



Shame and shamelessness: Changing discourses in Najib Razak's social media campaign

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ABSTRACT

After his political fall, former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has industriously worked to reinvent his public persona to regain political mileage. His campaign, “*Malu Apa, Bossku?*” (What is there to be ashamed about, my boss?), has allowed Najib to refashion himself as an everyman, a rebranding which resonated with and garnered support from certain segments of society, particularly younger Malay-Muslim supporters. While it is tempting to draw parallels with other right-wing authoritarian leaders, we observe that what Najib did is different. By “misappropriating” his public shame in the wake of the 1MDB sovereign fund scandal and his political losses in 2018’s 14th General Election, he has achieved a certain degree of success through his campaign, albeit by subverting his original political messaging. By utilizing a critical discourse analysis of Najib’s social media output, this paper proposes a theory for assessing the effects of subverting shame to rehabilitate the image of a disgraced politician. This was achieved through the humanizing of Najib’s public persona to make him more relatable to working class Malays, utilizing social media to drum up and amplify public support, and misappropriating shame as a shield from criticism and weapon against his political foes. By reframing his corruption charges as baseless slander, he draws similarities with the same negative stereotypes associated with urban Malays and a means to subvert political shame commonly associated with corruption. Through the strategic and targeted use of social media, this has resulted in remaking Najib as an influential voice in Malaysian politics where his popularity rivals that of the two recent sitting Prime Ministers.

Keywords: ***Populism, political shame, social media campaigns, Najib Razak, digital demagogues***

INTRODUCTION

In the early morning of May 10, 2018, hours after the official end of Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14), then Prime Minister Najib Razak officially conceded the *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition's defeat to the opposition, *Pakatan Harapan* (PH), losing control of the federal government for the first time since independence ("Pakatan Harapan wins", 2018). BN had been one of the few remaining authoritarian coalitions, having retained power for over 60 years (Dettman & Weiss, 2018). This was the culmination of years of scandals involving the state-run 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) sovereign fund, missing public funds, and allegations of gross kleptocracy (Nadzri, 2019). Najib then resigned as the president of his party, the *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO, the primary component of BN), followed by the raid of his properties which unearthed millions of ringgit worth of luxury goods and foreign currency, before a series of corruption trials commenced. In July 2020, the first of these trials saw Najib declared guilty on seven charges of misappropriation of funds (Paddock, 2020). The nadir of Najib's political career was arguably reached in an interview with Mary Ann Jolley in Al Jazeera's "101 East" programme in October 2018 (Al Jazeera, 2018). Najib evaded questions, assumed ignorance of many graft and misappropriation claims before abruptly ending the interview in a fluster. He was subsequently accused of conducting himself poorly, lacking the calm and collected demeanor expected of someone who once held public office ("You are not being fair", 2018).

In the months that followed, Najib retreated from the public eye but focused most of his engagement efforts on social media, primarily Facebook. Through daily status updates, Najib (note that in Najib's case, his former effective control of the media and regulatory frameworks ended after the defeat of BN, leaving him in the margins) released long, eloquent criticisms of the new government, their handling of policies and rebuttals to claims of wrongdoing under his leadership. Slowly, Najib began building an online following as a credible member of the opposition, intelligently opposing government policies. This social media usage became more pronounced once his corruption trials started in November 2018, where daily posts were crafted to refute statements made in court (Mohamed, 2019). As far as the public was concerned, all available information about how Najib handled the 1MDB suggest that at worst he was corrupt and guilty as charged, or at best, he was an inept minister who knew nothing about corruption under his charge.

In January 2019, Najib unveiled his most interesting political move since leaving office at a meet-and-greet event. Donning a simple hoodie with jeans, he was depicted sitting on a motorcycle. Photographs circulated with a simple caption: "*Malu Apa, Bossku?*" (henceforth MAB, trans. "What is there to be ashamed about, my boss?") (Zurairi, 2019). This became the start of his MAB political campaign, which we infer was meant to reform his apparent failed political career through the careful and strategic use of shame — we suggest that its aim was to "misappropriate" his personal and professional shame, using it to subvert unfavorable political currents. This proved, as we argue, to be successful for Najib, and we shall elaborate more on his use of shame below.

