

Rhetoric on Trial: An Aristotelian Insight into Najib Razak's Corruption Case

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ABSTRACT

Political rhetoric plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse and perceptions of corruption. The way in which the public perceives corruption and values anti-corruption rhetoric can significantly affect their trust in political institutions and inclinations towards politicians. Thus, anti-corruption rhetoric has been recognised as a strategic tool for political parties during elections. Nonetheless, there is a recorded tension between rhetoric's ethical and political dimensions, particularly in corrupt regimes where political rhetoric may serve various purposes. This study critically examines the rhetorical strategies employed by Najib Razak in response to his corruption allegations and the court's verdict, thereby addressing a gap in the literature on political rhetoric within legal challenges. Through a qualitative content analysis of 21 news broadcasts from ASTRO Awani, the study applies Aristotle's triadic model of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos. The findings indicate that Najib predominantly relies on logos and pathos, strategically leveraging logical reasoning and emotional appeal while minimising the use of ethos—ethical credibility. This selective use of rhetorical strategies suggests a deliberate effort to influence public perception amid legal challenges. The study highlights the ethical concerns surrounding such rhetorical practices, particularly in democratic contexts where public trust and legal accountability are crucial. By critically analysing Najib's rhetoric, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the intricate relationship between rhetoric, political legitimacy, and public perception, emphasising the need to scrutinise political discourse in corruption-related contexts.

Keywords: Corruption; Najib Razak; Political Rhetoric; Aristotelian; Persuasion

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INTRODUCTION

Dato' Sri Najib Tun Abdul Razak served as the prime minister of Malaysia from 2009 until 2018, when public outrage over the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal resulted in his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party losing power in the 14th general elections (GE14), consequently ended his tenure. Since Malaysia gained independence in 1957, it marked the first time that UMNO has lost its 60 years of hegemony over the Malaysian political landscape. In July 2018, Najib was charged for the first time in the sessions court with three counts of criminal breach of trust (CBT) and one charge of abusing his position over SRC funds, totalling RM 42 million. The SRC International Sdn Bhd case is a key component of the larger 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, a defining case of corruption in Malaysian history. SRC International, initially a subsidiary of 1MDB, was later placed under the Ministry of Finance, which Najib then headed. The scandal erupted when it was revealed that RM42 million from SRC International was misappropriated and ended up in Najib's personal bank accounts. This was part of a larger and more complex web of financial transactions linked to the broader 1MDB scandal, where billions of dollars were allegedly siphoned off and laundered through global financial networks.

The trial began in April 2019 and ended in July 2020, resulting in Najib being convicted and receiving a 12-year prison sentence and an RM210 million fine. Subsequently, Najib submitted a petition containing 307 distinct grounds for appeal. During the period spanning from 2021 to 2022, a series of legal actions took place, such as appeals, efforts to produce fresh evidence, and alterations in legal representation. In his defence, Najib employed various strategies to argue his innocence. His defence largely centred on claims of ignorance and misdirection, asserting that he was misled by individuals within SRC International and 1MDB, including fugitive financier Jho Low. Najib maintained that he was not aware of the illegal transfers and that he trusted the information provided to him by his advisors and financial institutions. Najib's defence strategies have broader implications for political communication, governance, and public trust in Malaysia. The logical appeals in his defence are significant as they reflect an attempt to construct a narrative that distances him from direct responsibility, framing himself as a victim of circumstances rather than a perpetrator of corruption. However, it was deemed unsuccessful despite Najib's final attempt to overturn his conviction and imprisonment for embezzling RM42 million in funds from SRC. The Apex Court, chaired by Chief Justice Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat, unanimously dismissed his appeal against his conviction, jail term, and fine issued by the Kuala Lumpur High Court on August 23, 2022 (Bernama, 2022).

Throughout this tumultuous period, rhetoric was pivotal in influencing and shaping public perceptions of the verdict. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle defined, rhetoric is the skill of persuasive speaking. It has historically been seen as an essential aptitude for individuals seeking to exert influence in politics (Russell, 2017). It involves the ability to analyse and utilise persuasive strategies that apply to a certain situation, which is crucial for success in legal disputes or gaining notoriety as a public speaker in civic events (Russell, 2017). The rhetorical process has three fundamental elements: the orator, the message, and the listener (Major, 2022). Rhetoric concerns how individuals use symbolic means, especially language, to influence the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours of others (Zhang, 2021). In essence, Rhetoric is a field that involves effectively conveying and persuading an audience through the strategic use of language.

Meanwhile, political rhetoric refers to political leaders' strategic use of language to persuade, influence, and shape public opinion (Hall, 2020). In politics, political decisions require

using logic in situations with unchangeable uncertainty, which fits the classical Aristotelian idea of political debate as being about whether a certain action will be good or bad in the future (Finlayson, 2007). Politics is primarily linked to persuasion, as it fundamentally involves the art of governing (Demirdögen, 2010). Rhetoric plays a vital role as a significant domain where power is exercised and contested. Politicians utilise language to create challenging interpretations and principles using rhetorical techniques such as metaphor, sarcasm, and hyperbole, as well as by incorporating cultural and historical allusions (Finlayson, 2007). They elicit emotions and provoke affective reactions while appealing to commonly held values and beliefs (Finlayson, 2007). It is deeply intertwined with the construction of political leadership and the performance of politicians. It serves as a tool for crafting leadership personas, shaping ideological narratives, and engaging with the audience to communicate convincingly (Crines, 2013; Madestam & Falkman, 2017). Politicians' strategic use of language and persuasive techniques can influence public sentiment, garner voters' empathy, and advance their political stances (Sujoko, 2021).

