

Populism and Rhetoric in Moroccan Political Discourse.

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Abstract

This paper explores obscured areas within contemporary Moroccan political discourse. Specifically, it examines Moroccan politicians' employment of populist discourse in their speeches to convey their perspectives, while also influencing public attitudes and behaviors in order to realize their political aspirations. The paper brings the Moroccan political discourse under the rhetorical microscope by analyzing it through rhetorical strategies lenses. Furthermore, the paper shifts the reaction-based and biased analysis that characterizes most critiques of Moroccan political discourse to dealing with them through the lenses of rhetorical criticism. The study combines Aristotle's and Fairclough's theories of rhetoric to examine former Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane's (2011-2016) and the parliamentary member Rim Chabat's (2022-2026) speeches. The conclusion suggests the necessity of a constant evaluation of the quality of political speech in order to enhance public taste and promote a more rhetoric-based discourse.

Key words: Populism, Rhetoric, Morocco, Political Discourse.

Introduction

In the Moroccan context, politics has shifted from an era marked by the monarchy's manipulation of the political landscape under King Hassan II's reign (Odom 52) to a period in which politics has become a contested terrain where different political actors and parties compete for influence and control. Verbal battles are fought on a daily basis between different political factions and scathing criticism are exchanged between different political actors who, at times appear in religious attire, at other times wear patriotic jackets, sometimes appear in humanistic dress, and occasionally appear in all of these outfits in a single speech, each claiming their defense of the citizen's interests. Each claims representing people's concerns and anxieties. A critical examination of the speeches delivered by political actors –whether in power or opposition- reveals the populist features that characterize their discourse. In other words, Moroccan politicians strategically draw on spiritual, national, and historical capital to bolster their rhetoric, aiming not only to communicate their views but also to influence public attitudes and behaviors. This rhetorical strategy often serves political ambitions without necessarily offering concrete solutions to the socioeconomic issues faced by citizens. Critiques of Moroccan political discourse tend to be reactionary or superficial and, most importantly, remain confined to political verbal battles and not based on objective evaluation, suggesting the lack of critical rhetorical approach to Moroccan political discourse. In light of this issue, this paper aims to examine the pragmatic impact of the Moroccan political discourse employed by two Moroccan politicians: former Prime Minister; Abdelilah Benkirane and the opposition parliamentarian Rim Chabat. By placing Moroccan political discourse produced by the two figures under rhetorical scrutiny, the study seeks to go beyond surface-level reactions and explore the persuasive strategies and ideological underpinnings that shape their political communication. To this end, the paper draws on Aristotle's classical rhetorical appeals – ethos, pathos, and logos to evaluate the extent to which Moroccan politicians construct credibility, stir emotions, and appeal to logic in their speeches. Complementing this with Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study investigates political discourse as text, as discursive practice, and as a sociocultural product, in order to highlight how political language both reflects and reinforces power dynamics within Moroccan society. The paper begins by exploring the relationship between language, politics, and rhetoric followed by an overview of Moroccan political discourse. Then, it presents a rhetorical

analysis of selected speeches by Benkirane and Rim Chabat, before concluding with reflections on the need for a rhetoric-aware political culture.

Language, Politics, and Rhetoric.

Without a shadow of doubt language is an essential tool in the practice of politics. It provides the words, structure, and style that empower political speeches. Through words, whether written or spoken, political ideas are conveyed and debates are conducted. Politics largely relies on language to express its goals and agendas. Politics, at its core, relies on speech as its primary means of expression. Through speech, politicians articulate policies, engage in debates, and move the masses according to their plans (Corcoran 52). Language and politics do not exist in separate spheres; rather, they overlap and belong to the same sphere. In this sense, politics cannot truly exist without the discourse that defines it. Language is the medium, through which political power is exercised, contested, evaluated, and negotiated (53). Language serves as a powerful instrument to shaping public opinion, constructing ideologies and legitimizing certain actions. Moreover, language can bring about instant changes when associated with politics. In Robert Harris's novel *Imperium*, part of his *The Cicero Trilogy*, Cicero states that "politics is history on the wing" suggesting that politics accelerates historical change and causing instant transformations (Harris 47). Political language goes beyond its basic function as a means of communication to become a rhetorical instrument for influencing and guiding people's actions. When endowed with certain strategies and techniques, language turns to a powerful vehicle used by politicians to defend their positions whether they are in power or in opposition. Political life depends on speech and communication. Without language there is no political debates and negotiations. In essence, where there is politics, there is speech, where there is speech, there is politics. Language and politics are overlapped and that language and politics occupy the same space within. The interplay between language and politics, along with the clash of competing political interests and the desire to influence the actions of others give rise to rhetoric and drives its development (Kennedy 1). Language, politics, and rhetoric intricate relationship proposes challenges to the understanding of the connection binding them. In fact, the issue has long been a central concern throughout History. In ancient Greece, philosophers establish a strong connection between language and politics. For example, Aristotle argues that language and politics are inseparable, and that politics cannot function without language. He argues that

humans are distinguished by their ability to speak. In his book *Politics*, Aristotle states that “Man is by nature a political animal, and he alone has speech” (Aristotle 5). The quote demonstrates that humans are the only creatures who are endowed with the ability to speak and therefore to articulate concepts like justice and law. Aristotle contrasts this with other animals, which can only communicate basic emotions such as pleasure, pain, and danger (Aristotle 5).

