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*Muslim active citizenship in Australia: Socioeconomic challenges and the emergence of a Muslim elite*

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## **Muslim active citizenship in Australia: Socioeconomic challenges and the emergence of a Muslim elite**

### **Abstract**

*The recent national Census demonstrated that Australian Muslims continue to occupy a socioeconomically disadvantaged position. On key indicators of unemployment rate, income, type of occupation and home ownership, Muslims consistently under-perform the national average. This pattern is evident in the last three Census data (2001, 2006 and 2011). Limited access to resources and a sense of marginalisation present challenges to full engagement with society and the natural growth of emotional affiliation with Australia. Muslim active citizenship is hampered by socioeconomic barriers. At the same time, an increasingly proactive class of educated Muslim elite has emerged to claim a voice for Muslims in Australia and promote citizenship rights and responsibilities.*

**Keywords:** *Muslims, active citizenship, socioeconomic marginalisation, civic elite, multiculturalism*

### **Introduction**

Australia is a diverse multicultural society that is committed to equal opportunities for all citizens of different ethnic backgrounds (Tavan 2012). Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bali bombing of 2002 and London bombings of 2005, however, Muslim citizens have come under extreme scrutiny. The tabloid media and populist political leaders have implied a link between Islam and terrorism and cast doubt over the future of Muslims in Australia. Critics of multiculturalism have seized the opportunity to argue against ethnic and religious diversity for its purported generation of ghettos that pose a threat to 'Australian values' (Johnson 2007). For Australian Muslims this turn of events has been extremely hurtful. The demonisation of Muslims as potential terrorists, and the repeated pressure on Muslims to denounce terrorism, has caused angst and alienation. In response, a number of community initiatives and organisations have emerged to bridge the gap. That has meant working on two distinct levels. On one level, they engage with the media, government agencies and policy-makers to voice community concerns and dispel doubts about Muslims loyalty as law abiding citizens. On the other level, they work within their own grass-root communities to enhance capacity by providing training, advice and guidance. The emergence of an articulate Muslim elite has made a difference in the public domain and helped challenge some of the most outrageous presumptions about Australian Muslims.

This article draws upon census data over the post-2001 decade and interviews with a variety of key community figures, to present an analysis on key areas of civic and political participation by Australian Muslims. It offers fresh insight into their socioeconomic trajectory over the decade 2001-2011 and utilises the data to reflect on the current status of Australian Muslim citizenship. Muslims continue to occupy a significantly disadvantaged position. Although it must be noted that over the past decade some Muslims have accumulated socioeconomic capital and resources, allowing them to be civically and politically engaged citizens, this has not changed the persistent picture of socioeconomic disparity. Moreover, the data analysis points to a growing schism *within* the Muslim community. A substantial proportion of Muslims have failed to climb the socioeconomic mobility ladder and have remained – or have become even more – socially marginalised and disenfranchised. These contradictory developments have implications for Australian Muslims’ active engagement.

This article posits that a small but growing civic Muslim elite has emerged, who have learned to play the game of political and civic lobbying to advance the civic standing of Muslim communities and to contribute to build a more cohesive society at large. On the other hand, the continued socioeconomic marginalisation of many Australian Muslims poses significant challenges for their integration and belonging.

## **Methodology**

This article is based on a detailed analysis of statistical data from recent Australian census rounds, especially from the 2011 and 2006 Census. This analysis covers the post 9/11 decade and offers highly insightful views on key development of Islam in Australia during this crucial period.

This article examines the demographic, educational and socioeconomic status of Muslims in 2011 and recent developments through the lens of active citizenship. To allow a deeper examination of the census statistics, the authors additionally draw upon qualitative data obtained through 15 in-depth interviews, conducted in 2012 and 2013 in Melbourne and Sydney, with Muslim community figures and other ‘ordinary’ Muslim citizens, who have been actively involved in various forms of grassroots community, cross-community and mainstream engagement. These interviews have been carried out within the scope of two separate research projects: first, an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study on active Muslim citizenship in Australia and the UK (2011-2013) and, second, an ongoing PhD research project on civic and political participation of Muslims in Australia and Germany (2012-2015). Some evidence was also drawn from an ARC funded study examining legal pluralism based upon semi-structured face-to-face interviews in Sydney. These qualitative data add depth to the analysis of the census and facilitate the interpretation of the statistics with regard to Muslims’ active citizenship. This quantitative-qualitative methodological mix has proven well suited to reveal new insights into how Australian Muslims experience the positive possibilities and constraints of Australian citizenship.

## **Theoretical framework: active citizenship and resources**

Active, participatory forms of democratic citizenship require a certain level of social resources and dispositions. As Jan W. van Deth has aptly pointed out: ‘Democracy doesn’t deserve its name without citizens’ participation...Citizens’ involvement, however, cannot be taken for granted but depends heavily on resources, motivation, and social contacts’ (2013: 9). This understanding of citizenship stands in contrast to other more static models that argue

‘citizenship is most adequately defined in terms of both rights and duties’ and as a ‘social status that confers membership of a political community that in turn determines an individual's share’ (Turner 2013: 231). According to the latter rights-and-duty based understanding of citizenship, the ‘status of citizen is not derogated or jeopardized if they choose not to be so active’ (Isin and Wood 1999: 7).

Isin and Turner posit in the introduction to their edited *Handbook of Citizenship Studies* that the notion of citizenship as a ‘status held under the authority of a state’ has been expanded to ‘include various political and social struggles of recognition and redistribution as instances of claim-making, and hence, by extension, of citizenship’ (2002: 2). This paradigm shift has contributed to generating an array of new analytical tools and approaches to examine social phenomena of active participation as a fundamental pillar of citizenship. This broader understanding of citizenship also addresses less formalised forms of civic and political claim-makings, collective mobilisation and group consciousness, the role of agency and ‘equal standing in civil society’ (Conover et al 2004: 1037). In this context the notion of *active* citizenship has gained prominence.