The use of rhetoric in politics has both beneficial and detrimental facets. It may serve as a beneficial instrument for thoughtful discussion and public involvement. It allows for the expression of many perspectives and aids in resolving intricate political matters. Additionally, it may function as a tool for convincing others using logical arguments, personal charisma, or authoritative influence and evoking emotional responses. Furthermore, it can mediate between the realm of politics and the concept of 'the political,' granting legitimacy to certain individuals and concepts at a fundamental level (Edgar et al., 2021; Ivie, 2015; Waddell & McKenna, 2009). However, the negative aspects of political rhetoric are evident in its potential to transform political issues into polarising judicial rhetoric. This shift can impoverish political reasoning and the overall process (Lape, 2016). Politicians frequently construct national narratives to rationalise their goals, resulting in a confrontational strategy that depends on historical events, whether genuine or pseudonymous, to endorse present policies (Starkey, 2015). Such rhetoric could potentially create divisions and impede constructive dialogue. Hence, understanding political rhetoric is crucial for comprehending its intricacies and societal impact.

Being a prominent political figure in Malaysia, Najib has been scrutinised extensively since the 1MDB scandals broke. Corruption cases can significantly impact a politician's image, adversely affecting their reputation. However, following his first indictment in the 1MDB case, Najib's supporters launched a campaign titled '*Malu apa bossku? (What is there to be ashamed of, my boss?)*' to portray him as a victim of erroneous allegations in the global corruption scandal (Noorshahrizam, 2023). Najib's campaign triumph rendered him seemingly impervious to political challenges, enabling him not only to avoid being a liability for his political allies but also to actively promote their campaigns in Sabah, Melaka, and Johor state elections (Noorshahrizam, 2023). This study is essential to understand how Najib attempted to mitigate the negative fallout from his corruption scandals and maintain his influence and support. Najib's efforts to appeal court decisions and potentially deceive the judicial process illustrate a deliberate attempt to evade responsibility and shield himself from political liabilities. This behaviour is particularly concerning as it highlights how political elites might manipulate legal and political systems to maintain power and support from their allies despite serious allegations. Considering his significant support base in Malaysia, his rhetorical strategy could influence public sentiment towards him and public trust in democratic processes. Therefore, analysing Najib's utilisation of rhetorical strategies will be noteworthy.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine specific strategies employed by Najib to present logical arguments (logos) and their effectiveness in shaping public perception amidst corruption allegations.
2. To investigate how Najib utilises emotional appeals (pathos) to foster empathy and connection with his audience while justifying his actions amidst corruption allegations.
3. To explore the impact of Najib's selective use of credibility appeal (ethos) in reinforcing his legitimacy and support among party members amidst corruption allegations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What strategies does Najib use to present logical arguments (logos) to influence public perception of his corruption cases?
2. How does Najib utilise emotional appeals (pathos) to connect with his audience and justify his actions amidst corruption allegations?
3. How does Najib's selective use of credibility appeal (ethos) impact his perceived legitimacy and support among his followers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

POLITICAL RHETORIC AND CORRUPTION

Political rhetoric plays a pivotal role in shaping public discourse and influencing perceptions of corruption. For instance, the Watergate scandal exemplifies how a politician's rhetoric in response to corruption allegations can profoundly impact public trust in political institutions. President Richard Nixon's denial and attempts to cover up his administration's involvement in the scandal led to a sharp decline in public confidence. Despite Nixon's efforts to deflect blame, mounting evidence eroded his credibility, ultimately leading to his resignation in 1974. The scandal left a lasting legacy of public scepticism toward political institutions and altered the political landscape in the United States (Genovese, 2023). The public's perception of corruption and the effectiveness of anti-corruption rhetoric can influence their trust in political institutions and their willingness to support politicians (Wang, 2015). As a result, anti-corruption rhetoric has been identified as an ideal election strategy for political parties (Naxera, 2018). This was seen in the 2016 Philippine presidential election, where Rodrigo Duterte's anti-corruption rhetoric was central to his campaign strategy, appealing to voters' frustrations with government corruption and contributing to his electoral success (Dressel & Cristina Regina Bonoan, 2024).

However, the tension between ethical and political aspects of rhetoric has been noted, particularly in corrupt regimes where political rhetoric may serve different purposes (Jörke, 2014). For instance, Czech politician Andrej Babiš utilizes anti-corruption rhetoric to deflect attention from his scandals by presenting himself as a champion of integrity and transparency. Babiš has framed his political involvement as a mission to combat corrupt politicians, positioning himself as a crusader against corruption (Naxera, 2018). In such contexts, political rhetoric may serve divergent purposes, from justifying controversial actions to diminishing the impact of corruption scandals. In addressing corruption scandals, politicians' use of political rhetoric can significantly impact public sentiment towards corruption, thus influencing public trust and support for politicians. When politicians deliver positive policy results in areas that are important to the public,

citizens may tend to overlook or discount corrupt behaviour (Carreras & Vera, 2018). For instance, during the 1MDB scandal, Najib's rhetoric often emphasised his contributions to national development and downplayed allegations of corruption. This approach, combined with positive policy outcomes such as infrastructure projects, influenced public perception and allowed him to retain significant support despite the corruption charges.