Interestingly, Isocrates, one of the prominent Greek scholars, argues that we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man whom the power of speech has not helped us to establish. (Isocrates 251). What Isocrates implies here is that speech is fundamental in the foundation of any society and that it is the driving force behind order and human progress.

Unlike Aristotle and Isocrates who emphasize the importance of rhetorical speech in public discourse and civic life though in varying degrees, Plato holds an opposing and yet critically different position toward rhetorical speech. Particularly in his book *Gorgias*, where he critiques political rhetoric by labeling it as a form of flattery and deception designed to manipulate the masses rather than promoting justice (Plato 38). Through the character of Socrates, Plato refuses to consider rhetoric an art, drawing an analogy between rhetoric and cookery: just as cookery is a counterfeit of medicine, rhetoric, in turn, is a counterfeit of justice (Plato 126). Furthermore, Plato underestimated rhetoric and denied its value by labeling it as an inferior form of knowledge, emphasizing its potentially dangerous consequences in politics (Finlayson and Martin 1).

Despite the contrasting perspectives that marked the debate among ancient scholars—particularly regarding the nature of rhetoric—rhetoric nevertheless represents a powerful framework where the fusion of language and politics produces strong political discourse that requires analysis and consideration through the lens of rhetoric itself.

Rhetorical Political Analysis

Rhetoric has traditionally been understood as a means of persuasion. It has been considered as the art of influencing an audience especially through speech. Despite the multiple views and the controversial atmosphere marked the debate over rhetoric among ancient scholars, the classic view of rhetoric was limited to its nature and function. In other words, the discussion often revolved around whether rhetoric was useful or harmful and deceptive. The debates, however, did not consider the possibility of developing rhetoric into an analytical tool for studying political discourse except for Aristotle whose work *On Rhetoric* suggests that

rhetoric can be both productive and analytical (Kennedy 17). Modern approaches, however, go beyond the classical view to see rhetoric as a methodological tool for the analysis of political discourse. In other words, the modern view of rhetoric regards rhetoric as a tool to study and analyze political speech. It is about the employment of concepts from rhetoric scholarship to the analysis of political language. This new conception of rhetoric is highly backed by Norman Fairclough who integrated critical discourse analysis (CDA) into the study of rhetoric. In contrast to its classical sense, Fairclough emphasizes the importance of using rhetoric as a methodological framework to examine and explore the rhetorical strategies employed to construct social reality and shape power relations. In other words, Fairclough's main concern is to go beyond what is said and to examining how it is said and what it does whether it fosters existing power relations and structures or challenges them. In this regard, Fairclough argues that "Discourse is a form of social practice... discourse not only reflects social processes and structures but is also involved in constructing them" (Fairclough 23). Fairclough's view suggests a dual role for rhetoric: both as a means of persuasion and as a tool for critical analysis. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding Moroccan political discourse.

Overview of Moroccan Political Discourse.

Politics in Morocco has witnessed significant transformation, especially with the ascending of King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999. The new king hitherto has clearly redefines Morocco at all levels. He established the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in 2004 to investigate human rights violations and promote national reconciliation. This initiative marked a critical shift in Moroccan politics and has contributed to the advancement of Morocco's democratization process. The king's decision marked the beginning of a new era where freedom of speech becomes a significant aspect of modern Morocco provided that it does not violate the red lines designed by the palace. The new phase characterized by greater openness toward different political factions, allowing more political voices to appear. The new era enabled long marginalized and always muffled and excluded political voices to take part for the first time in Moroccan political landscape. Moroccan politicians however remained cautious and lacked enough audacity to address critical and sensitive issues. Their political discourse had been elitist and characterized by wooden language. With The rise of the Justice and Development Party (known in Morocco as the PJD) at the beginning of the 21st century, the features of a new political landscape have begun to appear on the horizon, and a new image of political discourse in Morocco has started to take shape. The initial

emergence of the Islamist-oriented party, the PJD, in opposition accelerated the development of Moroccan political discourse by challenging the former discourse, which was characterized by wooden language and cautious wording aimed at avoiding the red lines set by the palace.