Active citizenship emphasises varied dimensions of civic-political engagement and can be conceptualised in different ways depending on specific traditions. Republican citizenship, for example, deploys an individualistic notion of the ‘good citizen’ who participates in the public sphere working towards the greater good of society, even though this may not always coincide with their own personal interests (Dagger 2002). The communitarian tradition challenges the republican ideal of a clearly-defined common good. ‘For communitarians, citizenship is about participation in the political community but it is also about the preservation of identity, and therefore citizenship is always specific to a particular community’ (Delanty 2002: 163). This communitarian logic emphasises that active engagement is often driven by the specific agenda of a particular community group, which highlights the relevance of this communitarian version of active citizenship for the collective claim-making of minorities and their communities. More pluralistic models of citizenship, as proposed by scholars such as Young (1989), Mouffe (1995) and Kymlicka (1995), stress the active component of minorities’ mobilisation for substantive equality and more particularistic goals like accommodation and recognition of their community. Chantal Mouffe calls in her model of radical democracy for a less rigid notion of citizens’ context-specific identities as the constantly shifting foundations of their active engagement within social movements and other forms of mobilisation. These multiple identifications need to be constantly negotiated in a way ‘to make our belonging to different communities of values, language, culture and others compatible with our common belonging to a political community’ (Mouffe 1995: 34).

All these political and philosophical concepts of active citizenship are of relevance when examining Muslim civic and political engagement in Australia. Muslims may act as public-spirited (‘republican’) citizens seeking to serve the whole society and pursuing the common good, but they may also engage in public affairs more specifically in order to advance the wellbeing and recognition of their own religious community and redress exclusionary stigmatisations. These divergent aims can be pursued through classical means of formal political participation (e.g. electoral participation) and civic engagement (e.g. voluntary community work), as well as in less formalised and more unconventional manners (e.g. blogging). Furthermore, in accordance with Mouffe’s notion of fluid identities, Muslims may engage in collective mobilisation activities outside narrowly defined community boundaries, be it as feminist or human rights activists or in the trade unions, to name but a few. This may be acted out within traditional community organisational structures, but it can also emerge in

more ‘fluid and unstructured forms of participation’ (Fahmy 2006: 105), which has become particularly prevalent among young people (Vromen 2003) and has been described as ‘DIY citizenship’ (Harris and Roose 2013).

It may be argued that access to resources facilitates active citizenship. People with high levels of education and a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to become active in the formal and informal political space or civic forms of engagement. This fundamental premise can be considered empirically well-established, although there might be an ongoing dispute on the true nature and causality of this relationship between higher education and socioeconomic status and civic and political participation (see, for example, Berinsky and Lenz 2011; Cohen et al. 2001).

A commonly used framework to explain civic and political participation is the Civic Voluntarism Model, developed by Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman and Henry E. Brady within their large US-study *Voices and Equality* (1995). This model identifies three key determinants of political participation: individual resources, psychological predispositions (‘political engagement’) and political recruitment (Verba et al. 1995: 269-73). Verba and his colleagues stress, however, the crucial importance of individual resources:

All three components of the model are important. However, we place greater emphasis on the resources that facilitate participation and on the variety of psychological predispositions towards politics that we label “political engagement” than on political recruitment...With respect to resources and engagement, ...we place greater stress on the former (Verba et al. 1995: 270).

According to Verba et al. (1995), the individual resources that affect one’s capacity and proneness to become politically active encompass three separate dimensions: time, money and civic skills, the latter being described as a person’s ‘organizational and communications capacity’ (271) People gain and enhance their civic skills in the family, during their formal education, at the workplace and through their participation in civil society organisations (304-33). Those who know how to communicate effectively and to organise the political involvement, are not only more likely to become politically engaged, but their participation also tends to be more efficient – which again encourages further political commitment: ‘being more active may increase engagement as participants become more interested, informed, and efficacious’ (344).

In addition to this, according to Verba and his colleagues, most decisive explanatory factor of political participation, citizens’ personal interests in politics and a basic motivation to become politically active are considered crucial. Verba et al. refer to this as ‘political engagement’ (1995: 344). ‘[I]t is hard to image that at least some psychological engagement with politics is not required for almost all forms of political participation’ (345). Verba et al.’s empirical analysis clearly indicates that ‘resources and political engagement jointly matter for political participation’ (351), the former giving citizens the ability to act and the latter providing the motivation. As a third and least important determinant of political participation, the US research team identified citizens’ personal involvement in (non-political) institutions of adult life – ‘the workplace, voluntary association, or church’ (369).

This explanatory model with its emphasis on individual resources as key facilitator of participation bears similarities with other resource-based frameworks and research findings

which also highlight that political participation is more prevalent among those with a higher socioeconomic status (e.g., Peterson 1990) and educational attainments. Rosenstone and Hansen posit that education ‘imparts the knowledge and skills most essential to a citizen’s task’ (1993: 136) and makes well-educated citizens more capable (and likely) to actively engage in one or another form of political participation. Essentially the same pattern applies to civic participation, more precisely, their engagement in voluntary work, as various research and statistics have consistently shown. The special analysis of the 2010 General Social Survey (GSS) data, for example, found significantly higher volunteering rates among adult Australians who are studying or employed (as opposed to those unemployed), those with higher school attainments and a higher weekly household income. Moreover, the proficiency in English (measured as language spoke at home) also affects the likelihood of volunteering (ABS 2010: 10 and 14).

The above conceptual framework is very relevant to better understanding the level and nuances of Muslim engagement in Australia. The following analysis of statistical data explores some key measurable socioeconomic barriers to full Muslim citizenship. This quantitative analysis relies on data from the 2011 Census, with reference to 2001 and 2006 Census data where appropriate to highlight important trends and persistent patterns..

## **Australian Muslims in the census: demographics and resources**

### *General demographics*

According to the latest Census in 2011, more than 476,000 people in Australia identify as Muslims. Australian Muslim population has grown continuously since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2006, around 340,000 Australians self-declared as Muslim. Today 2.2 per cent of the total population of Australia are Muslims, which makes Islam the second largest minority religion in Australia after Buddhism (Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Number of self-identified Muslims (2001, 2006, 2011)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Muslims</b>	<b>Proportion of total population</b>	<b>Changes (number and percentage)</b>
2001	281,576	1.5%	1996-2001: + 40.2%
2006	340,393	1.7%	2001-2006: + 20.9%
2011	476,292	2.2%	2006-2011: + 39.9%

Source: ABS 2001; ABS 2006; ABS 2011

In 2011, 37.6 per cent of Muslims were born in Australia; this proportion has not changed much over the past decade (2001: 36.4 per cent; 2006: 37.9 per cent). Muslims born overseas come from a range of countries, with Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey as the top ranking countries of birth. In the past decade the number (and proportion) of Muslims born in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and India has increased. In contrast Muslim migration from Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina has significantly declined (Table 2).