Similarly, politicians frequently use rhetoric to discredit opponents or secure electoral domination (Lambropoulou, 2021). In the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump's rhetoric frequently aimed at undermining his opponent's credibility and framing them as corrupt, which was a strategic move to sway public opinion and bolster his electoral prospects (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2021). This strategic use of political rhetoric in corruption scandals can thus influence public morale and electoral outcomes, demonstrating how rhetoric can both mitigate and exacerbate the impact of corruption on public perception and political support.

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES OF NAJIB RAZAK

Past literature has investigated Najib's rhetorical strategies in various contexts, including his speeches, presentations, crisis management, and social media. Osman et al. (2017) have identified persuasive, expository, and descriptive rhetoric in Najib's speeches on the Blue Ocean Strategy, particularly emphasising persuasive techniques. In the wake of the 1MDB scandals, Case (2017) provides insight into Najib's crisis management strategies, revealing Najib's attempts to consolidate his support base among Malay elites and grassroots supporters while weakening the opposition coalition and deflecting blame for the scandal onto others. Following the 14th General Election, Zainal Anuar & Jalli (2020) analyse Najib's social media during the Semenyih by-election, highlighting Najib's utilisation of agenda-setting techniques and offensive propaganda to portray himself as innocent while discrediting his adversaries. The study also suggests that Najib's Facebook page was likely managed by his team to humanise his image and connect with his followers personally. Moreover, Fatmawati et al. (2020) have contrasted Najib's rhetorical style with that of Mahathir, noting Najib's reliance on logos and Mahathir's emphasis on ethos. Abadi (2021) notes that Najib uses manipulation strategies, such as exclusion and inclusion, to achieve his foreign loan objectives, which resulted in inflated infrastructure loans from China. In Najib's budget speeches, Diebaa & Su'ad Awab (2023) reveal that Najib extensively utilises conceptual metaphors, mainly the '*Government is captain.*' By portraying the country as a ship sailing towards economic prosperity and as the captain navigating the nation's ship, he seeks to legitimise his administration's governance, social actions, and ideologies.

Previous literature demonstrates Najib's strategic deployment of persuasive language, agenda-setting techniques, and conceptual metaphors to shape public perception and reinforce his political legitimacy. Language is a potent instrument wielded by individuals in positions of authority, enabling them to manipulate it according to their agenda, whether for positive or negative purposes (Tan & Al-Rikaby, 2022). Nevertheless, previous scholarly works merely analysed Najib's leadership attributes and demeanour, resulting in a noticeable gap in the existing body of research concerning the study of Najib's rhetorical strategies in the context of his corruption case. This focus on the intersection of rhetoric, politics, and legal challenges contributes a novel perspective to the existing body of knowledge.

ARISTOTELIAN THEORY

According to Aristotle, rhetoric serves three primary functions: apodictic (demonstrative), rhetorical and dialectical (Jonassen & Kim, 2009). He defines rhetoric as the ability to see the available means of persuasion in each particular case (Heracleous et al., 2019). In his treatise, ‘On Rhetoric’, Aristotle defends the importance of rhetoric against criticisms from figures like Plato and Aristophanes. He argues that rhetoric is essential for public debate and social engagement (Molina & Spicer, 2004). Aristotle believed that rhetoric helps people understand the truth, although it is secondary because the truth is not always absolute or unquestionable (Finlayson, 2007; Sprute, 1994). He suggested that our goal is to persuade others to see things from our perspective, defining situations in a particular way so that others view them similarly (Burnyeat, 1994; Finlayson, 2007). However, people often disagree about the means and ends of actions and their value and significance (Finlayson, 2007). Aristotle’s rhetoric proposes that there are three ‘means of persuasion’ (Kyei et al., 2023), which are logos (argument), ethos (the virtue of the speaker), and pathos (emotion) (Davoudi et al., 2019). Additionally, Aristotle emphasises that the merit of rhetoric depends on logical validity, audience trust, and emotional connection (Prabakaran, 2020). Aristotle has also linked communication and persuasion in three main ways: appeal by reason, appeal by ethics, and appeal by emotion (Dubov, 2015). The process of persuading others involves the application of these three modes of persuasion (Sheng et al., 2022).

Logos involves using facts, figures, and empirical evidence in rational argumentation (Davoudi et al., 2019). In classical rhetoric, logos is the realm of the *enthymeme* (syllogism or logical deduction). The *enthymeme*, which Aristotle termed the ‘body of persuasion,’ seeks to bridge ‘reality’ with commonly accepted premises—what is generally known to be the case. It involves demonstrating how things are and encouraging people to view and interpret them as ‘this way’ rather than ‘that way’ (Burnyeat, 1994; Burnyeat et al., 2015; Finlayson, 2012). Logos has been used to provide intellectual legitimacy for political ideologies, reinforcing its importance in political rhetoric (Davoudi et al., 2019). Politicians often employ logos to rationalise their actions to the public, as it can significantly contribute to constructing a logical argument that establishes their innocence or minimises the consequences of corruption allegations (Stilwell & Utych, 2021).

