TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

# "STANNING" NAJIB

## Fanning a Personality Cult in Malaysian Politics

Clarissa Ai Ling Lee and
Amirul Adli Rosli

ISSUE
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ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# “Stanning” Najib: Fanning a Personality Cult in Malaysian Politics

By Clarissa Ai Ling Lee and Amirul Adli Rosli

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


- The concept of fandom, which contributes to the construction of fan fiction, provides fresh insights into the seemingly inexplicable and irrational popularity of disgraced political celebrities. Political fandom provides the critical framework for contextualizing the continuing popularity of political social media influencers such as Najib Razak within an environment of populist politics.
- Political fandom comprises fans and anti-fans, each of whom is capable of critical reasoning regardless of conclusions drawn. The presence of anti-fans of an influential figure speaks not to the waning of popularity, but rather, the continuing relevance of that figure within socio-political spaces.
- Malaysia’s political fandom does not subscribe to well-defined morality when it comes to celebrity politicians. The fans appear more tolerant of the amorality of said politicians than they would be of themselves, their circle, and their peers. Among the Malay-speaking and especially the more rural constituents, the way politicians portray their stance on Islam and address the bread-and-butter issues of their constituents appear to be more important than the politicians’ personal ethics.
- Najib Razak’s various sources of social capital, derived from his political lineage, his contributions during his time as Malaysia’s Prime Minister, and his ability to brand himself as a social media influencer, made him appear a potent political force despite being the first former Prime Minister to be convicted of corruption.

- Najib Razak has been adept at spinning social media trends to his advantage and in connecting with the mundane lives and hardships of ordinary citizens. Through his social media postings, he was able to inspire both fans and anti-fans to produce fan fiction around him in the form of images and texts which he could selectively interact with, and even use as content for his "crusade" on behalf of his supporters as an opposition MP, or as distractions from controversies associated with him.
- Although Najib Razak is the main focus here, a comparative analysis of Anwar Ibrahim, as a rival politician, is provided to demonstrate how Najib constructed his social media persona in ways savvier than his political opponents.

# "Stanning" Najib: Fanning a Personality Cult in Malaysian Politics

By Clarissa Ai Ling Lee and Amirul Adli Rosli[1]

## INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUALIZING POLITICAL FANDOM

On 24 August 2022, the day after Malaysia's former Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak failed in his final appeal to the Federal Court to overturn his graft conviction, a group of 200 Najib loyalists from Pertubuhan Jalinan Perpaduan Negara Malaysia launched a petition calling for a royal pardon for Najib (Leong 2022). That petition was also uploaded to the website change.org. Within a brief span of time, a counter-petition by Bersih was launched with a list of reasons as to why such an extrajudicial action should not be countenanced by the ruling King (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil Bersih 2022).

As of this writing, the anti-pardon petition garnered 126,363 supporters (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil Bersih 2022), significantly outnumbering the pro-Najib petition which garnered 11,259 supporters (Ibrahim Ismail 2022).[2] Are these numbers representative of

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[1] Dr Clarissa Ai Ling Lee is presently a fellow with the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Aachen: Cultures of Research at RWTH-Aachen University. She was Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore and also Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Creative Arts, Universiti Malaya. Amirul Adli Rosli is Research Officer at the Media, Technology and Society Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

[2] As is argued below, such absolute numbers are not predictive of Najib's waning popularity as support is still coming for him from outside this particular petition. In addition, there are other smaller scale petitions that had been set up for him,

the final and complete downfall of Najib Razak? Is this just the beginning of further extrajudicial intrigue? More importantly, why does UMNO still insist on supporting Najib instead of paving a new future free of his political baggage? In this article, we will unpack the reasons behind the seemingly "unreasonable" and inexplicable popularity of Najib Razak through the perspectives of fandom and parasocial engagements. At the same time, we wish to emphasize that the size of his detractors does not represent his waning relevance since the fact that he still garners attention means that even his detractors still consider him politically relevant and a potential threat.

Fandoms, political or otherwise, operate on social media through meme-driven battles, personal textual postings, parodies, and pop culture-infused discourses—these are part of "fan fiction" activities involving the building of a (possibly illusory) world around a celebrity. The (im)personality of a celebrity derives from how these celebrities are defined; whether through the manner they engage with their target audiences and how their audiences respond to them; or by how social media content is configured around said celebrities (Marwick and boyd 2011). Fandom activities do not involve monetary compensation but are dependent on dedication based on the amount of affection and/or interest the fan has; some indulge on a more casual basis while others would work hard at raising the status and popularity of the celebrity.

Political fandoms often comprise fans who are possibly also fans of other (pop-cultural) fandoms. Therefore, the affective labour and loyalties cultivated through participation in other fandoms are sometimes observable in a political celebrity's political fandom. While Najib has had

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versus the single petition against his pardon. One such petition is "Solidariti Pengampunan Diraja Untuk Najib Razak" started by the Selangor branch of Barisan Nasional communications (that has more than 34,000 signatories). See https://www.change.org/p/solidariti-pengampunan-diraja-untuk-najib-razak signatories. The size of the signatories against his pardon is proof that there is real anxiety over the possible pardoning of Najib, and not merely because of one or two Change.org petitions. Negative attention (as opposed to no attention) represents the impact of the subject on those participating in providing the attention.

supporters from celebrities such as Michelle Yeoh in the past (Romero 2021), it is less about celebrities endorsing Najib but more about how the aura of the celebrity had created attraction towards Najib as a celebrated figure no different from pop-cultural icons, an aura further fuelled by the 1MDB scandal and its star-studded cast that enraptured a global audience (Ng 2019). Moreover, a fandom's sense of identification is not dictated by geographic but interest-oriented affinities—it is also fuelled by a strong desire to exchange knowledge and information about the object of fandom (Jenkins 2006). A sense of community is built out of fan exchanges about that common object; the relationship between the fans and the objects are less about the objects themselves, but more about how intensely these objects fit with the affective-cognitive spaces that the fans have constructed for themselves.

