

Scandal and Malay Politics: A Question of Dignity Against Anwar Ibrahim and Azmin Ali

Syaza Farhana Mohamad Shukri

Department of Political Science, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Political scandal has become very common in a democratic country as political rivals bid to discredit one another. An open and free media allows politicians from different sides to publicize alleged wrongdoings by their opponents. There are different scandals ranging from financial, political to moral scandals. Using dignity as a framework, this paper argues that moral or sex scandals are most effective to defeat a Malay politician in Malaysia because a section of the Malay population looks upon virtuous conduct to evaluate the capability of a leader. Specifically, this paper uses homosexual accusations against Anwar Ibrahim and Azmin Ali to show that this is the type of scandal that is convenient to bring into question their dignity. The paper concludes that after the same tactic is used over the decades, it appears that voters are reaching a saturation point, especially among middle-class Malays.

Keywords: Anwar Ibrahim, Azmin Ali, indignity, malay politics, moral scandal

INTRODUCTION

Scandal is part and parcel of politics these days, especially in a democratic country with relative freedom of access to various media outlets. Malaysia, being a hybrid regime for much of its history since independence, has

also seen its fair share of scandals throughout the decades. It is considered a hybrid regime because as a dominant-party system since independence, Malaysia has never been a fully consolidated democracy; yet, it still has democratic instruments as means of governance (Case, 2005). While there are many types of scandals that range from financial, political to moral scandals, this paper argues that when it comes to Malay politics, the concept of dignity is pivotal in the creation of scandals to bring down a political opponent. Arguably the biggest scandal in Malaysia so far is the ongoing

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 13 July 2020

Accepted: 17 September 2020

Published: 25 December 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.28.4.17>

E-mail address:

syazashukri@iium.edu.my

court case on 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) which is considered the world's biggest financial scandal. However, as a financial scandal, it does little to tarnish Najib Razak's reputation among the Malay population (Firdaws, 2016). When Mahathir Mohamad re-entered politics in 2016, he claimed to have done so in order to save Malaysia from Najib's kleptocratic rule, and not necessarily because of Najib's undignified character (Welsh, 2018).

Malaysia is of course not immune to moral scandals. For example, Anwar Ibrahim saw the end of his political career in the ruling United Malay National Organization (UMNO) following his attempts to address alleged corruption by Mahathir Mohamad in 1998. For that, he was accused of sodomy and then put into prison for abuse of power. A decade later, he was accused of the same crime, but this time under the administration of Najib Razak. In 2019, then Parti Keadilan Rakyat's (PKR) deputy president and Anwar's former protégé, Azmin Ali, was implicated in a gay sex video scandal. This raises the question: why was the same scandal repeating itself every decade in Malaysia?

Malays make up a significant majority of Malaysia's 32 million population at 68.8% (this figure includes indigenous people such as the *Orang Asli* and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak called the *bumiputras*). As a people, the Malay as an ethnic group has its own set of values that establishes them apart from other Malaysians such as the Chinese and Indians. Values that are held in esteem by Malays include a much more

traditional respect for conservative family values. Therefore, when a scandal breaks that purports the politician to have acted in a less dignified manner according to social norms, this requires much more effort on the part of the politician to try to clear his name (usually it is a male as there is a disproportionately small number of female politicians in Malaysia).

Every community would have its own shared values and norms. For example, the British are known for their stoicism while Americans are famous for their directness in communication. As a community, Malays in Malaysia are known for certain attributes such as reverence towards their elders, humility, circuitousness, obedience, hospitability, and politeness (Zamani, 2003; Zawawi, 2008). Supposed politeness in the Malay community can be seen in their behaviour and speech especially in their attitude to avoid conflict at any cost. This politeness also comes from a desire to preserve a person's dignity from being accused of souring a relationship (Brown & Levinson, 1978)—maintaining harmony is another important value to the Malays. Thus, in Malay politics, one effective way to accuse a political rival of being incompetent is to attack his or her dignity through actions that are considered un-Malay.

This paper will proceed with a thorough literature review on scandals and scandalology by scholars from various background. Different scandals affect politicians differently depending on multiple factors such as social norms, timing, and elite role. The literature review also fits dignity

into the larger question of scandals. This is followed by the three main case studies, namely Anwar Ibrahim's two sodomy cases and Azmin Ali's gay sex video. There is a short description on similar accusations that were used against other politicians before Anwar to show that this is not a recent phenomenon. Finally, the paper concludes by claiming that the people is reaching or close to reaching a saturation point of accepting this same information of supposed homosexual acts by the same politician.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on scandal, or sometimes called scandalology (Brenton, 2013), covers mostly the different effects of scandals on a politician's longevity in office. In his seminal work, Thompson (2000) defined "political scandal" as a moral transgression that must be condemned by certain groups and might cause damage to the reputation of the individual in question. According to Thompson (2000), the apparent rise in exposure to scandals since the middle 20th century is due to increased visibility of leaders, the professionalization of the media industry and technological innovation.