Meanwhile, Pathos involves appealing to the audience’s emotions to persuade and influence their beliefs and actions (Liu et al., 2019). Politicians employ pathos to cultivate a collective sense of identity and shared struggles by invoking historical narratives and personal anecdotes, thus enhancing their capacity to establish a deep emotional connection with the audience (Grapă & Mogos, 2023). However, appeals to emotions are perhaps some of the most frowned upon normatively (Finlayson, 2012). They are, at one extreme, simplistic (easy sentimentality substituting for clear thought) and, at the other, sinister (exploiting our fears and prejudices) (Finlayson, 2012). When addressing corruption allegations, sympathy cues evoke concern and facilitate emphatic imagination (Törnqvist, 2021).

Ethos is the communicator’s establishment of credibility by demonstrating competence, character, and goodwill (Kjeldsen et al., 2021). It involves the effort to validate assertions because they are expressed in a manner and by a character whom we, the audience, admire, respect, trust, consider, and have common interests (Finlayson, 2012). Politicians use ethos to build credibility and influence public opinion. This strategy involves self-presentation and the creation of a favourable image, aiming to connect with the audience on a personal and political level (Bronstein et al., 2018; Bronstein, 2013). Politicians employ ethos to minimise public outcry over corruption allegations by encouraging a tolerant attitude (Tan et al., 2016) and using their personal and

institutional power in the political sphere (Aronson et al., 2022). Ethos can significantly impact the support for compromise, which can play a significant role in conflict resolution. This, in turn, affects public opinion (Canetti et al., 2016). Ultimately, the persuasive strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos are integral to political rhetoric, particularly in navigating corruption allegations. This study will adopt Aristotle's Logos, Ethos, and Pathos to analyse Najib's rhetorical strategy when addressing his corruption allegations and court rulings to the public.

METHODOLOGY

The study analysed news coverage of Najib's corruption case, focusing on his rhetorical approach. Astro Awani was chosen because it is a leading brand of trustworthiness (Newman et al., 2023) and is known for its critical news content (Zaharom Nain, 2023). The analysis spans from February 11, 2018, to March 3, 2023, as it includes the events that took place before the trial, during the trials, and until the verdicts of SRC Final Appeal. Of the 311 news items, only 21 videos directly quoted Najib and his defence team. The videos were extracted and transcribed, including live interviews and press conferences. Subsequently, the excerpt was translated from Bahasa Melayu into English using the semi-literal translation approach to convey the discourse.

The excerpts were then systematically coded and qualitatively analysed based on clear definitions of rhetorical appeals (refer Table 1) to enhance consistency and reduce subjective interpretation. Systematic coding involved categorising the data into pre-defined rhetorical constructs like ethos, pathos, and logos while considering contextual nuances. The qualitative analysis was guided by thematic patterns within these constructs, allowing for a deeper understanding of Najib's rhetorical strategies. Based on the rhetorical analysis literature, table 1 elucidates all three appeals that formed the study's analytical framework. Construct validity was ensured by aligning the coding scheme with established theoretical constructs, while content validity was achieved through comprehensive coverage of all relevant components of the rhetorical appeals.

It was noted that some excerpts contained elements of more than one rhetorical appeal, leading to potential confusion regarding their classification. For instance, in one excerpt, Najib's reference to his longstanding political career (ethos) was intertwined with an emotional appeal to his supporters (pathos). In such circumstances, the researcher prioritised appeals based on salience, determined by their prominence and contextual relevance.

TABLE 1. Aristotelian appeals

Rhetorical Appeal	Definition	Components
Logos	Appeal to logic	Facts, figures and Empirical Evidence: The Speaker's reliance on factual information, numerical data and empirical evidence to support arguments. Intellectual Legitimacy: The speaker demonstrates the coherence and validity of the argument through logical deduction and inference. Character: The Speaker's moral integrity, trustworthiness, and reliability. Goodwill: The Speaker demonstrates benevolence, concern for the audience's interests and positive intentions.
Pathos	Appeal to emotion	Emotional Appeal: The Speaker uses emotional triggers, such as sympathy cues, when addressing corruption allegations.

		Collective Identity and Shared Struggles: The Speaker cultivates emotional connections with the audience by invoking historical narratives and personal anecdotes.
Ethos	Appeal to credibility	Competence: The speaker demonstrates expertise, knowledge, and capability in their field. Character: The Speaker’s moral integrity, trustworthiness, and reliability. Goodwill: The Speaker demonstrates benevolence, concern for the audience’s interests and positive intentions.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Figure 1 shows Najib’s rhetorical approach, categorised into logos, pathos, and ethos. Twenty-one appeals from 21 news videos were analysed, representing the entirety of Najib’s rhetorical strategies during the specified timeframe. The findings demonstrate the embodiment of the three appeals, with logos frequently utilised (43%), followed by pathos (38%) and ethos (19%).