Fans and anti-fans coexist in all fandoms, with political fandom being no exception to the rule. Fandom is not merely about plain adoration, but also obsession, and that obsession can lead to attacks on the target of the obsession/adoration (as well as the target's perceived rivals). Some anti-fans are equivalent to "fake" fans; by pretending to be part of a fandom but are there to sow discord or to bait other fans. Both fans and anti-fans engage in various forms of trollish behaviours in equal measure. Generally, we cannot predict whether the trollish behaviours of either camp have a positive or negative effect on the fandom and targeted celebrity, as the outcome of trolling activity is dependent on different factors such as the interaction between the fans/anti-fans' provocations and baiting, as well as the algorithms that supported and amplified the interactions. While there are toxic cultures within fandom that stem from mutually destructive and negative interactions, trolling is primarily about provocations and baiting to produce reactions that are not necessarily definable as harmful. In effect, trolling draws attention to topics and issues that might have escaped notice while triggering new activities around these topics and issues.

Through the process of attention-grabbing, trolling could also become an important tool for promoting a (political) celebrity's brand. For political figures, the cultivation of fans is significantly more valuable than engaging the services of cyber troopers, whose engagements on social media tend to be more inconsistent and less believable. If the

celebrity, together with their PR/image consultants, could spin trollish provocations into fan service, then this fan service could also be co-opted as a type of trolling activity that involves the manipulation of the attention/interests of fans to recruit advocates for these celebrity figures. In addition, the target of trolls tends not to be just a random person, but someone of relevance to merit the attention of trolls. In this sense, trolling is not equivalent to cyberbullying even if there are overlaps in the tenor of both practices.

Fan fiction has always been a part of mainstream political narratives. These fictions provide alternative narratives that may reinforce the image and myths surrounding the political celebrity around which such fictions are generated. Fiction here does not mean fake news or tales of the imagination (although the distinction from these is thin given that fans and anti-fans can still produce their own fantasies about the target celebrity), but rather, multiple representations and streams of logic emerging from the assembling and reassembling of available facts (Hellekson and Busse 2014). Therefore, even meme-able graphics could be considered a participant in this world-building fiction. Just as pop-cultural-inspired fan fiction could come in many forms; memes (Shifman 2014), videos, comics, deep fakes, and alternative written narratives; this is similarly applicable to political narratives.

By examining the logic undergirding the kind of world-building found in political fandom, one will obtain a better sense of how the personal vis-à-vis communal belief systems interact with each other, to augment the political influence of a political celebrity. The fact that political celebrities like Najib seem to garner blind loyalty may suggest that his fans lack critical judgement. However, we would argue that such fans do not lack critical thinking. Rather, their critical judgements are formed by narrative development similar to the practices in fan fiction, where beliefs about a political celebrity are built through the intermingling of logic and narratives derived from both fact and fiction.

Within the fiction produced about the celebrity-idol (politicians) are personal stories that connect them to the fandom's communities. Regardless of the demographics and social backgrounds of the fans, their individual aspirations, when merged with the creation of fictions, represent a formidable force in populist politics.

## *Methodology*

In this work, we combine qualitative and quantitative research to understand how political fandom manifests in Malaysia. Our primary focus is Najib Razak although we include a consideration of Anwar Ibrahim, as a rival figure to the former. We utilize data from the politicians' official Facebook pages as well as Twitter. Official Facebook pages refer to a Facebook page used officially by a prominent figure, including institutions, brands, celebrities and politicians. Political figures' Facebook pages are analysed as they have become a place where fans gather. Pages can be utilized as closed groups for politicians and celebrities to broadcast their thoughts and ideologies although these are less intimate than the closed groups on Facebook. In all Facebook page sites, fans can "react" to, and comment on, posts and interact in a setting of kindred spirits. Research has shown that Facebook pages "enable users to express themselves, establish ties, and develop and maintain social relationships" (Lin and Lu 2011).

While social media analytical tools look at the overall number of engagements of the political figures' posts, qualitative research is applied to better understand the nature of fans' participation. This can be done by surveying the diversity of comments on their posts, before doing a deeper dive into the syntactical and communicative qualities of the fans' comments. Qualitative research methods also study the context in which the narratives are conceived by fandoms to perpetuate their fan-fictional worlds through macroscopic comparisons to texts of similar categories. This involves eyeballing the extracted posts and digging through the comments to comprehend their sentiments. Comments are also measured by how many engagements (replies, reactions and shares) they receive; the most engaged comments are what fans resonate, or disagree, with the most.

This study extracted social media data between 1 October 2021 and 16 September 2022. This time frame covers three politically significant periods worth analysing—firstly between 1 October 2021 and 22 March 2022, between 23 March and 10 August 2022, and lastly between 11 August 2022 to 16 September 2022. The first period covers the Johor and Melaka by-elections and is worthy of analysis to see fans' level of

engagement with Najib during the elections, which were a politically buoyant period for him and UMNO. The second period covers the time between the elections and the court trials for Najib's final appeal. This period also comprises the Anwar-Najib debate, which was broadcasted live on national television and social media platforms. The third period covers Najib's trials and the period following his incarceration. This period observes the nature of fans' activities in defending Najib as well as those of the anti-fans.

It is not possible to obtain a fine-grained, quantitative breakdown of the profiles of Najib's followers from social media platforms, including and especially Facebook, due to the Terms of Services as well as existing privacy laws in countries where the platform companies are domiciled. We could only draw approximations of the demography of the fandom from those likely to be Najib's supporters through sources external to these platforms and triangulate these sources with activities on the platforms. These would include those who would either vote for him or provide political support: grassroots UMNO members in his constituency, those who respect his position as part of the Malay nobility, those who believe that they have benefited from the programmes he instituted during his term as the Prime Minister of Malaysia (Serina Rahman 2021), and those who are less interested in Najib's political history but more focused on his image as a troll or media celebrity.