<sup>1</sup> The Buddhist share of the Australian population is 2.5 per cent.

**Table 2: Top ten countries of birth: Muslims (2001, 2006, 2011), in percentage**

2001		2006		2011	
Australia	36.4	Australia	37.9	Australia	37.6
Lebanon	10.4	Lebanon	8.9	Lebanon	7.1
Turkey	8.3	Turkey	6.8	Pakistan	5.6
Afghanistan	3.5	Afghanistan	4.7	Afghanistan	5.5
Bosnia & Herzegovina	3.5	Pakistan	4.1	Turkey	5.3
Pakistan	3.3	Bangladesh	3.9	Bangladesh	5.0
Indonesia	2.9	Iraq	2.9	Iraq	3.3
Iraq	2.8	Indonesia	2.5	Iran	2.7
Bangladesh	2.7	Bosnia & Herzegovina	2.2	Indonesia	2.6
Iran	2.3	Iran	2.1	India	2.1
Other	23.9	Other	24.0	Other	23.2

Source: ABS 2001; ABS 2006; ABS 2011

Muslims in Australia have been characterised by their young demographic profile. Census figures in 2001, 2006 and 2011 show that Muslims are consistently overrepresented in lower age brackets (up to around 40 years) and underrepresented in the older age groups. The differences continue to be particularly pronounced within the age bracket of those under 5 years and those older than 65. A longitudinal comparison does not suggest major changes, although the proportion of Muslims younger than 15 (in relation to all Muslims) has slowly decreased from 30.8 per cent (2001) to 29.2 per cent (2011), while the proportion of Muslims older than 65 has increased from 2.8 per cent (2001) to 3.4 per cent (2011) (Table 3).

**Table 3: Age profile: Muslims and total population (2001, 2006, 2011), in percentage**

	2001		2006		2011	
	Muslims	Total population	Muslims	Total population	Muslims	Total population
<b>0 – 4</b>	10.6	6.6	10.8	6.3	11.4	6.6
<b>5 – 14</b>	20.2	14.1	19.1	13.5	17.8	12.7
<b>15 – 24</b>	18.7	13.5	18.8	13.6	17.3	13.3
<b>25 – 34</b>	18.2	14.4	18.7	13.5	20.8	13.8
<b>35 – 44</b>	15.3	15.1	14.8	14.8	14.5	14.2
<b>45 – 54</b>	9.5	13.5	9.5	13.9	9.6	13.7
<b>55 – 64</b>	4.8	9.3	5.2	11.0	5.3	11.6
<b>65+</b>	2.8	12.5	3.0	13.3	3.4	14.0
<b>All</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: ABS 2001; ABS 2006; ABS 2011

This demographic outlook of Australian Muslims has implications for the scope, and possibly also on the nature, of their civic and political participation. The much younger age profile of Muslims may partially explain their lower civic and political participation rate. Children and teenagers are less likely to engage with society in such ways. The GSS special analysis found that volunteering is most popular with people in the age bracket of 35 to 64 (ABS 2010, p. 10), within which Muslims are underrepresented. According to the GSS analysis, people born in Australia are more likely to volunteer than overseas born immigrants (ABS 2011, p. 10).

### *Political rights and citizenship*

In 2011, three quarters of all residents who identify as Muslims hold Australian citizenship (74.1 per cent) (ABS 2011). This proportion includes the 38 per cent of Muslims born in Australia as well as naturalised overseas-born immigrants. A special analysis, based on 2006 census data and other statistics of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, demonstrates that naturalisation rates are particularly high among immigrants from many of those countries where Muslims predominantly come from (Smith et al. 2011). Taking into account criteria of eligibility (e.g. duration of residence), Smith and colleagues calculate a naturalisation rate of 96 per cent among immigrants born in Lebanon, 93 per cent for those from Turkey and 87 per cent for Iraqi-born migrants. These figures are well above the overall average of 80 per cent of all foreign-born residents.

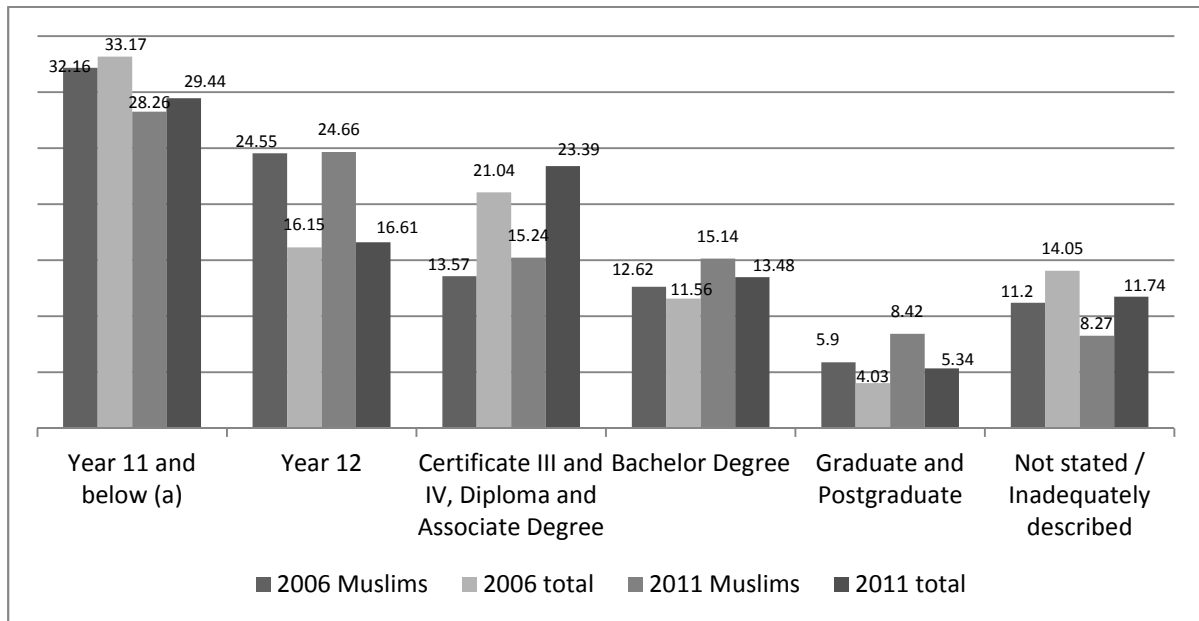
Legal citizenship status grants individuals full civic, social and political rights and responsibilities, including the right and duty to vote and the entitlement to run for public office. Muslims remain, however, severely underrepresented in the political decision-making processes. As of late 2013, only two members of the Commonwealth parliament, self-identify as Muslim. Ed Husic was elected in 2010 and was sworn into office (on the Quran) as Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and Broadband in the previous Labor government in 2013. In November 2013, Mehmet Tillam, a Turkish-born Australian was also sworn into Parliament on the Quran, though only to fill a short-term senate vacancy. Tayfun Eren, the first Muslim in an Australian parliament, was elected to the Victorian state parliament in 1996 and held his seat until 1999. In 2002, Turkish-born politician Adem Somyurek won a seat in the Victorian parliament, which he continues to hold. He was joined by John Eren in 2006 and Khalil Eideh in 2007. In New South Wales, the first Muslim member of the NSW parliament, Shaoquett Moselmane (Labor), was elected only in 2009. In June 2013, the Pakistani-born Mehreen Faruqi (Greens), an environmental engineer, was appointed by her party to the NSW Senate. Faruqi has often been referred to as the first Muslim women in an Australian parliament.