Shame is associated with the acceptance of blame and subsequently, apologies signify the acceptance of blame for wrongdoing, as well as "provide something like evidence of moral transformation, offer redress, and fulfill a promise not to repeat the offense" (Smith, 2022). Here we argue that for politicians, while shame was once seen as an important commodity for their political survival following ruinous exposures — e.g., sexual deviances and misdeeds, abuses of power — success lies in how delicately politicians navigate incidents entailing shame to protect their public personas, rather than letting it

completely destroy their careers or taint their legacy. Thus, it was assumed that shame is an important component in ensuring that politicians maintained their best behavior to appear virtuous (despite public suspicion that they might be hypocrites). As public representatives, politicians must at least *appear* to stay true to their manifestos and keep their voters at heart. Anything done in contrast to their ideals invokes shame and reduces public faith and trust in said politicians. This was the common-sense understanding of shame in politics, at least until Donald Trump's electoral success (Stępień, 2019). We shall discuss this briefly below, bearing in mind significant differences between how shame and shamelessness are operationalized in political discourse.

This paper examines Najib's approach in subverting shame for his political return and contrasts it with other political narratives. Instead of weaponizing shame to motivate and spur on his supporters (as other right-wing leaders have been wont to do in recent years), we posit that Najib employed a humbler approach by "misappropriating" his shame, or so to speak, using it to resonate with his followers while avoiding the embarrassment and humiliation that such shame would normally have entailed. This gives us a glimpse into the varied ways by which shame is utilized in politics — in part catalyzed by social media, thus indicating new structures of political communication outside traditional media gatekeeping. Such renegotiations allow politicians to dictate their own narratives, which proved successful for Najib, albeit at the cost of misappropriating non-local cultures and class divisions, thus impacting the Malaysian society at large.

THE WEAPONISATION OF SHAMELESSNESS

"Trumpism"

In contrast to shame, we can briefly review how shamelessness has been weaponized. Little more needs to be said about Trump's rise to power through an ideology driven by his public personality, populism, xenophobia, and white identity politics (Saramo, 2017), a campaign that highlighted the importance of linking and exploiting the twin circuitry of shame and dignity (Schaefer, 2019). Despite his economic misfortunes and the allegations leveled against him, Trump remained a self-proclaimed winner, paradoxically turning his shame into dignity (Snyder, 2017). His target was the white working class (which he did not belong to) often left out by contemporary liberal politics. Their downward social mobility, the increase in economic competition due to globalization and the prevalence of affirmative action policies have fueled a sense of fragility, shame, and disenfranchisement among this group (Lamont et al., 2017). For instance, Watkins (2018) surmised that the white working class is often mistakenly accused of benefiting from privilege (this is not to generalize an "Eastern"/"Western" binary — Duterte's campaign is an answer in itself). By highlighting the shame felt by his supporters (specifically those often accused of being privileged or labeled as racist, backward, and conservative), Trump strategically tapped into their "white rage", using public humiliation to motivate them to take action (Monnat & Brown, 2017). The discourse, which revolves around the decentralization of white privilege and hegemonic masculinity, coupled with narratives of loss and decline, has become familiar and needs little further elaboration (Schaefer, 2019; Schrock et al., 2017). Commentators have drawn attention to the similarity of this xenophobic rhetoric to that which accompanied the Nazi ascendancy to power, which incited anti-immigrant sentiment and faulted the Jewish community for German unemployment (Cochrane & Nevitte, 2012).

Therefore, such a novel approach played on a very old idea: the dilution of class into race awareness. Right-wing media and politicians primed working-class whites to think along racial rather than class lines while ignoring commonalities between them and working-class people of color, thus suggesting a zero-sum game (Watkins, 2018). Considering the level of success that was reached in the United States with such a strategy, it seems that this would work well in the Malaysian context, particularly given the greater leeway afforded to bigotry and xenophobia, which was especially evinced during the COVID-19 pandemic. But rather than rely on ostentatious, crass, and more aggressive techniques, Najib's campaign adopted a humbler and subdued approach, omitting overtly masculine tones to appeal emotionally to the social imagination of his supporters. As the following sections will elucidate, the MAB campaign enthralled his audience "without having to use any structured or meaningful discourse" (Lemière, 2018, p. 42).