## *Mapping Malaysian Social Media Users*

As of 2019, an estimated 7.3 million residents made up rural Malaysia spread across 50 per cent of the land mass, with 4.3 million of them living in the interior of Malaysia (Hezri 2019). On the other hand, Malaysia's Department of Statistics estimated that Malaysian urbanites would make up 76.6 per cent of the population in 2020, an increase from 71 per cent in 2010, the result of an increase in rural-to-urban migration (Mohamad Shukor 2020). In any case, Malaysia has a relatively high level of mobile penetration rate, regardless of the rural-urban divide. Mobile phone users in Malaysia reached a penetration rate of almost 80 per cent by 2018 (MCMC 2018), and nine-tenths of the users accessed the Internet using mobile devices. Rural users of smartphones had also increased

by 57 per cent by 2018 (Lim 2019). Many Malaysians under 30 have been tethered to digital spaces since elementary school. Even those from the older generations, including senior citizens from rural areas, have been quick to adapt themselves to digital space (Teng and Joo 2017), and have accustomed themselves to the use of social media platforms such as checking and interacting with Facebook posts, joining WhatsApp groups, and watching YouTube videos on a regular basis.

## BUILDING A PROFILE OF NAJIB'S FANDOM

Prior to his social media fame, Najib drew his main support base from rural working-class Malays, many of whom have been loyal to him because of his father and UMNO's legacy (*Malaysian Insider* 2015; *Negeri Pahang.com* 2019; Hazlin Hassan 2021). This base is made up of blue-collared workers, many of whom are involved in agriculture and small-scale entrepreneurships. The loyalty of this base appears to have held firm through the 1MDB scandal during the 2018 elections (Lemiere 2018; Hazlin Hassan 2021) and subsequently during his 2019 "Malu Apa, Bossku?" campaign. In the 14th General Elections of 2018, Najib won the seat to represent his constituency again, and a campaign was launched by his supporters to garner support for the ex-Prime Minister (Lee and Amirul Adli Rosli 2021). "Bossku" became the rallying cry used during the by-elections campaigning, beginning with the one in Malacca (Farah Suhaidah Othman 2021).

Loyalty to Najib from his Malay rural constituency probably stems from the benefits enjoyed during Najib's term as prime minister which spanned almost a decade. For instance, many rural Malays would have benefited from the Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M)[3] programme which was aimed at cushioning the lower-income groups to ameliorate the high costs of living. In fact, more than half of the seven national key result areas (NKRA) under Najib's Government Transformation Programme (GTP) were focused on the improvement of the lives

[3] https://www.br1m.info/ttps.://www.br1m.info/about-br1m/

of the lower-income groups (including those in the rural areas) and, ironically, to fight corruption. Critics of Najib saw the GTP as politically motivated and aimed at the Malay bumiputeras that were UMNO's key stakeholders (Noore Alam Siddiquee 2014), drawing on all kinds of sloganeering campaigns to boost sentiments. Other researchers studying the public's receptivity towards BR1M assessed that the intended recipients, a majority of whom are bumiputeras, were convinced of Najib's government's sincerity in helping them alleviate their burden (Rohana Kamaruddin, Akmal Aini Othman, and Zarina Denan 2018). The strengthening of Najib's Malay support base was also helped by the loss of confidence in Pakatan Harapan among Malay voters, as the coalition was plagued by increasingly public infighting. (Harris Zainul 2019; Head 2020). The eroding support for Pakatan among Malays was used to advantage by Najib and UMNO.

### *Najib's Fan Base on Social Media*

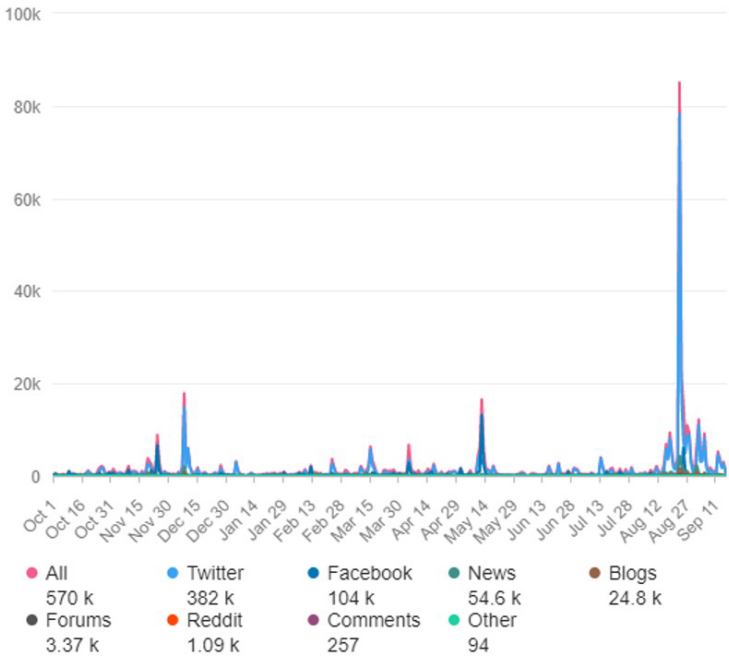
If Najib's more ardent supporters comprise those who perceived themselves as having benefited from Najib's policies during his time as Prime Minister, there is another group of followers who are less interested in his political past and more interested in his role as a social media influencer and troll. Those in the second group are either interested in the entertainment provided by the public persona or are anti-fans who follow him to troll him. A survey of the follower comments under the posts Najib makes on his Facebook page, where he currently is the most followed Malaysian politician, is illustrative of the adoration of his Malay fans regardless of the scandals accompanying him presently; even jail time has not reduced his social media activity. They constantly refer to him as "Bossku" as well as leave comments that cheer for Najib every time he troll-posts, reflecting how they view him as someone who sits higher on the social hierarchy. His fans track his activities and events surrounding him on Facebook pages in multiple languages (mainly Malay, English and Chinese) and have continued to cheer for him even to this day. Moreover, the ruling surrounding Najib Razak's appeal triggered a flurry of social media activity due to the long-drawn-out court drama being worthy of reality TV.

There were a series of events of political resonance that contributed to the continuing high interest in Najib from his followers/supporters and detractors alike, particularly between November 2021 and August 2022. November 2021 was marked by both the Malacca by-elections and the unveiling of the 12th Malaysian Plan, with sharp exchanges between Anwar and Najib witnessed in the parliament and through press statements. The Johor by-elections followed on the heels of what was considered to be a disastrous by-election in Malacca for Pakatan Harapan, with Perikatan Nasional only marginally better off. What happened in Johor is a confirmation of the already evident sentiment shifts towards Barisan Nasional since the Malacca by-elections. Less than a year later, the ruling against Najib Razak's appeal became fodder for Anwar to rack up favourability points among his fans with the expectation of improving sentiments around his embattled party, even as the former's supporters and fans came out in full force over what many considered to be a watershed, yet still highly ambiguous, situation pertaining to Najib's inability to escape incarceration (see Figure 1).