### *Education*

Census data from the past decade (2001-2011) reveal that many Muslims have reached in some ways similar or higher educational attainments compared to the population as a whole. A significantly higher proportion of Muslims have obtained a Bachelor, graduate or postgraduate degree. Moreover, in 2006 and 2011 Muslims have been underrepresented among those who have left high school in Year 11 or earlier. Muslims have also been underrepresented, however, in the certificate level category, which refers to a basic post-secondary degree obtained outside the university sector. Despite their strong representation among those with a university degree, Muslims are still more likely to have no post-secondary education at all; this applies to 52.92 per cent of Muslims compared to 46.05 per cent among the total population. The educational advantage of Muslims (as defined by possession of university degrees) grew between 2006 and 2011. In 2011, for example, 8.42 per cent of Muslims held graduate/post-graduate degrees, which constitutes an increase by 42.7 per cent compared to the 2006 figure (5.9 per cent); among the total population, the proportion of those with graduate/post-graduate degrees increased from 4.03 to 5.34 per cent, which constitutes a less significant increase of 32.5 per cent. This growth points to the emergence of a well-educated group within Muslim communities, that stands out with significant levels of civic skills (Verba et al. 1995) and social capital.



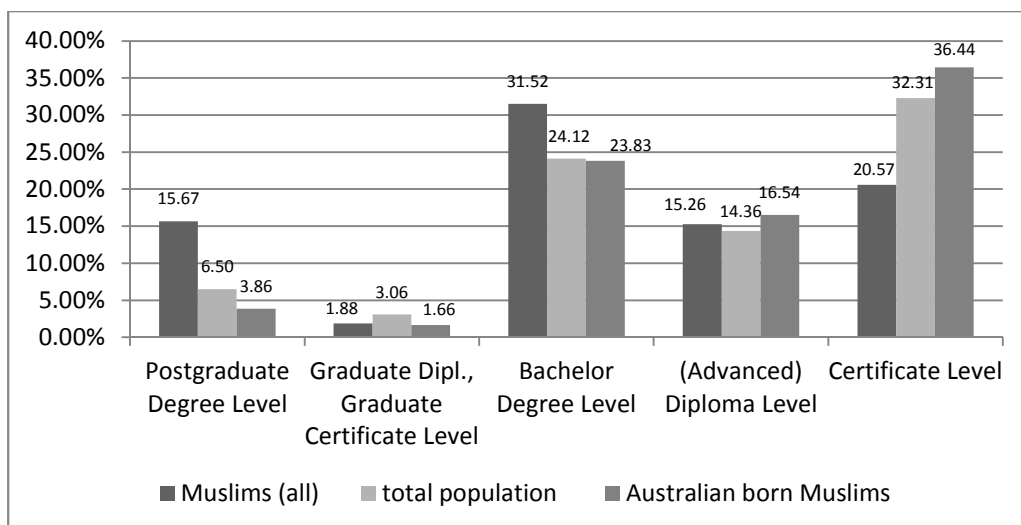
**Graph 1: Highest education attainments: Muslims and total population (2006, 2011), in percentage**



Source: ABS 2006; ABS 2011

These data suggest a growing educational divide within Muslim communities as some Muslims do exceptionally well while many others lag behind. Furthermore, there is an emerging gap between Australian-born and overseas-born Muslims. Graph 2 on the highest tertiary (non-school) education qualification shows that overseas-born Muslims are much more likely to have a postgraduate or Bachelor degree than Australian-born Muslims, as well as the total Australian population. However, educational capital may not translate directly into enhanced social and economic capital for overseas-born Australian Muslims, due to a range of factors among them non-recognition of overseas qualification (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006).

**Graph 2: Post-Year 12 (non-school) qualifications: all Muslims, total population and Australian-born Muslims (2011), in percentage**



Source: ABS 2011; missing to 100%: not (adequately) stated; only applicable cases

## *Language*

Being able to speak the language of the country of residence is crucial for many forms of civic engagement, in particular for those that require inter-community interaction with mainstream stakeholders in the political arena or civil society. The vast majority of Muslims in Australia consider their English proficiency to be very or fairly high. According to the 2011 census data, 82 per cent of Muslims speak either only English (13.0 per cent) or they speak English as a second language very well (46.5 per cent) or well (22.9 per cent). Around 16 per cent of all Muslims in Australia have only poor ('speak not well', 11.4 per cent) or no English language skills at all (4.2 per cent). Not surprisingly, recent immigrants are overrepresented in this low English proficiency group, while around 86 per cent of Australian-born Muslims have no difficulties communicating in English (ABS 2011). It must be noted, however, that more than one in ten Muslims born in Australia do not speak English well (5.6 per cent) or don't speak it at all (5.3 per cent).