Social media and the authoritarian strongman

Social media has become a new battleground for narratives promoted by authoritarian strongmen. By providing a medium that bypasses structural gatekeeping by the media and regulatory frameworks, political figures are better able to engage and mobilize their supporters by espousing more conservative and less progressive values (see Chandra Muzaffar's *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-led Relationships within Malay Society*, originally published by Aliran). Many others have followed suit with this newly established playbook. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's campaign heavily engaged with his right-wing followers using social media, taking advantage of populist rhetoric by espousing more traditional values (Mitozo et al., 2020). The Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte not only used social media effectively to secure his presidency (on a notorious anti-drug platform condoning extrajudicial killings), but also encouraged his supporters to troll or cyberbully his online detractors (Sinpeng et al., 2020). These online tactics have become typical of contemporary autocrats.

Fuchs (2018) discussed Trump's various techniques and methods to build and nurture his fervent online base. His main pull factor was leveraging his celebrity status and callous demeanor. While extreme narcissism often alienates public figures from their audiences, this is not the case here; relevant tweets contained far more first-person singular nouns (e.g., "I", "me") compared to first-person plural nouns (e.g., "we", "us"). This narcissistic, self-aggrandizing behavior was emulated by Bolsonaro and Duterte, among others. But Najib's MAB campaign presents a different scenario. As a fallen strongman and not an outsider, he has taken the opposite approach, employing strong, empathic elements with an effusive humility meant to rehabilitate his brand.

As we shall see in Najib's case, a reinvention of his persona became key through the art of "impression management" as exercised through this social media campaign, a task we assume would have fallen to social media handlers who would have been tasked with crafting his new political narrative. The resulting rhetoric employed a strong pathos that ran contrary to the general hypermasculinity of Malaysian politics, one which displays little to no signs of the humility or restraint encouraged among the *rakyat* (incidentally, this is an avenue that sorely deserves further research). The MAB campaign appears to counter the now-typical weaponization of shame rather than galvanize a disenfranchised community; it is used as a shield for a seemingly peripheral political figure, thus transforming Najib as a downtrodden man of the people and ultimately serving as a near-impervious tool for him to criticize and attack others. This is the basis for our critical discourse analysis, which involves examining MAB's posts, conducting a close reading of its rhetoric, observing responses, and analyzing its overall effects on Malaysian politics.

CAMPAIGNING AFTER THE FALL

Critics of Najib Razak cite the 1MDB scandal as the beginning of his political collapse. After assuming premiership in 2009, Najib established the fund as part of Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme (“How 1MDB corruption scandal”, 2019) to manage and expand international investments in various local sectors (Case, 2017). As the chairman of the fund as well as the minister of finance, he was in complete control and could access billions of ringgit in public funds (Pakiam, 2019). The “disruptive context of 1MDB” derailed the “elite-level cohesion” within UMNO after “revelations of vast resources in Najib's accounts created such scandal that they viewed his leadership as vulnerable” and were “motivated to challenge his ascendancy” (Pakiam, 2019, pp. 639–640). Despite these controversies, Najib was still BN's leader, and his administration was widely believed to retain some degree of power after GE14 due to a recent favorable delineation exercise and a rumored informal agreement with the conservative Islamist party, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS).

Regardless, the PH coalition won a considerable number of seats even in supposed BN strongholds (Dettman & Weiss, 2018), and Najib was forced to concede defeat and relinquish his premiership. While many attributed PH's win to the enigmatic Mahathir Mohamad's return to politics, it was also widely believed that the rising cost of living and rumors of mismanaged national debt caused by the 1MDB scandal were key factors (“High cost of living”, 2018).



Figure 1. Najib Razak wearing a hoodie and sitting on a *kapcai* motorcycle.
(Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

After almost a year out of the public eye, in January 2019, Najib launched his MAB campaign, portraying a more relaxed demeanor at a meet-and-greet with motorcycle enthusiasts in Kuala Lumpur. Najib posed on a Honda Cub motorcycle, which became the symbolic image for the entire campaign. This motorcycle is particularly important in terms of associating him with the *Mat Rempit* community. In public discourse, this term can be considered derogatory, since it refers to urban Malay youths who roam the city on cheap modified motorcycles (colloquially called *kapcai*) in large groups, stereotyped as misguided delinquents who also engage in street racing, snatch thefts and other illicit activities. Malaysian road users consider *kapcai* riders as *Mat Rempits* who do not observe traffic laws, ride recklessly and engage in dangerous behavior (Wong, 2011). *Mat Rempits* are also believed to be dependent on their *kapcai* for their livelihoods and are thus regarded as only being able to hold positions as delivery or dispatch personnel, thus solidifying the illusion that they are lazy and unambitious.