## COMPARING THE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE OF NAJIB AND ANWAR

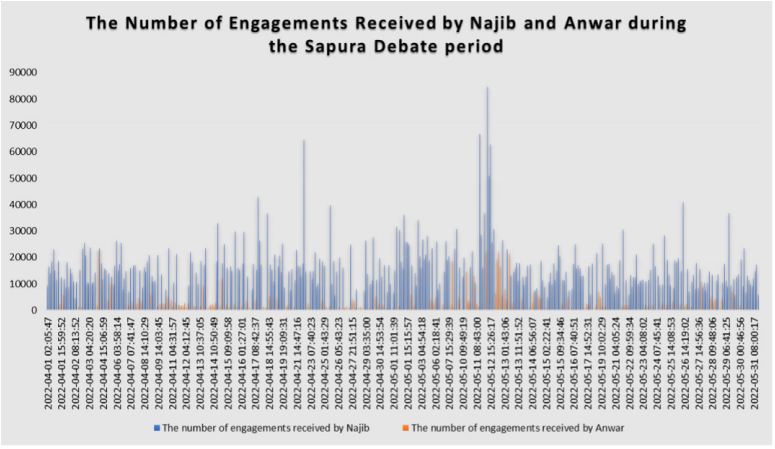
Dramatic politics and the degree of parasocial engagements that the political subjects have with their social media followers contribute to their popular following. Growth in follower count can also be attributed to their performative flair, as well as their regular appearances in the media during periods considered crucial to the maintenance and growth of their political influence. A comparison of the number of followers on Najib's and Anwar's official Facebook pages indicates that Najib has 4.6 million followers versus Anwar's 2 million followers. Najib's posts enjoy around 19,264 daily engagements compared to only 3,295 for Anwar. One could attribute this to how the content of Najib's posts is able to appeal to strong emotions (be these positive or negative) to demand immediate responses. This carries even into the number of engagements Najib received versus that received by Anwar during their May 2022 debate, with Najib consistently attracting more engagement. The demographics of their followers are contributory to the quantity and

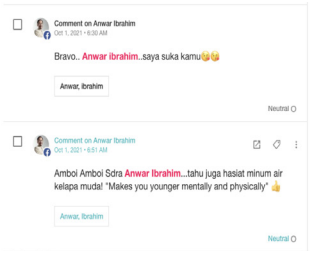
***Figure 1: A graph showing how the number of times "Najib Razak" is mentioned from 1 October 2021 to 16 September 2022. The spikes demonstrated in the graph pertaining to postings around Najib point to events that are "thrilling", such as the outcome of the rulings around his court case and the debate with Anwar Ibrahim.***

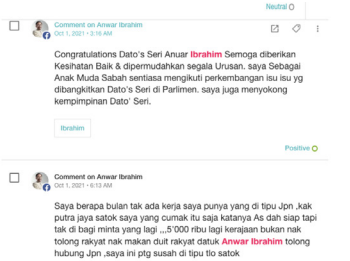



types of engagement each of these two politicians receives. Anwar's followers are made up of those who present the persona of being "critical", with some pretensions to learning; as well as those identifying as youths who are tired of the politics represented by UMNO and Barisan Nasional. Figure 2 illustrates in greater depth, the engagement of both Najib and Anwar's followers in their May 2022 debate. Najib's followers are described in the Methodology section above.

***Figure 2: Engagements received by Najib's Official Facebook page shows how often fans engage with him through likes, shares and comments. Spikes often occur when he makes a funny comment or attacks a political opponent. He received most engagements when fans expressed solidarity after failing to appeal his sentence. Through the colour-coding of the spikes, one gets the impression that Anwar's parasocial engagement lags that of Najib, putting aside the quality of engagement. That said, comments on Anwar's social media are not necessarily more intellectually engaging than the types received by Najib (see the screen-capture of a selection of Facebook comments from Anwar's page). Therefore, it is just as important to consider what these fans are using social media for when it comes to connecting with celebrities, political or otherwise.***



Najib, more so than Anwar, is highly active when it comes to tracking how others were engaging with him on social media, suggesting that he is savvier about optimizing his social media presence, which then translates to a high volume of audience-engagement actions such as commenting, reacting, and even sharing the content of others (see Figure 4). Anwar's seeming indifference (or ignorance) to such matters may account for the relatively lower levels of engagement around his social media posts, in addition to the formality of his online persona that makes him appear less personable and accessible. For Anwar, social media is merely an additional outlet for communicating his ideas and political inclinations, beyond what he is already doing through public appearances, interviews and writings. Although his Facebook posts show him engaging in visits to various constituencies and participating in various public events, he maintained a formal demeanour throughout, with few posts capturing him in more informal and light-hearted settings. He is less interested in the sort of fan-servicing that Najib engages in. In contrast, Najib portrays himself more informally and has no qualms about presenting himself as a joker whose posts need not be taken seriously. Of the two, Najib cares less about creating a clear distinction between his private persona (even if that "private" persona has been dressed up for the media) and his political profile. Najib is more adept at drawing attention from across ideological and class divide by making use of the affordances of platform amplification to gain more followers while providing fan service to existing ones. This translates into the format of their Facebook posts such as links, images, and videos (see Figure 3), which also correlates with the degree of meme-ability.