## *Labour market participation*

Muslims on average continue to occupy a disadvantaged position in the labour market. In 2011, the nationwide unemployment rate among Muslims was at 12.6 per cent, which is more than twice as high as the national average of 5.6 per cent (ABS 2011).<sup>2</sup> Table 4 documents this disparity and shows that the fall in the unemployment rate among Muslims is higher than the general population. The rate of Muslim recovery from unemployment between 2001 and 2011 was 33.8 per cent while the general population experienced a slower recovery rate of 23.9 per cent in the same period. The drop in the Muslim unemployment rate has even continued between 2006 and 2011, while the general unemployment rate actually increased slightly.

**Table 4: Unemployment rates: Muslims and total population (2001, 2006, 2011), in percentage**

	Muslims	Total population
<b>2001</b>	19.08	7.4
<b>2006</b>	13.42	5.24
<b>2011</b>	12.63	5.63

Source: ABS 2001; ABS 2006; ABS 2011

The statistical analysis suggests that Muslims' high unemployment rates are not predominantly attributed to recent immigration and subsequent adjustment processes during early stages of settlement. In 2011, Australian-born Muslims are almost as likely to be unemployed (11.8 per cent) as Australian Muslims in general. Not surprisingly, the unemployment rate among those Muslims with low English language skills is very high: 24.46 per cent of Muslims who do not speak English well and 36.83 per cent of those without any English skills are unemployed (ABS 2011).

Australian Muslims continue to work often in low-skilled occupations and have jobs typically characterised by physically hard labour, unfavourable working hours and/or low wages. Muslims are overrepresented among machinery operators, drivers and labourers and

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<sup>2</sup> Defined as the proportion of those aged over 15 years without a job who are actively looking for work in relation to the total labour force.

underrepresented in managerial positions and among professionals. A comparison between all Muslims and those born in Australia reveals a somewhat ambiguous picture. Australian-born Muslims, for example, work more often as technicians or qualified trades workers, as clerical, admin or sales workers – and less often as machinery operators and labourers – than Muslims in general. This indicates a move away from low-skilled and less prestigious occupations among second generation Muslims. Importantly, foreign-born Muslims are more likely to work in professional occupations than their Australian-born counterparts, perhaps due to strict rules on skilled migration as a prerequisite to settlement. A longitudinal analysis comparing all Muslims to the total Australian population shows consistent progress as Muslims have been catching up to the national average. This applies across the occupational spectrum, but is particularly evident in the occupational area of professionals (Table 5).

**Table 5: Occupational status (15+ years): all Muslims, total population (2006, 2011) and Australian-born Muslims (2011), in percentage**

	2006		2011 (changes 2006-2011: percentage points)		
	Muslims	Total population	all Muslims	Total population	Australian-born Muslims
Managers	9.11	13.21	9.24 (+0.13)	12.86 (-0.35)	9.57
Professionals	17.04	19.84	20.27 (+3.23)	21.33 (+1.49)	16.22
Technicians and Trades Workers	14.86	14.38	14.54 (-0.32)	14.17 (-0.21)	16.20
Community/Personal Service Workers	7.93	8.81	9.53 (+1.60)	9.66 (+0.85)	8.35
Clerical/Admin Workers	10.85	15.00	11.37 (+0.52)	14.75 (-0.25)	16.06
Sales Workers	10.75	9.84	9.82 (-0.93)	9.37 (-0.47)	14.48
Machinery Operators and Drivers	11.25	6.64	9.92 (-1.33)	6.56 (-0.08)	6.73
Labourers	14.48	10.46	12.08 (-2.40)	9.42 (-1.04)	8.73

Source: ABS 2006; ABS 2011

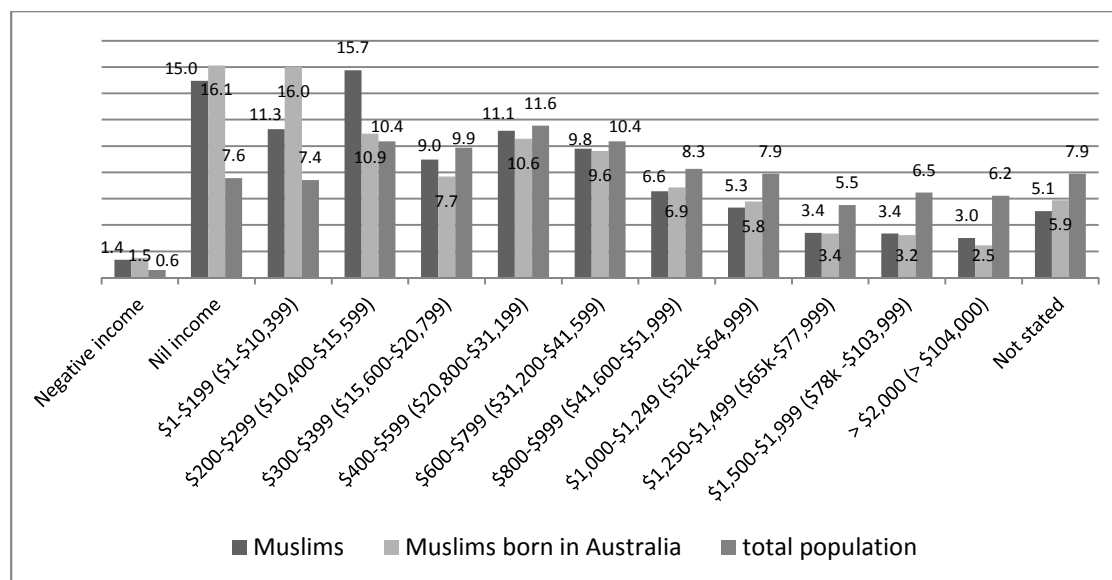
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### ***Income***

The disadvantaged labour market position of Muslims translates into lower personal and household income. With regard to the personal annual income of every person aged 15 and over, Muslims are clearly overrepresented in the lower income brackets of less than AU\$16,000 (Graph 3). Australian-born Muslims are not doing any better in terms of their financial situation than Muslims in general. Rather the opposite is the case: While Muslims born in Australia and those born overseas do not differ significantly in the medium and higher income groups, Australian-born Muslims are more likely to have no or very low annual income. 33.6 per cent of Muslims born in Australia have an annual income of less than AU\$10,400 (includes negative and no income) compared to 27.7 per cent among all

Muslims and 15.6 per cent among the total population (Graph 3). These income disparities between Australian-born Muslims and those born overseas may partially be attributed to the fact that Muslims born in Australia are particularly overrepresented in the age bracket of 15 to 19, which is relevant for the statistics on personal income.

