than two decades of his activism, he protested against the anti-narcotics policy of the United States, a policy that targeted destruction of all coca plants, as they are used for making drugs and are subsequently smuggled along US-Mexico border to the United States. The anti-narcotics policy of United States became a serious issue due to the reason that, the livelihood of wide sections of marginalised groups in Bolivia were dependent on the revenue earned out of coca plants. This traces the origin of anti-US sentiments in Bolivia, which was capitalised by Morales, also to legitimise the centuries of oppression that Bolivia suffered owing to foreign powers. This is how Morales often accused foreign powers of disturbing political stability in Bolivia like in the case of the alleged coup in 2010. This was also done during the expulsion of American diplomats and expulsion of anti-narcotics agency set-up by US which was working in Bolivia and several other Latin American countries, on the charge that it was interfering in the domestic politics of Bolivia (Kraul, 2009). However, the trend of accusing an external hand in domestic politics of Bolivia was reversed when indigenous groups from Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) region started a 500 km march to La Paz, the capital city of Bolivia. Though, as usual Morales accused exiled opposition leaders and the United States for the same, but it suffered a backlash when ministers in Morales' cabinet started resigning over the accusation of indiscriminate use of force by the police on protesters (Bolivia minister resigns over Amazon road protest, 2011). It is important

to stress that Bolivia, with its rewritten constitution, provides the citizens 'right to protest' as well as special provisions for safeguards of the rights of indigenous groups, solidifying its commitment towards the indigenous communities living in Bolivia. However, the protest by indigenous groups and the way police dealt with the protesters seem to question their long-held commitment. The continuous protests by the indigenous population that lasted for more than 11 days suggest that the grievances are deep. The protest by the indigenous group of people was over the construction of highways passing over the region where indigenous communities lived. Eventually, Morales announced the suspension of the highway project being built by a Brazilian company, which was supposed to integrate many parts to the country with each other as well as help it link with coastal seas and other bordering nations (Bolivia's Evo Morales suspends Amazon road project, 2011). Additionally, Evo Morales announced holding a referendum before proceeding ahead with this (ambitious as well as controversial) project and also to open dialogue between two provinces namely Cochabamba and Beni, which are involved in the dispute (Bolivia's Evo Morales suspends Amazon road project, 2011). While the decision to have a referendum is welcoming, it is important to point out here that a government, which draws its powers from the support offered by indigenous communities, decided to hold a referendum after the upheaval and not before. This exposes the fault on the government's part. Additionally, it is important to stress that indigenous communities chose to come all the way from TIPNIS to La Paz, to express their dissent, highlighting the flaws of avenues for people to express their disagreements at the local level. Now the most important question is how a 'marginalised' section was capable of holding a protest at all. The reason is, as discussed earlier in the paper; their rise and with increasing electoral importance they hold with Morales' rise to power, they have come forward expecting a viable solution to their problems. It is again interesting to note that, in June 2012, the same police sector that was used to suppress the protesters (indigenous groups), themselves protested against the low wages being paid by the government. This was possible because having shown their faithfulness and integrity, they felt their protest would also bring a change in their lives. Rafael Correa in Ecuador too belongs to the club of 'new left' who rose to power with a commitment to nationalise

natural resources in the country for the welfare of the Ecuadorian and not multi-national companies. By mid of 2013, the indigenous communities in Ecuador protested against the proposed 'copper mining plans' in Yasuni national park, denting his image as the saviour of the said community.

#### *Students' Protests*

Next case would be Chile and Colombia, both witnessing protests from the university students so to increase more state intervention in the education sector. In South America, both Chile and Colombia, have retained a strong democratic structure, in the post-dictatorship era. The rankings by Freedom House year after year classified both the countries as politically free . It is commendable that with time, political decentralisation in Chile and Colombia alike have reached an acceptable level and clear division of powers between different organs of the government exists, so as to maintain checks and balances between them (Fabian Machado, 2009, p. 6). It is in this context that scale of protest and popular participation by students must be seen. As discussed earlier, states having a well-developed decentralised structure are more permeable and offer more openings for people to express their disagreements. Contrary to the protests by indigenous groups in Bolivia, which was mainly concentrated towards the La Paz, the university students' protest is more decentralised and distributed over several parts of the country. It is the decentralised character of Chile that determines the national character of the students' protest. Had Chile been a centralised state, it would not have been easy for the university students beyond the capital city of Santiago to attack governments' seat of power in the same way as those in Santiago could do. Coming to the popular sectors in protest, it is to be reminded that education sector in Chile, and to a lesser extent in reference to Colombia, are considered one of the best in Latin America. Even by ranking, Chile was ranked better off than many other Latin American countries (PISA 2012 Results, 2013). Now as referred earlier, Chile is and has been said to be the best in the education sector, but nationwide protests by university students suggest not everything may be right in Chile. In reality, Chile's private educational sector is performing well but the same may not stand true with the government owned and run universities and schools (Long,