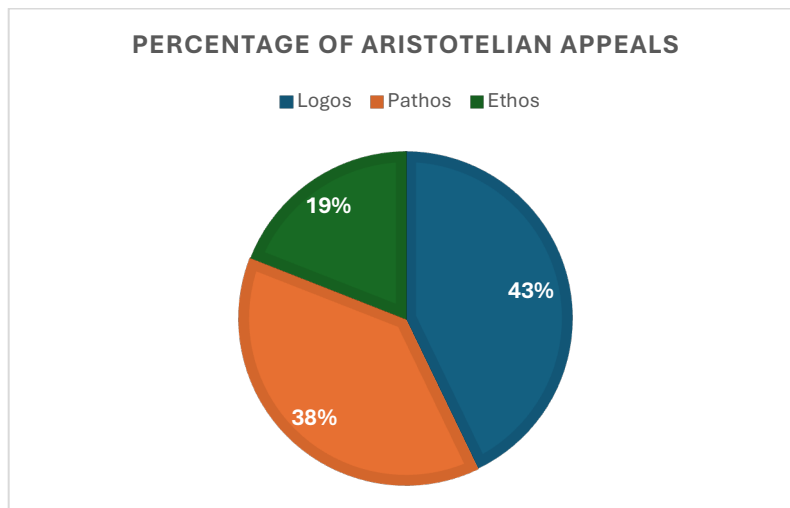


FIGURE 1. Percentage of Aristotelian appeals

LOGOS (LOGICAL REASONING)

Logos pertains to the rational appeal of an argument, wherein the utilisation of logic, evidence and a cohesive structure are employed to convince the audience (Tan & Al-Rikaby, 2022).

EXCERPT 1:

...I am not a thief, and hopefully, this journey in court will end to establish the truth...

...If we look at it briefly, it is shocking, but if we understand the facts and make an estimate, we will conclude that I have returned a large amount immediately after pru13...

*...I have no problem going through the process as long as I get **justice**. I want my **justice** to be allowed to clear my name...*

(Awani, 2018)

Najib utilised logical reasoning (logos) to substantiate the claims and defend himself. Najib asserted that he had received the monies from Prince Saud Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud as a charitable contribution and then refunded them, demonstrating his innocence from the accusation of being a ‘thief’. The phrase (in bold) shows Najib’s attempts to alleviate the consequences of his actions and claim innocence. The concept of *Justice* has been referenced twice, indicating that Najib only truly acknowledges its significance after he successfully clears himself from the allegations. Furthermore, it is essential to note that returning the money does not necessarily absolve him from any legal or ethical violations. Najib selectively provided evidence aligning with his perspective while intentionally neglecting or minimising facts that may weaken his stance. The intentional and purposeful use of certain information can create a misleading but seemingly logical stream of thought.

EXCERPT 2:

...I have always been focused on how to promote national interest...

...during my tenure as Prime Minister...the country’s total assets under my watch grew from RM 800 million to 2 trillion ringgit. Therefore, I’ve created a lot of wealth for my country...

...if you talk about national embarrassment, there are other incidents...forex issues, which led to the loss of about 31.5 billion ringgits. If you put that into context, isn’t that a colossal national embarrassment? I just like to put it in proper perspective.

(Awani, 2021)

Following the Court of Appeal’s ruling that upheld his corruption conviction, Najib expressed profound disappointment at which the judge labelled him as ‘National Embarrassment.’ In justifying himself, Najib asserted that he had generated substantial economic prosperity for the nation throughout his term, underscoring his consistent dedication to advancing the country’s welfare. Najib is seen to be downplaying the impact of his misconduct by comparing it to the perceived benefits he has provided to the nations. On top of that, Najib is seen to draw analogies to distract from his wrongdoing by referring to the 1990s foreign exchange trading losses suffered by Bank Negara Malaysia during Mahathir’s premiership, suggesting that the tragedy is much more of a national embarrassment than his issues.

EXCERPT 3:

...Nazlan said that SRC was the baby of Datuk Seri Najib, and he (Najib) set it up...

...SRC International was established by Maybank Bhd, a Malayan Banking Berhad subsidiary, as a research advisor. It was found that Nazlan was with Maybank during the period in question. He became the Maybank group’s General Counsel and Company Secretary until he resigned. This means that Nazlan knows how Maybank is involved in forming and structuring SRC International.

(Awani, 2022)

The court’s verdict on the SRC case resulted in Najib feeling he was not accorded a fair trial. Najib seeks to challenge the conviction by indicating that the court’s decision was swayed by a prejudiced impression of Najib’s position on the SRC’s board and by alleging that High Court Judge Nazlan Mohamad Ghazali has a conflict of interest, specifically regarding the employment history of the judge as Maybank Group general counsel and company secretary from 2006 to 2015. To subvert the judicial decision-making process, Najib strategically capitalised on perceived legal

loopholes, such as alleged biases of the judge and potential conflicts of interest. By portraying himself as a victim of a flawed justice system, he seeks to prove his innocence and influence public perceptions of him. However, the judiciary's processes are designed to ensure fairness and impartiality, and Najib's claims could be seen as an attempt to deflect from the evidence against him. Whether or not Najib's claims have merit, they do have the potential to cast doubt among the public regarding the legitimacy of the court verdict.

PATHOS (EMOTION)

Pathos appeals to the affective and ethical dimensions of the audience, intending to elicit emotional responses and establish a sense of connection (Tan & Al-Rikaby, 2022).