In contrast to the almost unrelenting earnestness of Anwar, Najib has an image that allows him to appear both august yet personally relatable since he tends to post about mundane affairs of the personal-day-to-day that gives the impression of him being both "approachable" and "down-to-earth", a practice he continues even while in jail. At the time of writing, Najib goes about his business as usual from jail, apparently unperturbed by his failure to obtain a pardon from the king. Between the start of his incarceration and 13 October 2022, he made seventy posts, with each post receiving an average of 28,051 engagements (see Figure 3). There

***Figure 3: A graph representing the engagements in Najib's Facebook page from 1 July to 13 October 2022. The number of engagements received by him is similar, whether before or during his incarceration.***

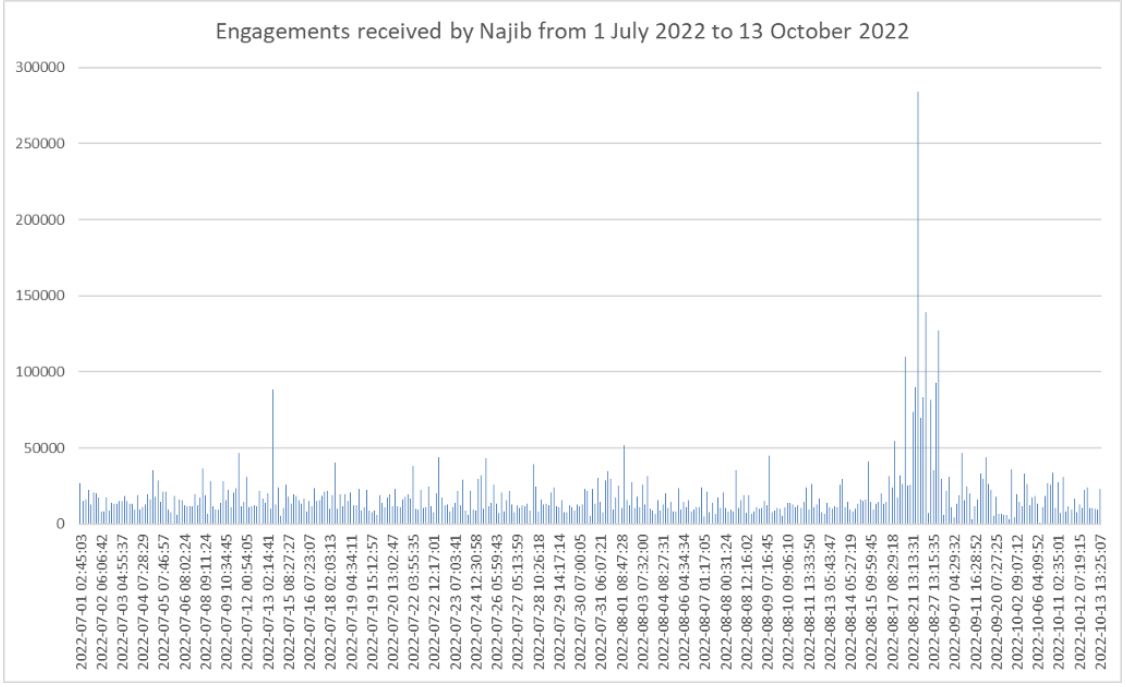
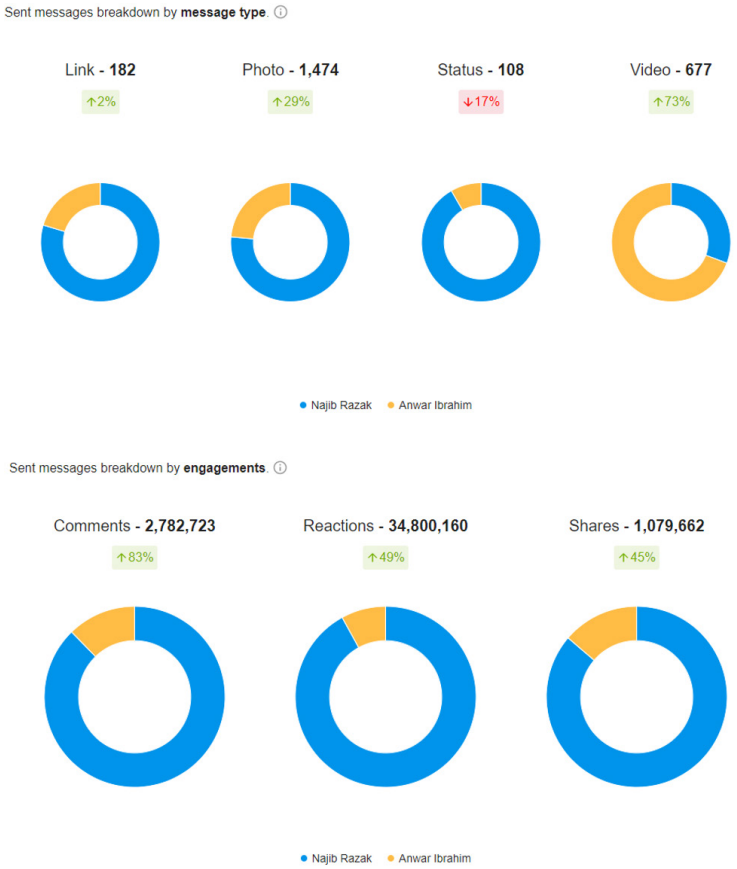


***Figure 4: Breakdown in type of content and engagement for Najib Razak's and Anwar's Facebook posts.***




has been no change in his tone and style as he does his "campaigning" on behalf of Barisan Nasional considering the upcoming 15th General Elections.

Najib's cultivation of his approachability and seeming gratefulness for the support he has received is not too different from the approach taken by social media influencers to maintain connections with their fans and parasocial networks through a series of low-intensity but regular doses

of formulaic yet "personalized" communication. Such communication feeds into creating positive biases towards these influencers by allowing them to control the narratives around themselves, and retains their fans' continuing attraction towards, and support of, them, thereby making such fans less likely to believe in negative publicity about the influencers. Such is also the case with Najib, as his fans were sufficiently motivated to take on social media to protest his innocence without having more access to information about the case above and beyond other regular members of the public. See Figures 5 to 7.