Najib's use of this image highlights his attempt to create a more approachable and relatable version of himself to appeal to the oft-ignored working classes of Malaysia. While critics and the media accused MAB of being overly engineered, denying, and violating morality and good behavior (Tang, 2019; Lim, 2019; Tan, 2019), Najib was also able to garner massive support since his "new moniker has made him appear more accessible to more people, even non-voters" ("Najib: Bossku", 2019). So popular was the *Bossku* appeal that Najib made an appearance on behalf of BN and UMNO candidates in the Semenyih (2019) and Kimanis (2020) by-elections, both of which BN won.

METHODOLOGY

The main approach to analyze the MAB campaign is critical discourse analysis. This method assumes a multimodal approach to study the efficacy of media messaging and its greater impact or influence on society. Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2017) offered an approach to analyzing contemporary political campaigns conducted over new media, in particular how far-right politicians and supporters utilize Right-Wing Populism rhetoric to appeal to the wider electorate. By emphasizing the masculine traits and strengths of its candidates and to tie that to the popular sentiment of repairing a corrupt system, this resonated beyond their core base and allowed them to grow their list of supporters quickly. This was conducted by analyzing the content produced by far-right politicians and supporters and reading the responses and feedback from the public.

Our reading of the output from Najib Razak's social media pages makes use of MAB posts, starting from its inception in 2019. MAB was primarily referenced on Najib Razak's Facebook and Twitter social media accounts. Of these, Facebook seemed more popular, receiving positive responses and thousands of comments, views, and reactions. MAB's output on Twitter was significantly lower, and for each tweet, there was a higher presence of antagonistic responses versus overwhelming support. We searched for all instances of the term "*Malu Apa Bossku*" or the *#maluapabosku* hashtag, structuring search queries in this manner to ensure that such posts on the official Najib Razak accounts made deliberate and direct use of MAB. The Twitter account only returned seven tweets as opposed to at least 40 status updates on Facebook. Therefore, most of our critical discourse analysis focused on MAB's Facebook presence, including all photographs, videos, and shared content. We also examined the comments on each post to understand the sentiment of his supporters and gauge his support on Facebook. As such, posts featuring the hashtag make up a minority of the page's overall output.

FINDINGS

While the findings of our analysis draw some parallels with the weaponization of shame, there are some significant differences. Rather than use social media in a self-aggrandizing fashion (Fuchs, 2018), Najib used it as both a shield and weapon. The success of the MAB campaign can be attributed to Najib's adeptness at the linguistics of mass persuasion by ensuring that his posts seem authentic and resonate with the public, rather than authoritative and manipulative (Chi, 2016). The adoption of informal instead of formal language in his posts convinced his followers that there is an affinity in attitudes, beliefs, and ideas between them (Ricks, 2018). While evoking similar themes (e.g., drawing upon class/race shame to build empathy between himself and his followers), his self-representation adopts a highly apologetic and humble tone then uses this platform to direct attacks against his opponents and boost his public support (or at least the perception of public support).

Overall, Najib's Facebook output made use of a variety of status updates — videos of Najib in public, photos of Najib in various guises and livestreams of him at public events. In terms of engagement (i.e., commenting, sharing, and utilizing the “reactions” feature on Facebook), the highest engagement posts tend to be of a personal nature (four posts in total) or interactions with members of the public (12 posts in total). Political content, such as criticisms of the government and by-election-related posts, have the least engagement. Despite this imbalance, all MAB status updates managed to still attract a relatively high engagement, with the least popular still having at least 11,000 reactions alone. We suggest that one reason behind this imbalance is that his followers are less interested in politics but are more genuinely interested in Najib as a person; therefore, they are keen on following up with content that emphasizes his humanity. A more cynical answer is that MAB's goal is indeed to focus on Najib's humanity and establish that he is a “humble” human being, and therefore, he is more genuine and trustworthy. As a result, when Najib does make political posts, he can draw on a stable of followers who already have a strong affinity with him and are more likely to be persuaded by everything he says, regardless of their actual engagement with these posts.