EXCERPT 4:

...I have never ordered any individual to kill a Mongolian woman named Altantuya Shaariibuu. I never met and never knew the deceased at all...

...If I lie, the curse of Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala is on me, and if I am truthful, then those who slander me and do not repent will be cursed by Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala.

(Awani, 2022)

Najib utilised *Sumpah Laknat's* oath to establish his innocence in the allegation of his involvement in the Altantuya murder case. *Sumpah* refers to the act of making a solemn declaration or oath, whereas *Laknat* is seen as the act of invoking a curse rather than a blessing. The ritual is referred to as *Mubahala* in Arabic, which involves invoking the curse of God. For Muslims, *Sumpah Laknat* serves as a final resort to establish the innocence of the accused, particularly in cases where there is a lack of evidence against them. However, Malaysian Mufti asserts that *Sumpah Laknat* holds no significance in both Civil courts and Islamic law (Abdullah, 2019). The utilisation of strong language (bold) in *Sumpah Laknat* has the potential to build trust, elicit sympathy and fear among individuals who do not have evidence against the accused, particularly Muslims who share similar beliefs.

EXCERPT 5:

My wife and I were used as material for Maharaja Lawak Mega. My wife's edited photos were used as material for DAP's 'Squid Game' and many more...

...Why does anyone have to hate me with the Malacca's state election? The election is the state of Melaka, but the one attacked is me...

...What do the opposing parties think the people of Malacca will get if they hate me? What have Malaysians gained by hating me after GE14?...

...Economy? Is it better after GE 14? National assets increase? Are savings fund dividends going up? Is the well-being of people's lives more comfortable? Is the country more stable and planned? Is the stock market better? Foreign investment increased? Is the Manifesto promise kept? What exactly.

(Awani, 2021)

After the land awarded by the government to former prime ministers became political capital for the opposition in the Melaka state election, Najib questioned why his family was subjected to public scrutiny. Najib expressed bewilderment over being targeted despite not being directly involved in the election. By insinuating that the hatred directed towards him arose from prejudice rather than a rational basis, he attempted to undermine the legitimacy of public discontent. Najib further redirected the issue's focus towards the government, expressing scepticism over the nation's progress in terms of welfare post-GE14. He questioned whether Malaysians have genuinely benefited from the new administration, implying that the government and the opposition are overly fixated on depicting him as a political scapegoat instead of prioritising the country's well-being. Najib pointed to specific economic indicators or social policies that, in his view, have not improved under the current government. By casting doubts on the parties' intentions and questioning the tangible benefits achieved since GE14, Najib skilfully portrays himself as a victim of political persecution. This shifts the blame away from himself and seeks to resonate with voters who may be disillusioned with the country's current state. By challenging the legitimacy of his critics and redirecting the conversation to broader national concerns, Najib effectively shapes public sentiment in his favour.

EXCERPT 6:

The world of politics and public service has its advantages and disadvantages... These challenges, with good results, bring a smile to Daddy...

...Daddy holds fast to the teachings of Islam. If this is the fate of his journey and the supposition of Allah SWT, what is the power of Daddy as a human and His servant.

...We are waiting for justice and judgment in the court of the hereafter...

(Awani, 2022)

Following the rejection of his last attempt to overturn his conviction, Najib expressed his regret in a letter to his family, acknowledging that his professional obligations had prevented him from dedicating sufficient time. He portrayed his selflessness for the greater good, recounting his deep affection for serving the public and his willingness to put the nation's well-being above his family. However, evidence might suggest that his political and professional choices were driven by personal gain rather than a genuine selfless concern for the nation. Najib also attempts to nullify the court's ruling by invoking the phrase (in bold), which insinuates that he is being denied equitable justice and that only divine justice in the afterlife can provide him with a fair judgment. By framing it this way, Najib strategically appeals to his audience's spiritual convictions, seeking to resonate with religious sentiments. While this appeal may resonate with some religious communities, others might view it as a strategic move to manipulate public sentiment and gain support from those who prioritise spiritual over temporal justice. Invoking divine justice could be seen as a way to evade responsibility within the judicial system, diverting attention from the case's facts to a more emotionally charged and less verifiable domain.

ETHOS (CREDIBILITY):

Ethos pertains to how the audience perceives the speaker's character and moral uprightness. It is centred on the speaker's credibility and ethical character to establish trustworthiness and knowledge (Tan & Al-Rikaby, 2022).

EXCERPT 7:

Yes, they don't need to resign. If everyone resigns, our party will collapse. Let me resign. Others, please fix the situation. Please fix the situation.

...Let's not have a culture of money politics among us. This is our election in the party. Choose a good leader among us.

(Awani, 2018)

Following the 1MDB scandal, Najib offered his resignation as allegations of misconduct surrounding his leadership had intensified. He emphasised his commitment to the party's future and sacrificial nature, pledging to prioritise the party's interests even if it meant stepping down from his leadership role. Additionally, Najib's opposition to a culture centred around money politics and his emphasis on selecting a competent leader for the party were strategic moves aimed at appealing to the audience's sense of ethical behaviour and trustworthiness. At a time when the party was grappling with internal divisions and external criticism, these appeals had the potential to foster a perception of moral integrity, which Najib hoped would counteract the damaging allegations against him. However, Najib's leadership was closely tied to the party's identity and direction, and his resignation could have led to a power vacuum or further instability within the party. On the other hand, his decision to oppose money politics and advocate for a competent successor highlighted the broader issues within the party and the need for reform, which could resonate with party members and the public seeking change.