It is generally accepted that scandal is negatively perceived because it brings into question the integrity of a public office holder. However, the extent to which a scandal affects the position of a public figure depends on the nature of the scandal, the timing of the scandal, and the culture in which the scandal erupted. On average, politicians will lose support from the outbreak of a scandal (Dimock & Jacobson,

1995; Welch & Hibbing, 1997) even though the politician's party may not necessarily be affected (Von Sikorski, 2014).

Given the frequency of political scandals in democratic countries, voters may turn to elites to gauge the importance of the scandalous issue being debated in the media (Woessner, 2005). Using two experimental designs, Woessner (2005) argued that in the absence of obvious incompetency from a scandal, elite framing of the scandal played an important role in affecting voters' evaluation of a president's performance. Using the Lewinsky affair during Clinton's administration as a case study, Woessner (2005) explained how Democrats framed the scandal as personal misconduct whereas Republicans framed the scandal as criminal obstruction of justice. Conflicting messages such as these appear to have little effect on the less ideological (Zaller, 1992). Similarly, affected parties in Malaysia may use the term "gutter politics" to dismiss scandals of a private nature. Nevertheless, moral scandal continues to be prominent in Malay politics because the unsavoury character of a politician affects his dignity in the community.

The conception of dignity is multifaceted as it can be understood from legal, psychological, cultural, and political perspectives. Furthermore, dignity is a concept that is discussed prominently in religious texts such as the Bible and the Qur'an, and in the philosophical works of Cicero, Locke, and Kant. As a starting point, it is possible to go back to as far as ancient times where dignity is associated with a

person's role in society (Hayry, 2004). We may also look at Aristotle's description of honour and virtue (Putnam, 1995). Honour, or dignity, as conceived about 2500 years ago is dependent on a person's stature in society. In other words, a person's external factors and accomplishments would deem him to be honourable among his peers and thus improves his reputation in society. The same idea is applied to understand contemporary Malay politics where honour is synonymous with dignity.

The above conception of dignity is of course different from that discussed by Kant some 250 years ago whereby he argued that dignity belongs to all persons by virtue of being human. As a species, humans are unique in our ability for conscience and autonomy. Dignity is for all who can differentiate moral right from wrong. Due to their ability to make choices, human beings are afforded dignity and rights. Rights are human claims from the state, and they can be inalienable or sometimes conditional. Since rights are dependent on human's relations with state authorities, rights do not exist in the state of nature; this calls into question whether rights are intrinsic to humans or if it is in fact a social construct. As the entity that can limit our freedom and autonomy, states have to ensure our rights are protected in order to safeguard our dignity (Donnelly, 1982). Thus, instead of being an intrinsic value to humans, dignity may be considered as a goal that depends on making morally right decisions. For a communitarian society such as the Malay community in Malaysia, duties and obligations are prioritized goals

over that of individual rights (Howard & Donnelly, 1986).

However, it is incorrect to define the Malays in a monolithic fashion. Before the coming of Islam and the importation of its epistemology to the Malay Archipelago, the Malays have already developed a more progressive and individualistic outlook based on their cosmopolitan nature in the middle of the east-west trade route. Contemporarily, we see the differentiation of Malays into an urban-rural divide. Those belonging in the urban middle class are more likely to be concerned with abuse of power whereas those belonging in the lower income group bracket are more easily swayed by moral scandals. Since moral scandals are directed towards the more conservative group that prioritizes the wellbeing of the community over individual rights, this paper employs a value-based instead of rights-based understanding of dignity.

This paper uses Mattson and Clark's (2011) conception of dignity as a framework to guide the discussion on dignity and scandal in Malay politics. According to them, the lack of a clear conception of dignity disallows a proper policy response from relevant authorities. They conceptualize four themes relating to dignity, namely (1) as a metaphysical explanation, (2) a virtuous conduct, (3) a stereotyping of the "other", and (4) a subjective experience. This study focuses on "virtuous conduct" relating to dignity. When a scandal arises out of unethical conduct, the person that is involved in the scandal would have

compromised his dignity. As mentioned, Malays hold high regards towards various values and voters' perception of undignified actions by Malay politicians would cause a massive scandal.

In this respect, it is worth reproducing the observation of Mattson and Clark:

We recommend viewing dignity as a commonwealth of individually assessed well-being, shaped by relationships with others, affected by the physical world, and framed in terms of values...Conceiving of human dignity as a commonwealth of subjectively experienced value production and enjoyment has many practical policy implications. (2011, p. 303).