Aside from the posts by these two politicians, there is also fan-produced content. There are Facebook pages dedicated to producing memes about Najib, which could explain the high quantity of photo-based content about him. Moreover, the frequency with which Najib posts on his Facebook account also makes him the most frequent poster of the two. Anwar, elder than Najib, having branded himself as a serious and intellectual, focuses on sharing links to texts and videos that either represent the activities he had been involved in or his speeches. He likes to reference international thinkers in his speeches, and participate in interviews with international news organizations, more so than Najib Razak who prefers to bank on his domestic traction. Of the two, Anwar's social content is less meme-able and less conducive to immediate fan-content responses. This means that the circulation of his content is more limited compared to that by, and about, Najib. As many active "political fans" on social media are often there for "thrilling" rather than "mundane" politics, the number of times "Najib Razak" is mentioned on social media continuously hits thousands on a weekly basis (see Figure 1). His "jabs" at opposition politicians (see Figure 10 below), jokes about his daily life, and political "hot-takes" serve as source material for the creation of memes. As if anticipating fan demand, Najib would artfully play out a "thrilling drama", such as through his debate with Anwar, resulting in 18,000 mentions of him. Another thrilling court drama was played out in August 2022, with 85,000 mentions by the time the final verdict was released. The excitement at the communal sharing of emotions around these events feeds into themselves while inciting further responses, leading to heavy spikes.

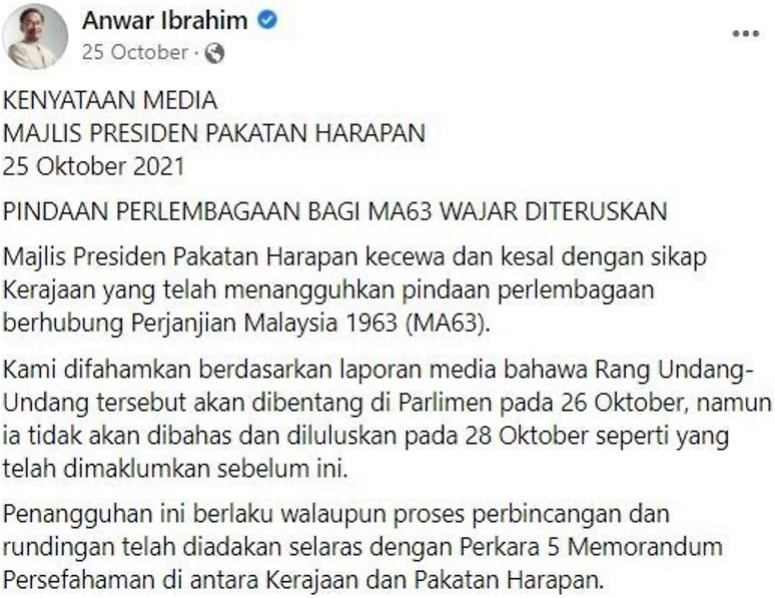
***Figure 5: The Facebook postings shown here, posted after the incarceration of Najib, are just some examples of Najib's fans who became his "justice warriors". The number of engagements of each of such posts speaks to the unabating relevance of Najib Razak to a significant group of people.***

In sum, celebrity politicians with high public visibility share similar attributes with other celebrity influencers, in that they have followers who are curious about their private lives, want to see amusing/heart-warming/salacious posts about or from them, and might even create content that is inspired by, or dedicated to, these celebrities. Often,

***Figure 6: A screenshot of Najib's post that translates to "Switch off the TV. Good night". The post was made in reference to Manchester United FC going down a few goals to rivals Liverpool FC on 25 October 2021. Football is a popular Malaysian pastime, and Najib demonstrates his relatability to the* rakyat *by posting about a frustration that is also commonly experienced by football fans. The post is candid and funny, which explains the over 93,000 engagements despite having only contained four words.***

the media representations of these celebrities are more real to their followers than the reality ascribed to them; the followers could provide the background rationale to stories associated with such celebrities. Therefore, it is not necessarily a contradiction for fans to appear tolerant of amoral behaviours or actions from their celebrity idols, even as the same fans may not necessarily be more accepting of such behaviours or actions from themselves and their social circles, because the halo of a celebrity allows for exceptions to the constraints of normative morality. After all, the celebrity influencer's real skill is their ability to connect to the personal stories, or the deep stories, of their target demographics (Ong and Cabañes 2018).

***Figure 7: A screenshot of Anwar's post on 25 October 2021, the same day as Najib's football post, about the actions taken by him with regards to the Malaysian Agreement of 1963 (MA63). His tone, like the majority of his posts, is formal, serious, and intellectual. He also favours using jargons and discussing the technical aspects about public policy.***




## THE ALLURE OF IMAGE AND INFLUENCE IN POLITICS

There is usually visible, and often repetitive, fan activity around the media personality (that we call the allure of the aura) for these personalities to qualify as a media celebrity or influencer. Merely having a high follower count (of one's social media account) is insufficient reason since one could easily "purchase" followers, or implant bots and fake accounts, while "genuine" followers might be more interested in the positions

of power occupied by the politicians than they are with the actual politicians, which means that the followers are not necessarily fans of the personalities themselves (Lee 2017).

Celebrity politicians are successful media products when preferred fans (such as the type of fans capable of adding value to the media product's reach) outnumber undesirable fans (anti-fans and negatively disruptive trolls) whereby their participation in the fandom of the politician is viewed as having negative consequences, and is highly disruptive, to the cultivated image of the celebrity. The circle of influence is sustained by the continuous consumption and production of collateral content by the fans. The multimodal affordances of Web 2.0 that allow cross-platform conversations and the production of narrative spinoffs add fodder to the continued attention upon the object of fandom. The "domestication" of the political fan, in terms of "taming" the fan, is crucial in populist politics beholden to public sentiment.

Najib Razak has been an example of a political celebrity who has developed a successful media persona amid public scrutiny surrounding his high-profile trial because of his involvement with the 1MDB scandal. As was also shown in Figures 3 and 5, negative news around his involvement had no effect whatsoever on the fiction that has been constructed by his fanbase. In fact, this is all but forgotten even by his own party which used him as a draw for support during the by-elections. From the time of the passing of the judgement on his conviction until right before the failure of his appeal, Najib used the opportunity to build, as well as encourage, alternative narratives to be constructed around himself, even spurring distrust in the negative news spun by established news sources. The alternative fictions do not merely produce different interpretations of events related to the media product, but also produce their own affective dimensions and digital spatiality of influence. Broader inconsistencies and "plot-holes" do not matter if these have no impact on a community's belief system that is anchored to these fictions. Therefore, we continue to see the persistence of the Bossku brand even to the point of Najib's incarceration, with active support being marshalled by his party, allies and supporters for this pardon (Hazlin Hassan 2022).