2011). Chile ranks lower on social segregation; some call it a 'social apartheid' or 'educational apartheid' being practised by Chilean government . The demand by students both in Chile and Colombia have been in respect to more and more state intervention in the education sector as opposed to private investment that basically limits education on to the elite ones. Despite, a year-long protest, the government does not seem convinced enough to again monopolise the education sector (Long, 2011). The discontent is rising not only due to hike in fees but the public-private divide is equally fuelling the protests. In Colombia, students in fact with a slogan expressed their disagreement over Colombia becoming more and more like Chile (Devia, 2011). By coincidence, both Chile and Colombia have right wing government in power. Even in this case, the protest cannot be called; solely a protest against neo-liberal policies, rather state's failure is more evident. To add further to this case; Mexico witnessed huge protests by the teachers, despite right-wing government in power external factors cannot be blamed, as the reasons are more local than a global one. With the coming of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012) in power, many educational reforms and the evaluation system that have been introduced are alleged to target teachers. As per the allegations made, it is said the new evaluation system makes it easy to fire teachers (Agren, 2013). As the statement by Porfirio Diaz goes 'Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the US'; Mexico having a border with the United States always had problems where the US had a stake. Be it the issue of trade or drug trafficking or illegal immigration, Mexicans have spent much of their time pointing fingers towards the US as well having accused by the US for many other similar problems. However, the protests by teachers are a result of governments' own policy rather than of United States. The drug war that is continuing in Mexico is also being protested by Mexicans, in demand for legalisation of drugs in the country. As obvious, it is to be seen how does the US views this specific demands of Mexicans

Colombia not being an exception like most Latin American countries experienced several cycles of boom and bust. With coffee exports rising, money earned from it has been a source of foreign exchange for Colombia. It has remained a priority sector in Colombia. Coffee institutes and agricultural institutes not only

promoted advanced research but also advised the government on the economic policies to be followed. Farmers have also been benefitted by the increasing food prices in the world market. While, that case with agricultural workers has been well off, the protest by agricultural sectors is directed against the some clauses of economic policies of the government that may put Colombian farmers on the losing end while in free trade with external partners.

#### *Brazil's case*

A country as giant as Brazil, if revolts it is certain to get international attention. Brazil, which hosted 2014 World Cup and is set to host 2016 Olympics suddenly saw spiralling of protests all over the country from June 2013. The protest started during confederations cup training almost a year before the scheduled world cup (June 2014) in Sao Paulo. Surprisingly, the scale of protest were huge spreading to more than 80 cities in Brazil, similar to the national- level students' protests in Chile. Though a seven percent hike in transport fares might have triggered the protest, it is not mere the hike in transport fares but encompasses wide range socio-economic dimensions to it like corruption, huge spending on building sports infrastructure while letting public utilities at a bad end (Saad-Filho, 2013). The protest in Brazil resembled a new generation of protests; without any ideological leanings and with a wide usage of social networking sites to retain the speedy interaction as well as connecting people in various countries at the same time, making them aware of the police atrocities at the same time (Saad-Filho, 2013, p. 659). A nameless protest, comprising Black blocs was given an ideological bent, as in various other countries such groups have been associated with anti-globalisation protests. It is, however, to be stressed that, people expressed their grievances to Mayor of Rio and the Brazilian President. It was purely a protest against the corrupt politicians as well as the law of 'secret ballot' in Brazilian Senate that seems to protect the corrupt leaders against the law that may go against their interests. The surprising part is that Brazil, which lifted millions out of poverty with the help of several welfare programmes like *Bolsa Familia* and *Fome Zero*, has such a large discontented population. Post-election of Luiz Inacio Lula da' Silva, policies under his leadership have had added millions of people to the middle class and the same

middle class is out on streets against his successors. Hence, it is important to know that despite improvements in governance patterns, the economic situation has deteriorated and the growth rate remained between less than one per cent to two per cent in the last few years. The social divide between haves' and have not's has worsened over the years. Given the participation of middle class in huge numbers, it is important to note that Brazil constitute the largest middle-class in the Latin American region, and middle classes have remained an utmost priority of the government since Lula came to power (Saad-Filho, 2013, p. 661). Contrary to the expectations, the loopholes existing between government and public in reference to the transfer of benefits managed to retain the discontent of the class. It is important to mention here that, students, youths, teachers and labour union leaders also flared up their demands for an increase in wages and extension of good education and other public benefits (Saad-Filho 658).

*Against the populists!*

The news that retained a special concern in American media is that of anti-government protests in Venezuela against the president Nicolas Maduro. This is obviously due to animosity between Venezuela and United States. It is important to note here that Hugo Chavez's victory apart, roaring voice and televised speeches by him were seen as Venezuela's and Venezuelans' protest, to the economic policies that the United States resembled. However, it is surprising that dissent of 'pueblo' i.e. people for which Venezuela's populism stood is not being tolerated by the government. It is worth mentioning here that Maduro's victory was by a mere one percent margin and even post his victory, he has not been able to retain the popular charm that was instigated by his predecessor Chavez, not to say about discontent among 'people', a section that constitutes the core of Venezuela's current participatory democracy. The inflation remains currently above 50 percent even by the official figure, worse to say about the availability of consumer goods in the market. Despite repeated accusation by Maduro; protesters of being fascists and protégé of United States, it is not worth convincing given the current economic situation in Venezuela. Though the protest might have ended, it is visible from the use of excess force that, be it Venezuela or Bolivia or Brazil, the new liberal regimes

have not been able to exhibit their tolerance towards the dissenting parties, despite their commitment of being tolerant (Carey 2006).