Framing dignity as value-based instead of rights-based justifies the application of this conceptual framework to the argument of this paper which is that indiscretion is linked to a loss of dignity to Malay politicians and possibly put their position in jeopardy. Weber's ethic of responsibility also stipulates that in a world of value pluralism, there is a need to accept responsibility based on certain values (Starr, 1999). Values and dignity are shaped by human relations and therefore the perception of indignity is a social construct that may create volatility in a communitarian culture of the Malays in Malaysia.

Based on the theme of virtuous conduct, dignity is constructed as when a person acts in a socially acceptable behaviour (Shultziner, 2003). Politicians, being in

positions of power in the public eye, are always expected to portray good behaviour. However, in an experiment based on a national survey in the United States (Doherty et al., 2011), it was found that while a moral scandal might affect a politician's personal evaluation, it does not affect the politician's job evaluation unless abuse of power was committed while in office. Nevertheless, in a communitarian society, a dignified person would be someone who fulfils his or her duties and society's expectations on him or her. Understanding this, Malay politicians have used a rival's ostentatious bad behaviour as proof of his incapability to lead the country. In other words, dignity, or the lack there-of, has been used over the decades in the contestation of Malay politics. It is not so much the Malay community that politicises the concept of dignity but the political elites who regularly manipulate an opponent's moral scandal to be in line with their defective view that dignity is not afforded to all equally but to those who showed virtuous conduct.

Without solid dignity, it is difficult to claim one's competence as a leader. Therefore, elites have also used political scandals as a strategy to block an opponent's political goals without having to mobilize the electorate (Ginsberg & Shefter, 1999). A behaviour is considered scandalous if it helps one side of the conflicting parties. As such, political scandal is unique by virtue of the political construction of its exposure in a 'hyperpoliticized' society defined by constant political contestation (Welch, 2007). Using examples of Watergate, Iran-

Contra, and again, the Lewinsky affairs, Welch argued that the exposure of a scandal is constructed by powerful interests and over time, political scandals have been accepted as “normal” due to ongoing contention by the powers-that-be. Even in a country such as Malaysia, the people have taken scandals of a private nature less seriously over recent years because the exposure is viewed to have been constructed by rival Malay politicians for political gains.

It is not to say that scandals are no longer effective in Malaysia to bring into question the dignity of a Malay politician. As argued by McDermott et al. (2015), it is the presence of hypocrisy that worsens the reputation of a public office holder. Through the usage of survey experiment, they showed that respondents react more negatively towards politicians who showcase inconsistency between his or her behaviour and explicitly stated beliefs. Hypocrisy brings into question a politician’s ability to perform his or her job because to legitimize a person’s rule, that person must be presented as a defender of social norms. Deception lies at the heart of people’s disapproval of hypocritical politicians (Runciman, 2010). For Malay politicians who claim to represent Malay and Muslim interests, when they are caught in a compromising situation that is against the values of the community, it puts their career at risk.

Another factor in understanding the effects of political scandal on a candidate’s prospect is the role of timing and repetition. Mitchell (2014) argued that a scandal introduced towards the end of a political

campaign had less negative consequence because voters had had the time to learn about a candidate and his or her policy. Another conclusion by Mitchell (2014) was that without new information, there was a saturation threshold where repeated references to the scandal would no longer have any impact; thus, it is better for a politician caught in a scandal to provide complete information from the beginning.

The literature on political scandal is of course not limited to the context of the United States. For example, Esser and Hartung (2004) provided a thorough review of scandals in Germany from the time of the Weimar Republic. An interesting point was made from the juxtaposition between Germany and countries such as the United States and Britain where scandal of a private nature is absent in Germany due to the country’s civil law which protects the private sphere. In a study on Nordic countries, Herman (2018) argued that ‘talk scandal’ by populist leaders had led to a power struggle with the liberal media and mainstream parties. This is a sign of rising challenge to liberal democracies in the Nordics. In South Korea, Min (2013) wrote that the 2007 scandal involving the BBK stock price manipulation was simply one of many factors affecting a voter’s decision in the presidential election. In other words, supporters would continue to vote for “corrupt” candidate despite him or her facing a scandal if the candidate is closer to a voter’s preference. We could understand Najib Razak’s continued popularity in Malaysia from this perspective as well.

From the literature reviewed, it is clear that research on scandal has covered a wide range of perspectives covering countries from Asia to Europe, mostly the United States. In the case of Malaysia, very little theoretical attempt has been made to understand the persistence of moral scandals over other types of scandal. There have been studies such as Funston's (2018) which argues that the parties in Malaysia are in constant contest for Malay votes in the country. This paper, however, goes a step further and explains that instead of just a play for Malay votes from the exposure of random scandals, there is a calculative effort by Malay politicians to use moral scandals to discredit their opponent because it would affect the dignity of the person. Since duty and responsibility is important to the Malay community, a loss in dignity could be a huge blow in holding a political position or mobilising the voters.