The power of fan fiction is such that fans of Najib have managed to convince themselves of his innocence through the fiction they have constructed for themselves regarding his innocence over the long four years: the drama surrounding his trial, speeches he made in the parliament seemingly on behalf of Malaysians, his trollish interactions with other politicians (or even baiting of members of the public), and his persistent parasocial engagements on social media. Najib is also savvy when it comes to latching on to certain meme-like trends that he then makes his own, such as in the case of the trollish exchanges around the symbol of the children's snack, Super Ring, after a verdict was pronounced on him. The trollish event then transforms into a kind of fan-servicing aimed to create a social media frenzy around this meme so that the more serious conversations on the guilty verdict are drowned out (Sukumaran 2020).

Fandom is such that entire universes of transformative (fan) fiction could be created that take on their own life. Many of the interactions on social media, whether in the form of memic responses or nested textual arguments, are derived from provocative statements aimed at snowballing emotional responses. The interactions between fans, celebrities, and the content binding them also contribute to the kind of cancel culture involved in the suppression of unpopular opinions, or as a form of intentional trolling, to cancel/drown out opposing discourses (James 2021). The circulation of such fictions is dependent on the present social situations, with a form of "intimacy" (the sharing of the intimate self) that came out of a psychological sense of being connected to each other (whether synchronously and asynchronously), and through exposing thoughts usually "filtered out" from physical settings. Fiction building in political fandom provides the "pleasure of distraction" and communal identification that shape (and also polarize) the political discourses most amplified on social media through types of affirmative and transformative fandom labour across media platforms.

Many social media interactions are fuelled by anxieties, commiserations, and forms of role-playing that enable one to depart from the realities of the social (Turkle 2011). However, in the case of the demography of the fandom considered, the actuality is also shaped by

an insular belief system operating within the enclave of reified legacies,[4] which is the case with the rural Malay communities (Serina Rahman 2018). Reifications within the insularity of these enclaves further amplify existing positive or negative emotions. Taking advantage of existing enclaves and polarities, Najib repeatedly utilizes the narrative of defending the interests of the "Malay-Muslims" and creates a narrative of how their interests are constantly under threat. On 18 July 2021, Najib racialized the COVID-19 issue by posting a 50-line, 287-word Facebook post in Malay, detailing that COVID-19 had affected Malay-Muslims more seriously than other races. He detailed, without any citation, that more Malay-Muslims were infected, therefore impacting Malay-Muslim government hospitals, increasing exponentially the number of jobs given to Malay-Muslim gravediggers, and contributing to high suicide rates among Malay-Muslims.

Najib emphasized at the end of the post that Malay-Muslims had not *gagal* (failed), but rather the Muhyiddin-led Perikatan Nasional government had failed them, making Muhyiddin and his government the Malay-Muslims' villain in this narrative. Similar posts were made throughout this period, like the one on 6 August 2021. In that post, Najib emphasized that "Malays did not fail. Islam did not fail." Instead, the blame should be placed on the Ministry of Health. The comments left on Najib's 18 July post see his commentators supporting him. A quick search of his past posts shows he openly criticizes other opponents, including Mahathir, and Bersatu leader Muhyiddin Yassin (see Figure 10). Anwar on the other hand, does not do the same on his Facebook page (see Figure 11).

[4] These legacies echo Malay-Muslim exceptionalism, and the exclusion of other races within this exceptional enclave is depicted in the fan discourse shown in Figure 8.

***Figure 8: An excerpt of a September 2022 Facebook post by a Najib fan posted in a Facebook group consisting of his fans. The post is one of the many posts that shares the sentiment of Najib being "betrayed by his own Malay-Muslim people" and that he must persist to rise above and overcome these obstacles.***

KAMU DIZALIMI BANGSAMU SENDIRI

Kamu adalah mangsa kezaliman bangsanya sendiri.
Allah larang manusia menzalimi manusia apatah lagi seagama dan sebangsa namun inilah hakikatnya.
Kepada Allah jualah kita pinta agar mereka yang menzalimi kamu terima balasan.
Jangan jatuh dengan apa yang kamu lihat
Tapi bangkit dari kejatuhan dengan apa yang kamu rasa
Kerana perjuangan haru sebatas penglihatan dalam kesakitan
Hanya kamu lihat ketika kamu buka mata setelah dizalami
Sedangkan dengan rasa bahkan kamu tutup mata sekalipun kamu
Dapat rasakan melihatnya kesakitan dizalami
Ada apa yang dicari kalau hilang atau sembunyi
Jangan mengejar yang sedang berlari maka jangan di tunggu jika aku pergi tidak untuk kembali pertahankan perjuangkan agama bangsa kedaulatan negara
Kini aku menjauh dari dirimu kerana aku tahu, kamu mampu bangkit demi masa depan anak cucu semoga kebangkitan kamu adalah yang nyata dan tidak menyekat diri dihadapku.
Aku yakin saat kau menawarkan diri seluas dan sedalam samudra untuk kami dan anak cucu kami

# CONCLUSION: PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY THROUGH TECHNOLOGIES OF FANDOM

Political philosopher Carl Schmitt (1996) once said that in the twentieth century, there was a mistaken belief that technology (and a technicized environment) would lead to depoliticization, and with that, the attainment of universal peace. However, according to him, since technology is part of culture, and culture is itself bred from nature, then technology is both natural and cultural, but never neutral. He also adds that idealism is pure abstraction, and all forms of normative prescriptions are fictions.