#### *Expectations and accomplishments*

It is without a doubt that the very rise of 'political outsiders' in the form of leaders of the new left exhibit peoples' expectation with those candidates who did not have previous experiences in politics, and who won on their personalist charm. The rise of 'political outsiders' also reflect that people have lost faiths in the conventional albeit a rather organised political system (Carreras, 2012). The academic and scholarly debate currently is led by the point, whether the new regimes too have fallen short of the expectations that people in the region had with those 'pro-people' governments. Citing the Brazilian case, for over a decade since Lula took over as Brazilian president, people have been said of Brazil's success on the economic front and on Brazil's growth as a vibrant economy. The resentment, however, is with the fact that if Brazil has witnessed remarkable economic growth, why the benefits have not trickled down. The point mentioned here is substantive from the fact that Brazil's income levels continue to remain stagnant, poverty levels continue to rise and unemployment rates continue to retain an increasing trend. The Brazilian case more or less reflects the state in other Latin American nations.

Serious resentment and dissatisfaction have also resulted from the attempts towards 'radicalisation' and 'recentralisation' of political system fuelling more protests than ever in the past (Eaton, 2014). This has often been at the cost of undermining the uniform political processes that existed before (Ellner, 2013). However, such initiatives have not been successful everywhere, and resulted in varying outcomes depending on the prevalent conditions. In the period 2014-15 alone, Guatemala, Panama, Peru, Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, Mexico have witnessed violent protests in response to the innumerable corruption cases and anti-people policies. Some experts also point to the fact if good days of Latin America's new left might have ended (Watts, Scandal, protests, weak growth: is Latin America's left in retreat?, 2015). To add further, fall of 'Peronist' regime in October 2015 election in Argentina has perhaps already given a hint (Watts, Peronist setback in Argentina may mark breaking of Latin America's 'pink wave', 2015). The volatile

period that encompassed the phase of military rule has ended in Latin America, and hence with strengthened democratic set-up and giant middle class, the new generation expects more from the governments, than bashing up at external forces for all the wrongs.

### ***Conclusion***

Ideological leanings in protests in Latin America have moderated having brought local issues which are a reason for discontent among people in the continent. This is a shift altogether from the trend of voting to power left-leaning leaders one after another, as a vote against the model of Washington Consensus. The failure of the capitalist model in Latin America may partly be the reason for voting in power the candidates, who seemed better to provide psychological and material support to already discontented public. However, it would be a mistake to classify the voting trends with the 2011-2015 protests, as the intended goal of the protests were quite clear and vocally expressed by the people themselves than the leaders of the ruling elite. The sectors and sections, which remained an identification mark or Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of the respective country are themselves on the street to revolt against the executive. This is to be mentioned here that, Brazil's middle class, Bolivia's indigenous community, Ecuador's mining sector and Chile's students are not the only sector that are depressed, in fact, it is only a tip of the iceberg. Given the challenges that contemporary Latin America faces, it is rather a challenging task for not only the governments to focus on accomplishments, but also for the scholars to localise their analysis in reference to popular protests. Events of the past might have induced transnational elements in popular protests in Latin America, but now local issues are a priority to Latin Americans than a global agenda. Future research works can focus on bringing out the local issues in the popular protests across Latin America.

**Endnotes**

- i. The argument is put forward, as their policies are directed towards bringing social and economic equity, as opposed to the model of Washington Consensus which was directed towards growth, but not much focused on bridging the divide between haves' and have not's.
- ii. This might not be exactly true, as irrespective of how the leftist leaders capitalised their popularity on the phenomenon of a pink tide, the new left can also be viewed simply as a movement for electing more responsible and accountable leaders (not much to do with the United States).
- iii. The author draws the argument from general newspaper reports. The author based on his knowledge ascertains that, well established journals in the field of Latin American Studies still correlate the protest in Latin American region at conceptual level to be in response to neo-liberal policies. The news articles however paint a different picture, and focus the protests to be largely on local agendas.
- iv. The reason to raise this question here is that, the group of people or sections or sectors that have come to protest are not the neglected ones, but, in fact, remained under priority of current regimes in power if not their predecessors.
- v. This based on the general perception developed by the researcher, as ascertained from the research articles appearing in the reputed journals.
- vi. Larry Rohter is a journalist associated with New York Times newspaper. The reason for using the word 'pink' in place of red is their reformed and moderate nature.
- vii. Freedom House is an international organisation that ranks the country in three categories namely 1 for Politically Free, 2 for Partially Free and 3 for Not Free.

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