METHODS

This study is a qualitative research on political scandals among Malay politicians with specific references to Anwar Ibrahim and Azmin Ali. To further investigate this issue, counterfactual analysis was employed as a method of analysis. Based on the counterfactual analysis, we are assuming the possible alternative to a known event (Fearon, 1991), and in this case the use of moral scandals among Malay politicians to rile up certain Malay sub-population. In a small N research, counterfactual analysis is useful to provide a more rigorous explanation for the study.

According to Nye (2005), plausibility, proximity in time, relation to theory and factual accuracy are four factors that may help strengthen a counterfactual argument. In order to achieve Nye's four factors as best as possible, historical documents and textual records such as the *50 Dalil Kenapa Anwar Tidak Boleh Jadi PM* ("50 Reasons Why Anwar Cannot Become Prime Minister") were given a new read within the framework of dignity as suggested. Similarities among the different cases that relate to the framework of dignity underscore the possibility of analysing the events from the perspective of value-based dignity that might not be present had it been in another society or ethnic group.

RESULT

In his seventeenth year as prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad sacked his third deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, from all cabinet posts on September 2, 1998, for being under police investigation. A series of events culminated into Anwar's sacking, starting with the distribution of a publication titled *50 Dalil Kenapa Anwar Tidak Boleh Jadi PM* ("50 Reasons Why Anwar Cannot Become Prime Minister"). The book was circulated widely during UMNO's General Assembly in 1997 when Anwar officiated the Youth and Women wings' conference. There is no doubt that the purpose of doing so was to bring down Anwar by bringing into question his capability as a leader. Interestingly, instead of simply emphasising alleged corrupt actions committed by Anwar while in office, the book also contains

several disturbing allegations of moral misconduct from adultery to sodomy.

It appears that a scandal involving abuse of power is not enough to defeat a Malay politician. As pointed out by Esser and Hartung (2004) in the literature review, the impact of a political scandal depends on the political culture of the state. Unfortunately, in Malaysia, financial scandals have been tolerated in the past because of the rapid economic growth experienced from the 1970s until the 1990s. According to Funston (2018), the Malay-centric New Economic Policy (NEP),

and high growth rates for most of the 1970s through to the 1990s, provided an almost unlimited source of funds for political patronage, with which UMNO could exert financial control over Malays and offer appealing handouts during elections. At the same time, however, it led to major financial scandals, particularly as UMNO expanded its own direct business role. (p. 62).

Nevertheless, the NEP did lead to multiple facets of success such the elimination of hardcore poverty, diversification of the economy and growth of the middle class. Further culture of financial misappropriation occurred during the first tenure of Mahathir Mohamad's premiership when material reward was given to the urban, corporate and rich UMNO elites (Jomo, 2003) while government officers, teachers and the security and armed forces were banned from

holding party posts. This was in lieu of a commitment to an ideological struggle for the betterment of the Malays. In this political climate, Anwar's political opponents need to concoct additional allegations of undignified behaviour in the form of moral scandals such as those alleged in the book in order to really paint Anwar as undeserving of the prime ministerial post.

Allegations of adultery and homosexuality are made worse by the fact that Anwar is a known Islamist who founded and led the Malaysian Islamic Youth Association (ABIM). Since those acts are sinful in Islam, accusing Anwar of committing them could possibly take away his power and influence over the Malay-Muslim population. On September 29, 1998, Anwar pled not guilty on charges of corruption and sodomy. Sodomy, even if consensual, is illegal in Malaysia, as a remnant of British colonial anti-sodomy law. However, the law is seldom used except in political circumstances as a manner to stifle opposition ("Malaysia: end political case", 2014). It must be noted that the author of the book that caused Anwar's ouster was eventually found guilty of slander by the High Court in 2005.

Matters of a private nature were no longer sacred when one is a Malay politician in Malaysia. Following Anwar's sacking from cabinet, Mahathir as the prime minister appeared on television to explain Anwar's arrest under the Internal Security Act (ISA), another remnant of British colonial rule. The ISA allowed any police officer to detain a person suspected of threatening national

security without a warrant for up to two years. Mahathir argued on television that if two of Anwar's associates were charged with committing sodomy with Anwar, then Anwar should be charged for the same crime as well ("No room for rivals", 1998). Even before the judiciary could have come to a conclusion whether Anwar was guilty or not, Mahathir was already implying that he did commit the acts. It is argued that the government interfered in a supposed criminal trial because it was to the government's advantage to highlight Anwar's supposed misbehaviour that brings into question his dignity and thus his merit as a Malay leader.