**Graph 3: Weekly and annual personal income: all Muslims, Australian-born Muslims, total population (2011), in percentage**



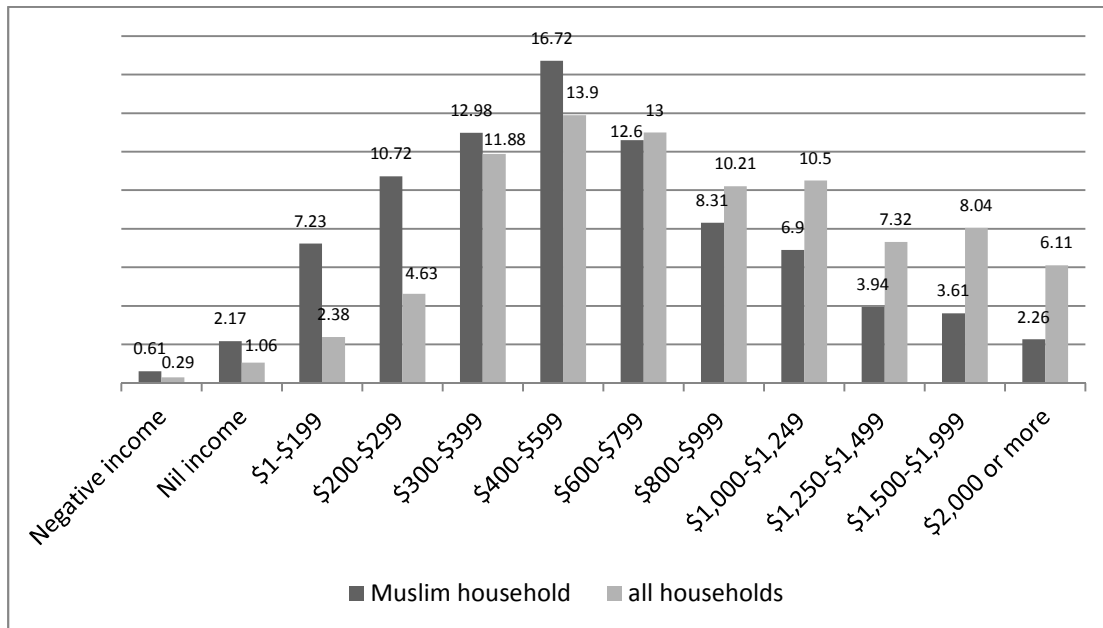
Source: ABS 2011, refers to people aged 15+

Muslim households also tend to have much less financial means at their disposal than the national average. The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) defines poverty as 50 per cent of the median (middle) disposable income for all Australian households (in 2010: \$752 per week for a couple with two children) (2012: 6-7). The benchmark for poverty according to ACOSS is \$358 per week for a single adult.

Muslims are significantly more likely to live in poverty than non-Muslim Australians. One in ten Muslim households have less than AU\$200 a week, while this applies only to 3.7 per cent of all Australian households. A further 23.7 per cent of Muslim household have a weekly income of between AU\$200 and AU\$400, compared to 16.5 per cent among all households. Accordingly, Muslim households are underrepresented in the income bracket of AU\$600 and more per week. The higher the income level, the wider the gap between Muslim and other households grows (Graph 4).

Although an accurate comparison with the 2006 census data is not feasible due to changed income categories and a different definition of Muslim household, the figures suggest that the financial situation of Muslim households has not improved, and possibly even further aggravated over the previous half decade. In 2006, for example, 9.28 per cent of Muslim households (‘at least one resident is Muslim’) had a weekly income of less AU\$250 (all households: 7.54 per cent). In 2011, 20.7 per cent of Muslim households (‘reference person is Muslim’) had AU\$299 or less, compared to 8.36 per cent of all households.

**Graph 4: Equivalised weekly household income of Muslims and total population (2011), in percentage**



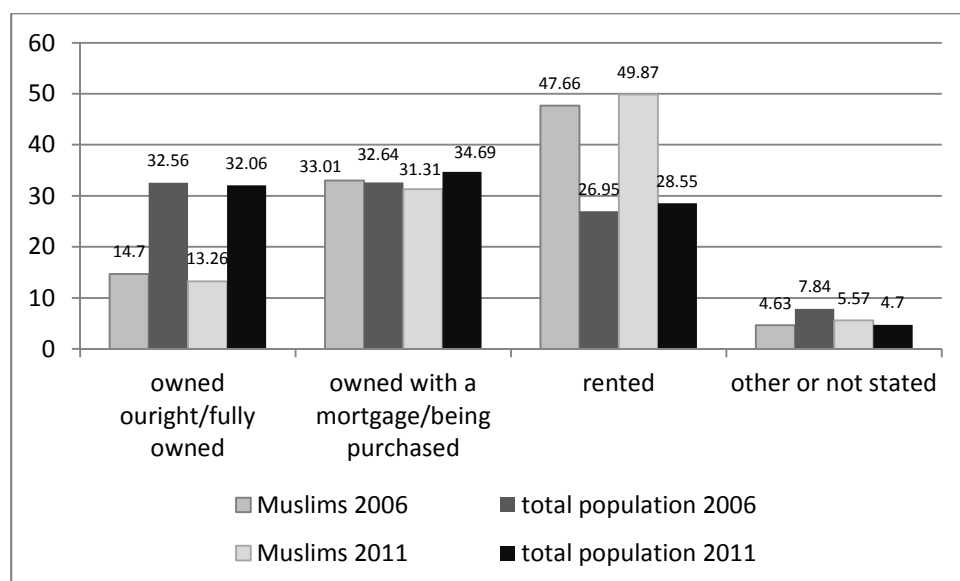
Source: ABS 2011

Note: Missing to 100% partially or not stated income; Muslim household defined as 'reference person is Muslim'

### ***Tenure***

According to Riaz Hassan, home ownership is 'the most common vehicle through which Australians accumulate private wealth' (2010: 579). Owning one's home without having to pay a mortgage increases the cash flow in the household and contributes to a sense of financial and emotional stability and permanency. In 2011, only 44 per cent of Muslim households resided in a house or apartment that they owned (13 per cent outright and 31 per cent with a mortgage), compared to 67 per cent of all Australian households (32 per cent owned outright and 35 per cent with a mortgage). Half of all Muslim households rented in 2011, while this applied only to 29 per cent of all households (Graph 5).