The rebranding of Najib Razak

This analysis specifically examines Najib's posts to show how shame is presented and to gauge the tone of the rhetoric of his account's collective messaging. Therefore, MAB's overall campaign goal can be perceived as a means of rebranding Najib through three main approaches: (1) building affinities with the urban Malay working class by making Najib more relatable; followed by (2) taking ownership of non-specific shame and using it as a weapon to highlight the shame of his political foes; as well as (3) using shame sarcastically to defend his innocence.

Building affinities

Most of Najib's MAB posts centered around making him more relatable to his followers and building stronger grassroots support. Najib's awareness of the dynamics of his social relationship with his followers prompted him to deploy language as a political tool which has the power to shape social realities and the way people think (Rabiah, 2018). The strategic use of colloquial language by Najib evoked its affective properties, creating a façade that he is intrinsically similar to his audience (Ricks, 2018). With Najib battling on multiple fronts, the campaign panders to the “masses” with grievances against the current government, using his social media accounts strategically to muster support by addressing the issues and problems of his target audience, that is, the Malay urban working class. This

was done by highlighting that the PH government was uncaring and that he would have done a better job since he understood their struggles. The campaign attempted to achieve this goal by paying tribute to the working class while at the same time humanizing Najib, thus serving as a proxy to canvass public support online.

Tribute and support for the working class



Figure 2. A post celebrating the work ethic of Malays, countering the negative stereotype that Malay youths are considered lazy. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

In several of his posts, Najib countered the prevailing stereotypical narrative that the *Mat Rempit* are lazy and engage in criminal behavior. He lends credence to the idea that they are unfairly viewed and stereotyped, when they are in fact just as hardworking as everyone else, simultaneously drawing parallels between how both he and the urban working class are viewed and treated by society (and in Najib's case, the incumbent government). Through this narrative, Najib relies on "nativistic" and "personalistic" appeals that "flaunt the low" which is typical in populist discourse (Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016). The linguistic framing of the issue aims to heighten his likeability and popularity, as Najib is hyperaware that mobilizing support "has less to do with substance and more to do with style" (Ricks, 2018). This show of solidarity is seen as a reflection of how people can be accused of terrible behavior but are essentially good at heart. Najib claimed that he had been unfairly treated for losing GE14 and that he actually performed well whilst in office. While he takes responsibility for his party's loss, he still manages to find fault with those who attacked him for being corrupt, insisting that their accusations are trumped-up charges and slander. The argument being used is that his failings as prime minister cannot be equated with the corruption charges laid against him.

Humanising Najib

Najib's humble only persona carefully presents his views in a manner that is polite and seemingly coming from a position of weakness and lack of real power. While his supporters may believe that Najib has nothing to be ashamed of, this politicization of humility plays into the trope of his diffidence and innocence.



Figure 3. A Valentine's Day post beseeching Malaysians to accept Najib as their valentine. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

This carries on beyond politics: for instance, Najib posted a Valentine's Day message on his Facebook account, entreating the public to accept him as their valentine. Within the realm of Malaysian politics, where politicians often present themselves as entitled and lacking in humility, Najib shows remarkable restraint in reducing class differences in these posts.



Figure 4. A post featuring an image of Najib at his university graduation to refute the claim that he had a fake degree. In the post, he apologizes for his bad hair, citing that it was a trend back then. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

Another example can be seen when the account posted a picture of him during his graduation, in response to claims that he faked his degree, while also poking fun at how he looked then. While the number of these personal posts is relatively small, they have a significantly higher engagement than all other MAB posts, suggesting that they succeeded in softening his image.

A proxy for public support



Figure 5. Image of Najib hugging an Orang Asli voter during the Cameron Highlands by-election. (Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

MAB was also used to highlight public support for Najib. Choice photos and videos taken around the country were used strategically to show regular folk from various walks of life clamoring to meet and embrace him. Najib constantly parades in large crowds wherever he goes, drawing parallels with Anwar Ibrahim following his ousting in 1998. Live-streamed videos of his speeches during by-election campaigns were often accompanied by chants of “*Bossku*” by the crowd. Among the campaign’s media tie-ins and promotions was a song featuring the campaign’s tagline as its title, which featured a tacit endorsement by Najib in a teaser video, even if he did not actually appear in the song.