Anwar was sentenced to nine years imprisonment for sodomy on August 8, 2000. However, his conviction was later partially overturned by the Federal Court in September 2004, allowing for Anwar to be released from prison. Under Malaysian law, a person may not participate in political activities for five years from the end of his or her sentence. Anwar could only begin participating in politics on April 14, 2008. Knowing this, parliament was dissolved on February 13, 2008, with the 12th general election (GE-12) set to be held on March 8, 2008, more than a month before Anwar could qualify to contest for a parliamentary seat. Despite the government's attempt to block Anwar from returning to parliament, the opposition bloc that was led by his wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, successfully denied the government a two-thirds majority in parliament that year.

Anticipating that Wan Azizah would eventually vacate her Permatang Pauh parliamentary seat to make way for Anwar to compete in a by-election, a second sodomy allegation cropped up on June 29, 2008, by Anwar's former aide. The question raised is about the timing of the allegation. Why a similar accusation came up when Anwar's support and popularity was on the rise with the expectation of his return to parliament? Is it possible that the government was looking for ways to discredit Anwar with the tried-and-tested formula of a sodomy accusation? If the allegation made in 1998 was problematic due to many aspects such as the relatively recent age of the sperm specimen on the supposed mattress the acts were committed on, the allegation in 2008 also brought into question the plausibility of a 61-year-old man overpowering a strong and healthy 24-year-old. Hence, the complaint was changed from forcible sodomy to persuasion. Is it possible that the accusation is politically motivated to frame Anwar as a politician who lacks dignity? Anwar was subsequently arrested on July 16, 2008, but was released without charges the following day.

With mounting evidence to discredit the accuser, and Anwar pleading not guilty to the charges, the alleged victim decided to take another route—a spiritual one. A month-and-a-half after his initial allegation, the supposed victim chose to swear upon the Quran that he was sodomized by Anwar. This event was orchestrated to influence the perception of the majority Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia of Anwar's guilt.

Yet, in the middle of the storm, Anwar won the by-election that was held five months after the general election, making him the new opposition leader replacing his wife. This shows that despite the nature of the allegations, Anwar's supporters are not jaded by such scandal. As argued by Welch (2007), the Malaysian populace is perhaps now more mature to differentiate between a crime and a scandal concocted to bring down a political opponent.

The trial for Anwar's second sodomy allegation began in February 2010, a decade after the first trial. After almost two years, now during the administration of Najib Razak, Anwar was found not guilty of sodomy. This verdict was used to show that the judiciary in Malaysia is supposedly independent. It is difficult to believe so as it was not the end for Anwar. In 2014, Anwar was involved in a political manoeuvre termed the "Kajang Move" which attempted to replace the Chief Minister of Selangor. The way to do it is for a PKR assemblyperson from Selangor to vacate his seat for Anwar to contest in a by-election. This was done by the Kajang assemblyperson in January 2014 with the by-election set for March 23, 2014.

If Anwar were successful at becoming the 15th Chief Minister of Selangor, it would have given him more power as leader of the most prosperous state in Malaysia. Without a doubt, his opponents would not have been thrilled with this prospect. Coincidentally, just a few weeks before the by-election, the Court of Appeal overturned Anwar's acquittal from 2012 and sentenced him

to five years imprisonment, effectively disqualifying him from standing in the Kajang by-election. Without a scandal on Anwar's ability to lead, his political rivals resorted to moral scandals to portray Anwar in an undignified light. This is possibly part of Malay politics as Anwar's second round of being accused and convicted of sodomy was nicely timed before two of his by-elections.

In a twist of event, Anwar's former trusted protégé, Azmin Ali, who chose to side with Anwar over Mahathir in 1998, saw himself being the victim of the same dirty politics that brought into question the dignity of a Malay politician. On June 12, 2019, five years after Anwar's acquittal of sodomy was overturned, a video showing a man who resembles Azmin in bed with another man was circulated on social media. The video was supposedly recorded on May 11, 2019, the weekend in which a by-election was held in Sandakan, Sabah. Azmin, as PKR's deputy president, was present in the city in northeast Borneo to show his support as part of the campaign. As the case with Anwar, the question raised is why was the video released? Azmin was by then a powerful Minister of Economic Affairs, but he was supposedly caught in a tussle with his own mentor, Anwar Ibrahim, ever since he took over as the Chief Minister in Selangor (Sukumaran, 2019). While Anwar had been promised the premiership by Mahathir after the 14th general election (GE-14), rumours began swirling that Mahathir did not intend to pass the baton to Anwar and instead preferred Azmin.