**Graph 5: Housing tenure: Muslim and all households (2006, 2011), in percentage**



Source: ABS 2006; ABS 2011

Note: Muslim household in 2006 defined as ‘at least one resident is Muslim’ and in 2011 as ‘reference person is Muslim’.

The changes that have occurred since 2006 may be minor but point to a negative development. In 2011, more Muslim household lived in rented properties. Muslims’ home ownership rates (with and without a mortgage) are lower than in 2006. The analysis also suggests increased disparities with regard to tenure between Muslims and the total population (Graph 5). This may be in parts attributed to the ongoing immigration of first generation Muslims, who are still in an early stage of their settlement process in Australia, but also reflects the disadvantaged financial situation of Muslims in an increasingly unaffordable property market in many metropolitan areas. Moreover, as an emerging body of evidence suggests, at least some observant Muslims face difficulties in purchasing a home due to their reluctance to pay home loans linked to interest. *Riba* (Interest) is considered impermissible within Islam.

#### *An emerging elite and a growing socioeconomic schism within the Muslim communities*

The overall socioeconomic situation of Muslims continues to be characterised by substantial disadvantages and poor access to resources and human capital compared to the total population. These disparities and inclusion barriers are caused by a complex interplay of various factors (Hassan 2010: 583; University of Newcastle 2011: 32-46), ranging from racially and/or religiously motivated forms of discrimination especially in the access to the labour market (Booth et al. 2012), the poor recognition of overseas qualifications (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006) to community factors (e.g. family patterns and gender roles, settlement-related adjustment issues) or demography (e.g. younger age profile, more families with young children). More targeted research is needed to gain deeper insights into these interwoven factors. What this data analysis clearly shows, however, is that despite the prevalence of these disparities some Muslims have been catching up. This development is reflected most vividly in the data on education attainments. A growing number and proportion of Muslims hold a university degree – almost 25 per cent in 2011 which is higher than the total national average. There is also a growing trend for educated Muslims to

occupy more prestigious and better paid positions, for example, as managers or professionals. These developments point to the growing emergence of a professionally well-established, highly educated Muslim elite. But this is only half the story. The majority of Muslims still have no post-secondary education attainment at all. Similarly, the average employment experience for Muslims, in particular the high unemployment rate, demonstrates a continuous socioeconomic disadvantage.

The last three Census data suggests that the Muslim experience of socioeconomic marginalisation is not simply related to the challenges of recent immigration. While new Muslim migrants face obvious difficulties, not dissimilar to other new settlers, problems of socioeconomic disadvantage is much more pervasive. Australian-born Muslims appear to be equally affected by such marginalisation. The consequent sense of disappointment with their unfulfilled expectations holds a potential for far-reaching repercussions for a sense of citizenship and belonging

### **Discussion: implications for Muslim active citizenship**

Bearing in mind the Civic Voluntarism Model, given their low socioeconomic status, Muslims in Australia often lack access to relevant resources that facilitate civic and political participation and are hence less likely to get involved in formal forms of civic engagement. The 2011 census data on Muslim volunteering rates seem to confirm the above: Less than one in ten Muslim respondents (9.18 per cent) stated they volunteer for an organisation or group, compared to almost double this proportion among the total population (17.8 per cent) (ABS 2011). However, this 'statistical fact' needs to be interpreted with analytical caution due to the census question's skewed bias towards formal volunteering, which may not be a very suitable tool to accurately capture Muslims' civic engagement. Madkhul asserts that ethnic minority members may 'prefer a more informal and less bureaucratic approach to volunteering' (Madkhul 2007: 8).

Based on the qualitative research we argue that the Civic Voluntarism Model retains important relevance to Muslims in Australia. Economic hardship is a barrier to civic and political activism.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that only economically well established and highly educated Muslims become active citizens. Clearly, the process of active citizenship is complex and multi-faceted and cannot be described as a direct reflection of one's resources. However, as Hassan convincingly argues, '[e]conomic disadvantage is disempowering' (2010: 582). It hampers not only the ability and eagerness to participate effectively (see Verba et al. 1995), but also 'increases the probability of ... alienation from mainstream Australian society' (Hassan 2010: 582).

In addition, other cleavages have been emerging that complicate the picture. On the one hand, there is an increasing proportion of Muslims who actively engage with Australian mainstream society, who feel Australian and have no problems reconciling their religious with their civic identity. This is what can be described as the new Muslim civic elite. Many are economically well-established, educated and articulate, eager to participate in and contribute to society at large, be it individually or through engagement in Muslim community or mainstream organisations (Amath 2013; Roose 2013). Hass Dellal, executive director of the Australian

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<sup>3</sup> In a 2007 survey respondents from cultural minority communities explained their concerns about volunteering, highlighting problems of, among others, personal time constraints and additional volunteering-related costs, for example, for public transport or meals (AMF and VA 2007: 66)

Multicultural Foundation, for example, stated during an interview in September 2013 that he has encountered ‘a great proportion of young Australian Muslims who are really getting out there and participate and have become quite successful in media, political parties, local councils, and a whole range of other activities’. Sheikh Shady Al Sulemain, the youngest Australian-born Imam and National Secretary of the Australian National Imams Council states optimistically in early 2013:

I believe that the Australian Muslim community is going through a positive direction, give it ten years and you’re gonna find big changes in this community okay, more educated Muslims, more political involvement for Muslims, less Muslims on the streets, less Muslims on drugs, less Muslims in prisons.