Overall, these posts create the impression that there is widespread support and adoration for Najib. The imagery of crowds flocking towards him demonstrates a strong grassroots appeal, while media tie-ins reflect the apparent growing popularity of the campaign. While social media posts are hardly reflective of reality, they are at least powerful enough to provide the perception that Najib has strong support from large portions of the Malaysian population. Therefore, we cannot automatically claim that Najib’s support is not rooted in reality.

Taking ownership of and ‘misappropriating’ shame

Contrary to common masculine and unapologetic conventions, the MAB campaign is a conduit for expressing shame over poor decisions in the past, where Najib apologizes for his mistakes and promises to do better. In this context, Najib’s apology is nothing more than a creative form of performance speech in his MAB discourse. He posits himself as sensitive and responsible by acknowledging his shortcomings. By highlighting shame, Najib seeks to minimize his responsibility over his misdeeds while simultaneously using it for the restoration of his political image and public trust (Kampf, 2013). Najib shares

this shame with his supporters, building up to the core idea that they had voted wrongly in GE14 and should therefore, recognise their mistake. By admitting this fault, Najib can be perceived as having forgiven them, assuring them that they are not to blame due to effective PH propaganda.

The MAB slogan itself is a means of expressing regret over falling for PH's supposed lies and slander, and it gained traction in light of PH's many unfulfilled election promises. It was also used to indicate that every other PH claim was probably false. Najib strongly implies that the PH propaganda machine is highly effective and unmatched in the degree to which it has manipulated the people, presenting himself as a humble victim of a highly organized smear campaign.



Figure 6. The account highlights the apparent shame of an apparent “independent” candidate standing in a by-election. The post is full of sarcastic remarks about how this is a tactical ploy by the PH government to win the election by splitting votes.
(Source: Najib Razak Facebook, 2019)

As Najib humbles and humanizes himself, he wears his shame like armor, thus allowing him to direct it against his opponents. When attacking the government, Najib makes use of shame throughout his rhetoric, attempting to pressure the authorities into admitting their faults. For example, when highlighting the fact that PH ministers were copying actions done during his tenure, he says: “*Sekarang sama-samalah kita tanya Menteri-menteri PH semua ini. Malu apa bossku?*” (Now let us ask the PH ministers about all this: what is there to be ashamed of, my boss?). Najib notes that PH engages in the same questionable behavior which they had been critical of in the previous government (other examples include avoiding questions posed by journalists).

By comparing his former government with the PH government, Najib highlighted how much better his administration was. However, Najib does not explicitly suggest that BN had ever actually engaged in such behavior, limiting his posts to pointing out how they had been “accused” of doing so.

Distractions from reality and non-apologies for non-specific shame

The MAB campaign served to distract Najib's followers from the reality of his failures and scandals, alluding instead to the PH government's illegitimacy and that ultimately, BN should be returned to power. Najib and BN are therefore not considered to be at fault, but are instead victims of PH's smear campaign. The subtext is that Najib did nothing wrong and his shame for losing is undeserved.

This humble disposition and apologetic tone appear both sardonic and sarcastic to the "masses". By creating affinity with his supporters, Najib's follies become their own and, played right, they might defend him regardless of the merits of any attacks. Najib has therefore created a support base like Trump's despite using a vastly different approach; where the latter leverages shame to create anger among his supporters, the former *embraces* shame to appear resonant and relatable to them.

There is another element to Najib's apology and concession of shame: his admittance of shame is clear, but the subject of his apology is always abstract. Despite calling on others to admit their failings, the MAB campaign never addresses the 1MDB scandal despite his Facebook account's regular postings about the case (often each time there is a court appearance). The account very clearly avoids using the MAB hashtag or slogans in these instances. For anyone following the MAB hashtag, their impression of Najib would be void of any indication of embroilment in any of his high-profile corruption cases. Kampf (2013) characterized this as blurring the nature of the offence, whereby the linguistic personification of the MAB campaign is implicitly designed to draw public attention away from his trials and towards his reformation as a regular, unjustly persecuted man instead. By emphasizing Najib's humanity, it focuses on building empathy and connections with the Malaysian public and not harping on the specificities of politics.