A week after the release of the initial videos, Azmin stated that he did believe the people responsible for releasing the videos were members of his own party (Hassan, 2019). This statement came a day after Anwar said on parliament ground that if Azmin was indeed found to be the person in the video following police investigation, he should resign. As one can imagine, this makes matters worse as Azmin had remained loyal to Anwar throughout his two sodomy cases. In fact, when Azmin was Anwar's private secretary, he suffered an arrest under the draconian ISA for organising a protest supporting Anwar. Therefore, if it is true that people loyal to Anwar, such as his political secretary, were indeed behind the gay videos, it shows that the ploy to bring into question the dignity of a Malay politician may come from rivals within one's party. It is not difficult to imagine someone within PKR having a vendetta against Azmin as Farhash Wafa Salvador Rizal Mubarak, Anwar's political secretary and PKR Perak state chairman, shouted "Azmin *semburit*" following his release by the police for investigation, with *semburit* translated as sodomy. The police even concluded that a leader of a political party had possibly paid several hundred thousand ringgits to make the videos (Tay, 2019). This proves that tarnishing a person's dignity is very much a preferred method by Malay political leaders to upset a rival.

There is another proof that the leak of the video was nothing more but dirty politics to bring down a Malay politician. Haziq Abdullah Abdul Aziz, who publicly admitted as the other person in the video, immediately

released a statement confirming his role and also made a plea for the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) to investigate Azmin for alleged corruption. Interestingly, he also claimed that Azmin was unfit to be a leader. As described in the literature review, a moral scandal might not necessarily affect voters' evaluation of a politician's capability at his job unless an abuse of power was committed. Perhaps understanding this, Haziq somehow made a link of Azmin's indiscretion to his alleged corruption to discredit his position as a leader. This is similar to what was faced by Anwar in 1998 when he was accused of both sodomy and corruption. However, it is very difficult to make the case that a sex scandal also demonstrates abuse of power.

Unlike Anwar, Azmin was not charged for any crime from the release of the video. It might be argued that Azmin had the support and protection from Mahathir as the prime minister, in contrast to Anwar who was in a bitter rivalry with the same man in 1998. However, as argued by Mitchell (2014), voters have a saturation level when faced with the same information that is repeated over time. It seems that Malaysians are also increasingly weary of sodomy being used as a political weapon in Malay politics as a way to question a person's dignity. While these are of course different allegations by different people towards different leaders, the nature of the scandal is the same. Perhaps voters feel that unless new allegations are uncovered that necessitate a leader to abandon his seat in power, it is time for Malay politicians to abandon this dirty tactic.

DISCUSSION

Anwar was Mahathir's third deputy prime minister during his first tenure as prime minister. The previous two deputies, Musa Hitam and Ghafar Baba, had to resign for different circumstances. While Ghafar Baba lost to Anwar in the UMNO election in 1993 for the position of party deputy president, Musa Hitam submitted his resignation letter to Mahathir in December 1986 after five years as deputy prime minister supposedly due to incompatible leadership style and lack of trust. However, as he recalled in his memoir, Musa Hitam accused several individuals of spreading negative stories about him in a bid to get him out of government (Hitam, 2016).

Interestingly, a few years after Anwar's second sodomy accusation, Musa Hitam claimed that back in the 1980s when he was still deputy prime minister, he was accused of having sex with underage girls. As a weapon, accusing a Malay politician of undignified behaviour that goes against Malay customs and expectations has been an effective tool to bring down one's opponent even in the 1980s. This is especially true in a party such as UMNO which proclaims to be defender of Malay rights in the country. Therefore, in order to avoid being blackmailed for this or other accusations such as homosexuality—as had happened to his future successor—Musa Hitam was supposedly forced to relinquish his position (Jusoh, 2014).

It may seem straightforward that a politician that broke a code of conduct would be punished for his or her undignified

behaviour. However, in Malay politics, indignity as part of a moral scandal is played against one's opponent. For example, another Malay politician who was caught in a moral scandal was Rahim Thamby Chik, a former close ally of Mahathir in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1994, when he was the Chief Minister of the state of Malacca, he was accused of raping a 15-year-old schoolgirl. Since he was highly connected as UMNO Youth Chief, the girl's guardian asked for help from Lim Guan Eng, a member of parliament in the opposition bench. Instead of bringing Rahim to justice, it was Lim Guan Eng who was imprisoned for sedition. Evidently, it is not the act or scandal itself that causes the fall of a Malay politician, but how a scandal is used to frame a politician as acting in an undignified manner. Obviously back then with the government, being as powerful as it was, did not scandalize the crime as an act that questions Rahim Thamby Chik's dignity. It may be interpreted that politicians and elites of the post-NEP era with limited social standing in society except for access towards public resources played into gutter politics when it benefited them because Malaysia's political environment very much depends on patronage in order to survive. The end may justify the means, but will the end be the same in years to come?