Qualitative research suggests that a small segment within Muslim communities shows no desire to be part of Australian society; some reject the democratic foundation of the Australian polity as illegitimate. A small minority refuses to participate in general elections because they do not accept the general legitimacy of the Australian political system. (Al-Momani et al. 2010: 16). While the view that Muslim and Australian identities are compatible is generally shared among Muslims, a small but vocal minority remains defiant. A 2009 report produced by the Monash University Centre for Muslim Minorities and Islam Policy Studies found that 4.3 per cent of Muslim respondents (in a sample of 282) disagreed strongly with the statement ‘I can be a good Muslim and a good Australian’ (2009: 18).

Muslim communities have been traditionally inward looking and preoccupied with the internal concerns of the community. But the shocks of terrorist attacks have made them aware of the importance of reaching out to the wider community and becoming more active in the public domain. While the extent of their civic and political participation cannot be quantitatively determined, there is a general consensus that Australian Muslims have become much more engaged in various forms of civic and political activities in the post-9/11 decade (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014). Amath (2013) identifies three main areas of Muslim community engagement, which pulled an unprecedented number of Muslims into the sphere of active citizenship: inter-faith initiatives (Bouma et al. 2007, 61), media engagement (Dreher 2010) and government consultations. The past decade has fundamentally changed the way in which Muslim community organisations negotiate their civic standing and engaged with the wider society, be it their immediate neighbourhood, other civil society and/or faith groups, local, state or federal government and the media (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014). With the accumulation of human and social capital, lines of communications with political decision-makers, public opinion leaders and other influential stakeholders have been established and enhanced – and often successfully utilised for Muslim political and civic participation. However, as several community leaders have lamented, this multiple engagement with the wider society has also taken up a lot of their resources and has distracted them from equally important community-internal tasks.

This new way of civic negotiation has been executed effectively by a growing number of Muslims, equipped with the civic skills and personal commitment to do so, often as representatives of community organisations, such as the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), the Affinity Foundation or various Muslim women’s organisations, to name a few. It is illustrative to consider the make-up of the ICV board as an indicative example. The 2014 President is Nadeem Hussain, an environmental Protection Officer of Pakistani background with a Master’s degree from the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok. Vice President Maryum Chaudhry, a 2013 Victorian Women’s Governance Scholarship award winner from



the Australian Institute of Company Directors, is a graduate of the University of Sydney. Other board members include an accountant, PhD student, psychologist, a university centre coordinator and the head of Human Resources at Australia Post.

But many of these agents of Muslim active citizenship who took on the post-9/11 challenges of the Muslim communities encountered opposition from an unexpected direction – from within their own communities. Especially those Muslim individuals and organisations who became involved in collaborations and consultations with the government or simply accepted government funding for projects on promoting social cohesion have been viewed by some segments of the Muslim communities with suspicion (Akbarzadeh 2013). An executive AFIC board member asserted that those Muslim organisations that were engaging with the government were ‘seen by some Muslims on the grassroots level as the government’s puppets’. Nora Amath found in interviews with key representatives of Muslim civil society organisations that even those involved in interfaith dialogue have become the target of internal criticism and that ‘this mistrust seemed to be aimed specifically at Muslim women’s organisations’ (2013: 123). Internal dynamics and mistrust have reinforced the schism between those engaged and politically active Muslim citizens and ‘this minority within the Muslim community that have always been more marginalized, because they look a certain way, have language barriers, and other things’, according to an AFIC board member.

It remains an open question as to whether Muslim organisations are sufficiently established and resourced to retain credibility within their own communities – without jeopardising their positive relations and lines of communication with mainstream society. They have to find new approaches to tackle the problems of community fragmentation and marginalisation on their own terms and with their own arguments – and not as an executor of the government’s will.

Nevertheless, the government has an important role to play. Living up to its own multicultural promises, it needs to make greater efforts to promote equal access to educational and socioeconomic resources and ensure substantive equality beyond the formality of political rights. This requires targeted measures and investment in settlement services, as well as a revived commitment to empowering migrant and ethnic/religious communities.

## **Conclusion**

The last Australian Census data show that Australian Muslims continue to be overrepresented in lower socioeconomic strata. Muslims perform below the national average in almost all key indicators: income level, type of profession, unemployment rates and home ownership. A comparison with 2001 and 2006 Census data suggest that this is a persistent pattern. The only area where Muslims have a marked advantage over the national average is in the area of tertiary education. Australian Muslims are more likely to hold a university degree than the national average rates.

Muslims in Australia constitute a particularly disadvantaged minority group – not only in comparison to the total population but also to any other religious group. For example, the 2011 Census data analysis reveals that no other religious minority in Australia is affected more by unemployment and no other group has a lower level of personal income than Muslims (ABS 2011). Similar disparities can be found when comparing first-generation Muslim immigrants to other non-Muslim immigrant groups. The Australian experience is not

unique in Western societies and resembles in many ways the situation of Muslims in many Western European countries (Peucker and Akbarzadeh 2014, 28-45, Open Society Institute 2010, 109-113). The persistent pattern of Muslim underperformance on key socioeconomic indicators holds significant implications for the sense of belonging and citizenship. The most immediate consequence of socioeconomic marginalisation is limited access to the resources that facilitate civic and political engagement. As Verba et al. (1995) have argued, time, money and civic skills greatly enhance one's capacity to engage with and contribute to society, which fosters emotional connections with the polity. Applying this resource-based model to Australian Muslims demonstrates significant gaps in the infrastructure which could undermine identification with Australia and active citizenship. High unemployment rates, low income and a persistent sense of being on the margins of society dent the natural instinct for Muslims to aspire for full citizenship. Continued disparity in wealth and prospects of prosperity, evident in the 2001, 2006 and 2011 Census, work against the sense of belonging.

Despite these obvious challenges, however, an increasingly assertive Muslim civic elite has emerged to address the limitations and barriers facing Muslims in Australia, with a view to claiming full active citizenship. This class of often well-educated elite has benefitted from the equal treatment-based political framework of Australian multiculturalism to claim a voice and advance the cause of Muslims in this country. The achievements of the Muslim civic elite in raising issues of concern in the public domain and lobbying the government have been significant. There are now many channels of communication between Muslim organisations and government agencies. But the impressive record of claiming a voice and becoming proactive citizens pales in significance when compared to continued socioeconomic marginalisation and disadvantage.

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