Rebranding through misappropriation

Baldacchino (2019) noted in his study that certain forms of honor were "antimodern and primitive". Yet perhaps a sense of honor is retained in Najib's assiduously crafted persona, coupled with shame and humility, which has allowed Najib to navigate a treacherous political scandal with some degree of success without having the need to express any guilt for any specific past action. Without the need for populist rage against the myriad issues facing Malaysian society, the MAB campaign has focused on honorable conduct in the sense that it steers away from the expected aggressiveness, cheap attacks, or incitements to violence.

However, it is important to also realize that this rebranding exercise can be considered a misappropriation of culture and class. The phrase "*Malu Apa, Bossku?*", which solidified a strong Peninsular support base, actually originates from Sabah, much to the chagrin of Sabahans. According to the anthropologist Trixie Tangit, the term "*Bos*" is commonly used by Sabahans as "a social currency to show friendliness, to seek help or favors", playfully used "amongst familiars" as an "art of ingratiating oneself" (Jacobs et al., 2019). "*Bosku*", however, originates from the Indonesian foreign labor communities in Sabah, used as an honorific for their local employers — "*Ku*" being short for "*aku*" ("I" or "my"). According to Tangit, the addition of the suffix intensifies the degree of one's relationship to their employer through some form of intimacy and affection to "soften any kind of ill-doing or ill-harm, or anything negative; it is always in jest or fun" (Jacobs et al., 2019). At the same time, to the average Sabahans, the expression is an oxymoron because the two elements have contradictory meanings. The phrase was popularized by a political campaign that ignored Sabahan cultural knowledge and can be considered a misappropriation of phrasing, with the possible intention of being antagonistic towards

the recipient in some contexts. Despite this supposed insult and slight, Najib's popularity in Sabah during the Kimanis by-election brought large numbers of local supporters who continued to use the "*bossku*" moniker.

Secondly, Najib's MAB campaign made waves, specifically amongst the Malay middle class, speaking directly to their grievances when it came to survival and political insecurities. An important point to consider is that there still exists poor class awareness in Malaysia, which is superseded by race awareness. This situation partly explains the MAB campaign's success in manipulating this lack of awareness for professional gain. Therefore, we criticize how it deliberately ignores Najib's actual class status as a political "blue blood", being the eldest son of Abdul Razak (the second prime minister) and the nephew of Hussein Onn (its third) ("Najib Razak", 2020), which would otherwise distance him from everyday Malaysians. The rebranding exercise reinvented Najib as a man of the people, often attempting to ignore the narrative of his privileged status. Again, what is remarkable is that there is no incitement to hatred or violence, the rhetoric that fueled other deeply contested issues (e.g., the anti-ICERD rally as well as mass anger directed at migrants and refugees) could easily have been tapped into and linked to the disenfranchisement of the "masses" as per the established Malaysian political playbook. Embracing shame in an honorable manner seems to be the dominant strategy here, and the traditional political discourses which his own party polished over decades of experience seem to have been abandoned. Most notably is the absence of the discourse of the "protector", looking out for the "protected" who are besieged by external threats, then again, this can hardly be a tenable narrative given that Najib was out of power and at the mercy of the judiciary at the time of campaigning.

Counter-narratives from opposition supporters remarking on the 1MDB scandal, his luxury goods, and the family's lavish lifestyle would usually be beaten down quickly by sycophants, and quickly followed up with newer posts focusing on his humbling experiences with supporters from the ground. The language used was also often colloquial and informal, a departure from his more commanding elocution while serving as prime minister. Some terms specifically seemed to be intergenerationally targeted, such as "*gais*" (guys), "old school", lowbrow humor, and sarcasm, with some commentators seeing it as somewhat unbelievable that "a political elite" would "have used such expressions", unless to "present himself as an ordinary man the people can get close to" (Anuar & Jalli, 2020, p. 24–25).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION — LEAVING NAJIB'S LEGACY OF SHAME

2020 brought drastic changes: as the COVID-19 pandemic began, Malaysia was undergoing a sudden, massive political shift after the PH government collapsed, and BN returned to the incumbent government coalition, albeit as a secondary force playing second fiddle to then Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Bersatu party, which continued to sideline Najib. Tensions grew due to Bersatu's poor handling of the pandemic, eventually forcing Muhyiddin's resignation. Despite this shift, Najib was still found guilty in his first corruption case, with a stay of execution. Najib remains a member of parliament until his appeal is completed.