After decades of seeing similar headlines, is this the end of moral scandal as the *modus operandi* to discredit a Malay politician? Apparently not, as Anwar was once again accused of sexual assault by a 26-year-old assistant researcher at the end

of 2019. This third attempt to bring down Anwar was unsuccessful when the Attorney-General's Chambers decided that not enough evidence was presented to charge Anwar with sexual assault. Furthermore, similar with the case against Azmin, it appears that Malaysians have reached a saturation point on this method of ruining a politician's dignity. It feels like there is no new information when it comes to attempts to bring down Anwar, and so Malaysians have become immune to sex scandals faced by the same politician as it is possibly viewed as a manipulated political agenda to silence those opposed to the powers that be.

Moreover, we are now seeing a shift in values by the Malays. Instead of being static, as an ethnic group, the Malays have experienced changes and development from a rural agrarian society to become a more affluent group of people which also render moral scandal to be ineffectual as a means to bring down a political opponent. Dignity is still important among the Malays; but perhaps modern individual dignity that stresses the values of justice, equality and liberty are beginning to overshadow the very narrow definition of dignity vis-à-vis immorality. This is possible partly due to the NEP that allowed the burgeoning Malay middle-class to become acquainted with a more universalistic definition of dignity that cuts across ethnicities and culture. The history-making 2018 general election is proof of a maturing democracy in Malaysia. Despite the constant barrage of gutter politics, Malaysians are seeing past the

smoke and mirror and are judging politicians accordingly based on new norms of integrity and transparency of governance as well as of justice and inclusivity of development delivery.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the biggest scandals faced by Malay politicians may have been a moral or a sex scandal because of the high regards put on dignity by the Malay population in general. While it is accepted that the Malays are made up of various backgrounds, moral scandals are usually used as a tactic by political elites to influence the more conservative rural Malays. Thus, dignity is still a truly relevant concept to understand the influence of moral scandals in Malaysia's democracy. Dignity is best defined in this paper by virtuous conduct, and a person caught in a compromising act of course risks tarnishing his or her dignity. Understanding the Malay psyche, political rivals chose to expose these scandals over other types of scandal such as a financial scandal that is not considered to be unusual in Malaysian politics.

For example, the 1MDB scandal is considered the largest financial scandal in the world. Despite the paper trail, Najib's supporters unabashedly promote the phrase "*malu apa bosku*" which translates to "what to shame, my boss". Since it is not technically a moral scandal, Najib is not tinged by indignity and thus saw his popularity even risen following his departure from the prime ministerial post. Furthermore, as described

in the discussion, it is the growing Malay middle class who find abuse of power to be more serious than a moral scandal. As long as systematic issues such as freedom of press, technological divide and an education system void of humanity and creativity, there will always be conservative Malays who will fall for the elite's strategy to tarnish an individual's dignity for political mileage. Therefore, future studies may want to look into the German model of having a law that protects an individual's privacy so that scandals of this nature may no longer be used for political gains.

As can be seen, the efforts by politicians to mobilize the people based on this religious-centric view on dignity has not shown much results in recent years especially with Anwar Ibrahim still being a much important figure in Malaysian politics despite multiple allegations against him. It appears that there is an implicit understanding that scandals are constructed for political gain of rival Malay politicians. Does this mean that dignity is no longer important to evaluate Malay politicians? Perhaps what it means is that Malays are moving beyond gutter politics to become a mature democracy with the people being able to distinguish between petty rivalries and actual crime in office.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express gratitude to Professor Emeritus Dr. Abdul Rashid Moten for his brilliant suggestion on the topic and guidance to improve the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Brenton, S. (2013). Commentary on 'democracy and scandal: A research agenda'. *Comparative Sociology*, 12, 863-871.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. N. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness* (pp. 56-289). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Case, W. (2005). Southeast Asia's hybrid regimes: When do voters change them? *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 5, 215-237.
- Dimock, M. A., & Jacobson, G. (1995). Checks and choices: The House bank scandal's impact on voters in 1992. *Journal of Politics*, 57(4), 1143-1159.
- Doherty, D., Dowling, C. M., & Miller, M. G. (2011). Are financial or moral scandals worse? It depends. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 44(4), 749-757.
- Donnelly, J. (1982). Human rights and human dignity: An analytic critique of non-western conceptions of human rights. *The American Political Science Review*, 76, 303-316.
- Esser, F., & Hartung, U. (2004). Nazis, pollution, and no sex: Political scandals as a reflection of political culture in Germany. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(8), 1040-1071.
- Fearon, J. D. (1991). Counterfactuals and hypothesis testing in political science. *World Politics*, 43(2), 169-195.
- Firdaws, N. (2016, September 27). IDE: 1MDB has little effect on Malay BN voters in S'ngor. *Free Malaysia Today*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2016/09/27/survey-1mdb-has-little-effect-among-malay-voters-in-sgor/>
- Funston, J. (2018). Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE14) – The contest for the Malay electorate.

- Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 37(3), 57-83.
- Ginsberg, B., & Shefter, M. (1999). *Politics by other means: Politicians, prosecutors, and the press from watergate to whitewater* (Revised ed.). New York, USA and London, England: W. W. Norton.
- Hassan, H. (2019, June 20). Malaysian minister Azmin accuses his PKR rivals of being behind gay sex video. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-economic-affairs-minister-azmin-gives-statement-to-police-over-sex-video>
- Hayry, M. (2004). Another look at dignity. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 13, 7-14.
- Herman, J. (2018). Old patterns on new clothes? Populism and political scandals in the Nordic countries. *Acta Sociologica*, 61(4), 341-355.
- Hitam, M. (2016). *Frankly speaking*. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk.
- Howard, R. E., & Donnelly, J. (1986). Human dignity, human rights, and political regimes. *American Political Science Review*, 80, 801-817.
- Jomo, K. S., (2003). Mahathir's economic legacy. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 4. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-4/mahathirs-economic-legacy/>
- Jusoh, L. (2014, April 2). Musa turut jadi mangsa fitnah seks [Musa also became a victim of sexual slander]. *Harakah Daily*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <http://arkib.harakahdaily.net/arkibharakah/index.php/arkib/berita/lama/2014/4/58649/musa-turut-jadi-mangsa-fitnah-seks.html>
- Malaysia: End political case against Anwar. (2014, October 23). *Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/23/malaysia-end-political-case-against-anwar>
- Mattson, D. J., & Clark, S. G. (2011). Human dignity in concept and practice. *Policy Sciences*, 44(4), 303-319.
- McDermott, M. L., Schwartz, D., & Vallejo, S. (2015). Talking the talk but not walking the walk: Public reactions to hypocrisy in political scandal. *American Politics Research*, 43(6), 952-974.
- Min, J. (2013). The influence of scandal on vote intention during Korean presidential campaigns: Why do voters support the "corrupt" candidate? *Asian Survey*, 53(2), 393-422.
- Mitchell, D. (2014). Here today, gone tomorrow? Assessing how timing and repetition of scandal information affects candidate evaluations. *Political Psychology*, 35(5), 679-701.
- No room for rivals in Mahathir's Malaysia. (1998, September 24). *The Economist*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://www.economist.com/asia/1998/09/24/no-room-for-rivals-in-mahathirs-malaysia>
- Nye, J. S. (2005). *Understanding international conflicts: An introduction to theory and history*. New York, USA: Pearson/Longman.
- Putnam, D. (1995). In defence of Aristotelian honour. *Philosophy*, 70(272), 286-288.
- Runciman, D. (2010). *Political hypocrisy: The mask of power, from Hobbes to Orwell and beyond*. Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press.
- Shultziner, D. (2003). Human dignity—functions and meanings. *Global Jurist Topics*, 3, 1-21.
- Starr, B. E. (1999). The structure of Max Weber's ethic of responsibility. *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 27(3), 407-434.
- Sukumaran, T. (2019, December 15). How Anwar Ibrahim and Azmin Ali's mentor-protégé relationship turned sour. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3042113/>

- how-anwar-ibrahim-and-azmin-alis-mentor-protége-relationship
- Tay, R. (2019, July 19). Political party leader paid 'hundreds of thousands of ringgit' to make sex video implicating Azmin, Malaysian police say. *Business Insider*. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from <https://www.businessinsider.my/political-party-leader-paid-hundreds-of-thousands-of-ringgit-to-make-sex-video-implicating-azmin-malaysian-police-say>
- Thompson, J. B. (2000). *Political scandal: Power and visibility in the media age*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Von Sikorski, C. (2014). Review of the book Scandalous! The mediated construction of political scandals in four nordic countries, by S. Allern & E. Pollack. *International Journal of Communication*, 8, 184-186.
- Welch, S. (2007). Political scandal and the politics of exposure: From Watergate to Lewinsky and beyond. *Politics and Ethics Review*, 3(2), 181-199.
- Welch, S., & Hibbing, J. R. (1997). The effects of charges of corruption on voting behaviour in congressional elections, 1982-1990. *Journal of Politics*, 59(1), 226-239.
- Welsh, B. (2018). "Saviour" politics and Malaysia's 2018 electoral democratic breakthrough: Rethinking explanatory narratives and implications. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 37(3), 85-108.
- Woessner, M. C. (2005). Scandal, elites, and presidential popularity: Considering the importance of cues in public support of the president. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 35(1), 94-115.
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Zamani, A. (2003). *The Malay ideals*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Golden Book Centre.
- Zawawi, D. (2008). Cultural dimensions among Malaysian employees. *International Journal of Economics and Management*, 2(2), 409-426.