EXCERPT 8:

...We appointed lawyers, auditors and Goldman Sachs, an investment bank that is famous globally. The responsibility of this bank is to look after the interests of Malaysia.

... So, how do I know if they fail to protect Malaysia's interests? They should have told me that something was wrong.

...Goldman Sachs proved that they failed their responsibilities.

(Awani, 2018)

Najib relies heavily on the reputation and stature of the lawyers, auditors, and Goldman Sachs to establish his argument. Najib implicitly suggests they should be competent and reliable because Goldman Sachs is globally famous and entrusted with significant responsibilities, including looking after Malaysia's interests. Therefore, their credibility and trustworthiness are reflected poorly if they fail in their duties. Najib attempted to deflect responsibility onto external entities by presenting himself as a victim of circumstances beyond his control. Najib's use of ethos in this statement is particularly effective because it leverages the presumed authority and expertise of the mentioned institutions to support his argument. It appeals to the audience's trust in established authorities, reinforcing Najib's perspective and lending weight to their criticism of Goldman Sachs. This approach might maintain an image of innocence towards his credibility as a leader by evading personal accountability and shifting the blame onto external entities.

EXCERPT 9:

...Although I should be busy with my lawyers today, I choose to be with Wanita UMNO... because I want Wanita to understand that, as a leader, I still fight together with Wanita...

...No matter what they do or what injustice is done to me, my wife, or my family...I will not back down even an inch. I will continue to fight, and together with the women of Barisan Nasional, we will ensure that GE15 belongs to the Barisan Nasional.

(Awani, 2022)

Najib's political leadership is bolstered by his unwavering commitment to Wanita UMNO rather than being influenced by his legal matters. He is loyal to the party throughout his ultimate appeal, showcasing his dedication to its beliefs and goals. Najib's determination and resilience in challenging situations are emphasised, and he is willing to tolerate injustice and make personal sacrifices for the party's benefit. His steadfast dedication enhances his reputation and credibility with the audience. He portrays his actions as a manifestation of solidarity with Wanita UMNO, appealing to the shared identity and beliefs of the party members. Aligning with the audience's interests increases his ethos since he is perceived as representing his constituents' collective aspirations and concerns.

DISCUSSION

The study reveals Najib's utilisation of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos in responding to corruption allegations and court verdicts, with Logos being the most dominant, followed by Pathos, while Ethos was the least employed. Amidst his corruption allegations, Najib utilises logos strategically by selectively presenting evidence that bolsters his viewpoint while disregarding facts that undermine his stance. This approach is closely aligned with the classical rhetorical concept of the *enthymeme*, a logical deduction that combines commonly accepted premises with reality to persuade an audience. In Najib's circumstance, the *enthymeme* is employed to construct a narrative that downplays the significance of his misconduct by suggesting that other issues deserve public scrutiny whilst juxtaposing it with the perceived economic advantages he has brought to the nation. This strategy seeks to manipulate and sway public perception by exerting control over the narrative of his corruption cases. The ability of corrupt politicians to distribute patronage benefits has been identified as influencing support for politicians suspected of corruption (Muñoz et al., 2016). Consequently, this may lead the public to overlook the issue of corruption itself.

In challenging the court's verdict, Najib framed his appeal around allegations of judicial bias and conflicts of interest to position himself as a victim of a flawed legal process. By exploiting legal loopholes, Najib aims to overturn his conviction and manipulate public perception by casting doubt on the judiciary's impartiality despite substantial evidence against him. Regardless of the validity of these justifications, they have the potential to cast doubts on the verdict's legitimacy, considering the strategic use of legal precedent and arguments that can influence public opinion regarding court rulings in corruption cases (Larsson et al., 2016). Najib's strategy reflects a broader phenomenon where politicians accused of corruption utilise legal narratives to deflect attention from their actions by highlighting perceived judicial failings. Ultimately, while effective in certain instances, Najib's reliance on logos exposes a deliberate manipulation of facts and legal arguments to sustain public support and contest his conviction. The ethical consequences of this strategy

illustrate the conflict between logical reasoning and the pursuit of justice, particularly when legal narratives obscure the truth and deflect accountability. This strategy challenges judicial outcomes and seeks to strengthen political support by exploiting legal loopholes, which may erode public confidence in the judiciary, particularly when the media amplifies these assertions. However, the judiciary's credibility hinges on its impartiality and capacity to address such allegations transparently, ensuring the rule of law is upheld.