The MAB campaign had already wound down by the end of 2019 after Najib's rehabilitation and rebranding exercise achieved its goal, although he continued posting very directed and poignant commentary via Facebook posts that resonated with many working-class Malaysians. In a previous study, Najib's MAB campaign was also seen as

attractive for utilizing humor “particularly among the younger generation” using “jokes, common speak, and trendy digital culture references”, creating a stronger bond with his targeted audience (Kasmani, 2022, p. 15).

While Najib appears to be living on borrowed time until his pending appeal is completed (as well as his other 1MDB-related charges), he has succeeded in reshaping his post-GE14 narrative. Judging by the photographs posted on his Facebook account, Najib appears popular. MAB's catchy slogan harkens back to other popular slogans, such as Mahathir's “*Wawasan 2020*” and Anwar's “*Reformasi*” (whether Prime Minister Ismail Sabri's “*Keluarga Malaysia*” slogan really catches on remains to be seen). These slogans perfectly encapsulate all their policies and intents, and supporters can draw different but favorable interpretations. This successful rehabilitation suggests the power of social media in reclaiming political narratives. It is arguable, however, that MAB may have been supported by the extensive use of cybertroopers, who operate pervasively in Malaysia, but the online support for Najib has arguably translated into on-the-ground support.

Within Malaysian politics, it is expected that a politician does not apologize for any wrongdoing, and thus Najib's approach of profusely apologizing and lowering his own station is a rarity. His opponents struggled to counter his attacks and were wary of angering his fervent supporters (who had grown tremendously during the pandemic). This inherent masculinity of Malaysian politics has been disrupted by MAB, and this is an avenue worth researching as successful Malaysian politicians are often defined by their abilities to exude masculine traits such as being vociferous, assertive, arrogant, and charismatic.

In the wake of his political fall, Najib was portrayed as emasculated and feminized, particularly through the turbulent relationship between him and his wife, Rosmah Mansor, with open jokes circulating on her aggressive and sometimes masculine demeanor, and rumors that most, if not all, professional decisions made by Najib were hers. Najib's MAB campaign has succeeded in relaunching his political career with no need to employ masculine traits, thus giving him significant clout in influencing the public sphere. The campaign is meant to portray Najib as a consistent, stable, and likeable everyday Malay man, only interested in the betterment of Malaysia.

In early 2022, as Malaysia braced for yet another state election (this time in the state of Johor), Bersatu and BN were once again at loggerheads over seat allocations. Amidst a heated tussle between Najib and Muhyiddin over the failure of the *Muafakat Nasional* partnership, Muhyiddin released an emphatic statement on this issue, where he directly addressed Najib's lack of shame:

In Islam, shame is part of faith. Unfortunately, in UMNO, a man convicted of a grave offence described as a 'national embarrassment' is instead placed on a pedestal as a boss and cheered on with the slogan, 'malu apa, bossku'. Where is your faith? Where is your pride? (Ong, 2022)

While this was not the first time a politician had highlighted the hypocrisy and shamelessness in Najib's candor through MAB, this was the first rebuke from a coalition partner that was said unapologetically and without reservations. MAB proved a useful vehicle to rally support against the then PH government and since has been useful to serve the political interests of Najib and UMNO by extension with no care for its allies. Muhyiddin's biting attack of MAB will unlikely break its hold on Najib's supporters but has brought into public discourse that even his allies can find the “*bossku*” moniker to be revolting and disingenuous.

It remains to be seen if this is the start of more humble and down-to-earth approaches becoming more common, but regardless, MAB has certainly changed the way in which shame serves as a political currency, allowing Najib to overcome so many setbacks yet retain a degree of honor. Even more remarkable is that as a member of the political elite, he has successfully rebranded himself as the proverbial salt of the earth, using shame as both shield and weapon. Perhaps politicians will be forced to employ more humble approaches in addressing the “masses”, and there could be a shift in the way people perceive their political leaders.

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