When these are viewed through the perspective of Web 2.0 social media platforms and algorithms, the "normative prescriptions" for political discourse produce fictions that generate actions in participatory democracy. The production of fictions has contributed to the aura around

*Figure 9: (Left) An amateurishly edited picture with the caption that Pakatan Harapan had planted evidence so that Najib would be found guilty for 1MDB. (Right) "Loretta Lynch received RM50 million from Mahathir to bring down Najib through the 1MDB scandal, according to Syed Saddiq". Both images were posted in a Facebook group for Najib's fans. Despite receiving very little engagements, images maintaining Najib's innocence in the 1MDB scandal like these are posted from time to time.*

***Figure 10: The graph measuring the number of times certain words are used by Najib in his posts from 1 October 2021 to 16 September 2022. The graph shows how often he talks about his political opponents; he made the most mentions of Pakatan Harapan. When referencing individual figures, he also made the most mention of Muhyiddin and Mahathir, sometimes calling the former Abah (father) and the latter Atok (grandfather).***

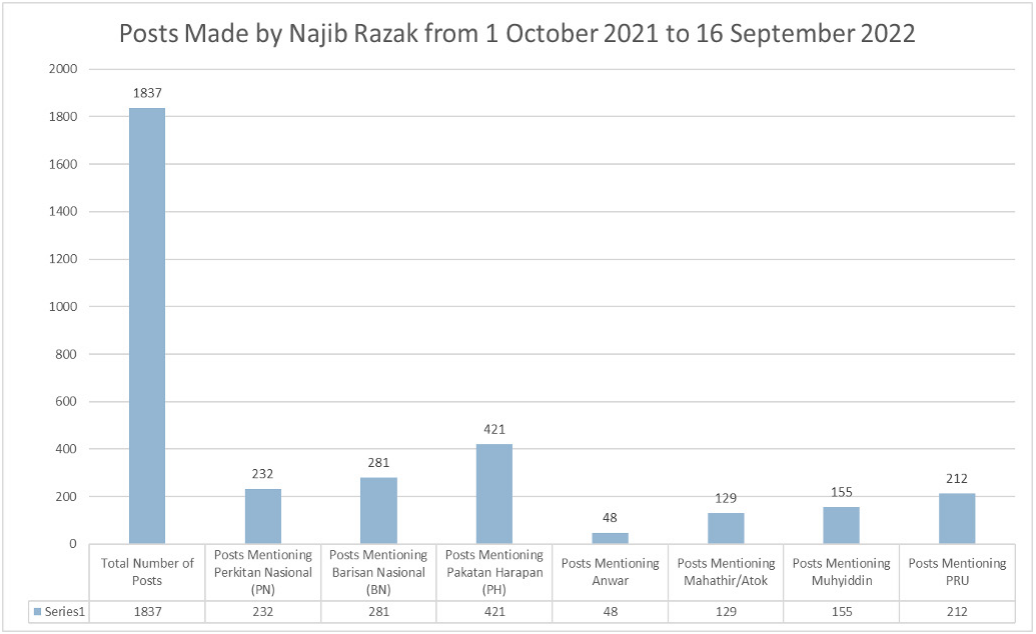
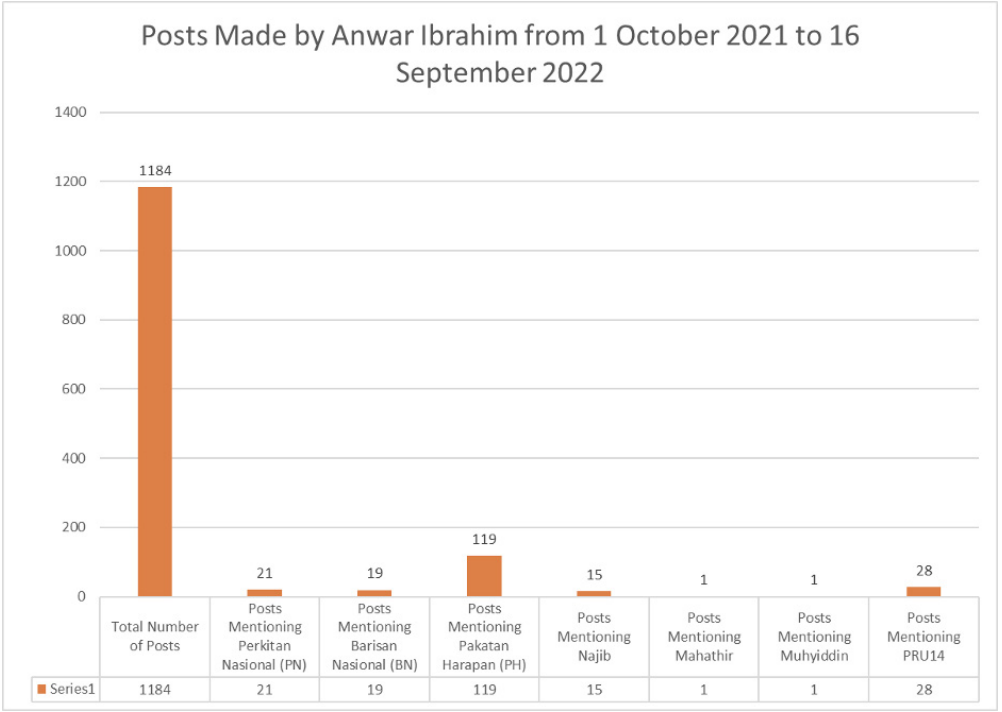


***Figure 11: The graph measuring the number of times certain words are used by Anwar in his posts from 1 October 2021 to 16 September 2022. He made very few mentions of political opponents or figures. Rather, he posted mostly on his own party and general political issues, as seen in Figure 4.***



the celebrity-political influencer by impacting a digitally tethered public's perception of these political figures and producing a sense of being "intimately connected" to them. Fandom becomes a stream of participatory democracy regardless of whether it is transformative or merely a reaffirmation of the status quo.

Participatory democracy in the age of social media requires thinking about politics that is mediated by immediacy and rapid response (Lee 2021). It is also crucial to understand how the political "user", who is the potential voter, consumes and engages with political and socio-cultural information that they have access to, as this brackets an appreciation for non-conventional criticality that appeals to a non-traditional political base less enamoured with, and therefore less attentive to, the usual political rhetoric in "older" legacy media such as the television and radio.

Forms of presentation of the content (and the reach of the form) are as important, if not more so than the content to be conveyed. Finally, the demography of those who access and engage with the reproduction of content around a celebrity politician is important for assessing the informational/fictional world that these communities have constructed for, and around, themselves.

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