Najib utilises emotive appeals (pathos), particularly religious rhetoric, to establish his innocence over allegations levied against him. He establishes legitimacy through *Sumpah Laknat* rites and religious values. Although Malaysian Mufti asserts that *Sumpah Laknat* holds no significance in both Civil courts and Islamic law (Abdullah, 2019), the utilisation of strong language in the oath has the potential to build trust, elicit sympathy and fear among individuals who do not have the evidence against the accused, particularly Muslims who share similar beliefs. However, its lack of legal standing means that it carries no weight in the eyes of the law. This disconnect between the religious significance of the oath and its legal irrelevance might lead to questions about the legitimacy of using such a ritual in a political or judicial context. Moreover, this lack of legal recognition could limit the practical impact of Najib's oath. While it might succeed in building trust, eliciting sympathy, or instilling fear among those inclined to believe in its spiritual significance, it does not alter the legal narrative or the evidence (or lack thereof) surrounding the case. The disparity between the symbolic impact of the oath and its legal insignificance could lead to a divergence in how different groups perceive Najib's use of the oath. For some, it might be seen as a powerful assertion of innocence, while for others, it could be viewed as an insignificant action. Regardless of truthfulness, political merit exists in evoking emotions (Tan & Al-Rikaby, 2022).

Following the verdict, Najib frequently utilises personal narratives to enhance the relatability of his message, aiming to foster an emotional bond with the audience by recounting the events of his sacrifices. His resort to self-sacrifice for the greater good evokes empathy and portrays himself as a victim of unjust persecution. After Najib's final attempt to overturn the court's verdicts fails, he attempts to nullify the court's ruling by invoking spiritual principles and appealing to a higher sense of justice. The intricate connection between religion and politics has led politicians to exploit religious rhetoric, as it allows them to divert attention from their deceitful actions by appealing to the emotions and beliefs of the public (Cheng-Matsuno & Berliner, 2023). Through this action, Najib seeks to resonate with religious communities and cultivate a sense of solidarity among his supporters. Such manipulation of religious sentiments can perpetuate corrupt practices, as individuals may use every tool available to them, including religious affiliations, to further their corrupt agendas (Norziaton & Sabri, 2022). While emotive appeals can effectively sway public opinion in his favour, they also raise ethical concerns regarding manipulating emotions for political purposes. This illustrates the tension between emotional reasoning and the pursuit of justice, highlighting Najib's rhetoric's complex connection between personal narrative and accountability.

Najib draws on his ethos appeal when speaking at the party's general assembly. Stemming as Malaysia's youngest lawmaker at 22, the son of Malaysia's second premier, the nephew of the third, and leader of Malaysia's most influential political party, he is no foreign in politics. Therefore, utilising ethos ensures the party member regards him as a leader and acknowledges his legitimacy despite being bombarded with allegations of corruption. Subsequent to the scandal, Najib demonstrated accountability by stepping down from his position. This self-sacrifice, framed as prioritising the party's interests over his own, was likely to reinforce his loyalty to the party and

the Malay community, suggesting that a higher moral purpose drove his leadership. Additionally, Najib further reinforces his ethos by invoking the credibility of reputable institutions like Goldman Sachs to protect his reputation and shift accountability onto external entities, suggesting that any errors were due to their incompetence rather than his own. This strategy enables him to safeguard his image and minimize scrutiny by leveraging the authority of these credible entities. Nevertheless, his use of ethos is limited, indicating a deliberate focus on logical and emotive appeals rather than his credibility. Utilising ethos as a persuasive strategy becomes challenging when politicians engage in fraudulent behaviour, as these actions erode their credibility. A breach of integrity significantly affects the ability to gain public trust. If politicians are seen as corrupt, their efforts to employ ethos to rationalise their conduct may face scepticism, exacerbating the damage to their existing ethos.

This study aligns with Fatmawati et al. (2020) and Zainal Anuar & Jalli (2020) findings that Najib often utilises logical reasoning to enhance the credibility of his arguments, rendering them difficult to dispute. Najib consciously tried to humanise his image and improve public relatability to foster a personal rapport with his supporters and cultivate trust and connection. Drawing from this research, Najib employs a similar strategy to humanise himself—presenting himself as a victim of political persecution—while appealing to the public for compassion, thus mitigating the negative fallout of his corruption scandals.

CONCLUSION

Najib Razak is a skilled orator whose extensive political background has propelled him to his current position. Many socio-political, economic, and cultural elements influence his approach to communication and persuasion. This requires him to be adaptable and sensitive to the changing situations in which he uses rhetoric. This rhetorical dexterity is particularly evident in his responses to allegations of corruption, where his discourse reveals a deliberate focus on logical and emotive arguments. Interestingly, his use of ethos is limited which can likely be ascribed to his involvement in fraudulent behaviour that severely undermines his credibility. Najib's pragmatic, arguably Machiavellian approach juxtaposed against the Aristotelian ideal of ethical persuasion, under the potential for rhetoric to be employed as a tool of manipulation rather than a vehicle for truth-seeking and democratic deliberation.

In his treatise, 'On Rhetoric,' Aristotle emphasised the importance of using persuasive rhetoric ethically, arguing against deceptive rhetorical techniques. Such practices can be detrimental in politics, as they manipulate emotions, undermine credibility, and prioritise rhetoric over substance. By promoting transparency and informed dialogue, ethical rhetoric empowers citizens to assess political speech critically and hold politicians accountable for their words, actions, and policies. This active citizenry is fundamental to upholding democratic principles. This study underlines the critical need for ongoing scrutiny of political discourse, particularly when such discourse intersects with issues of corruption, accountability, and legal context.

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