In addition to the new dynamics created by PJD, the expansion of mass media and the emergence of social media influencers with large followings have helped shift the Moroccan political discourse from a stagnant environment dominated by political cautious discourse to a more dynamic one, where various political actors, from politician to ordinary citizens, express their opinions on various issues and interact with political decisions. This new political climate enabled people from all walks of life to engage in debates on governance, social justice, and economic policies. In this new context, political debates and rhetorical competition for power have become more pronounced. In this regard, a number of social media platforms have made political discourse their central focus. Political mudslinging has become a prominent feature on these platforms and on YouTube channels, which their owners have turned into tools for political confrontation. For example, *Tahadi* (Challenge) is a YouTube channel created by Hicham Jirando, who uses highly critical discourse to attack, according to him, symbols of corruption in Morocco.

Abdullah Benkirane.

No wonder that the former Prime Minister of Morocco (2011–2015), Abdullah Benkirane, has obviously redefined Moroccan political speech. For a considerable period, political speech was dominated by elite whose political speech was limited and cautious as previously noted. Benkirane was among the first to challenge this norm and liberated Moroccan political speech from the control of elite circles. To put it differently, Benkirane could be considered as the first politician who stirred the stagnant waters of Moroccan political discourse. His speeches, initially as a parliament member representing the opposition party PJD and later as the prime minister of the Moroccan government, became widely recognized, frequently discussed by Moroccans across various settings, at dinner tables, cafés, and taxis, on television programs, and street debates. An examination of his speeches, however, raises important questions about his rhetorical strategies. From a rhetorical perspective, Benkirane's discourse reveals a strong reliance on emotional appeal (pathos) positioning his speeches within the framework of populist discourse. In fact, Benkirane consistently draws upon spiritual and religious capital to influence his audience without providing real solutions to people's concerns. His fiery speeches in parliament especially during his party's time in opposition, proves the lack of

other rhetorical strategies (ethos) and (logos) while pathos represents a significant element in Benkirane's speeches. In one of his speeches in parliament in 2001, Benkirane quoted Omar Ibn Al-Khattab: "Gargle or don't gargle, you shall taste neither butter nor honey."

Benkirane's use of Omar Ibn Al-Khattab's words clearly demonstrates his reliance on emotional appeal (pathos) to strengthen his arguments and advance his party's agenda by infusing his speech with a religious tone.

Although the settings and occasions on which Benkirane delivers his speeches may vary, his populist style remains consistent. In one of his notable interviews, hosted by the France 24h channel, Benkirane emphasizes the existence of "ghosts" and "crocodiles". These metaphorical figures, Benkirane claims work hard to impede reforms and act against the interests of citizens. He even asserts that these political actors exist in all countries. When asked by the host to identify who he considers the "ghosts" and "crocodiles" in Morocco; Benkirane responds that if he knew their names, he would not refer to them as ghosts and crocodiles. This analogy demonstrates Benkirane's use of the dichotomy "we" as presenters of the people and "them" the "ghosts" and "crocodiles" presenting the corrupt elite. This analogy clearly reflects a core characteristic of Benkirane's populist discourse.

Rim Chabat

Female voices have rarely found space within Moroccan political discourse, which has long been dominated not only by political elites but also by a predominantly masculine perspective. Rim Chabat, however, challenges this norm and has emerged as a prominent figure in Moroccan politics. Representing the Front of Democratic Forces (FFD), she was elected as a member of parliament for the 2021–2026 term, representing the Fez–Meknes region. She has been an active participant in legislative discussions, notably addressing issues such as the rising cost of living and the government's failure to improve the quality of life for Moroccan citizens.

Chabat employs a populist style effectively in her speeches, making them both powerful and emotionally resonant. Her parliamentary interventions have drawn significant public attention. Her speeches have been widely shared across various platforms. Extracts from her interventions have circulated extensively on social media, helping establish her as a prominent and recognizable figure within the Moroccan political opposition. Her use of *pathos* is particularly notable, as she appeals to the emotions of the masses, while also deploying a clear

dichotomy between the struggling poor and the corrupt elite. As Fairclough notes, discourse is not only a form of communication but a “social practice” that shapes and reflects power relations (Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* 87).

The following extracts are taken from speeches delivered by Rim Chabat during parliamentary discussions:

"All what you care about is what you gain from Moroccan citizens' pockets. You don't care about the increase of prices or the high cost of living... These are your golden days, you are showing off on our backs like riders in Tbourida, you've been showered with privilege" (Chabat).

This statement, addressed to Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, exemplifies populist discourse through its strong *us vs. them* framing. The repeated use of “you” constructs a binary opposition between the people and the ruling elite, a hallmark of populist rhetoric (Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis* 40).

In another speech, Chabat further criticizes the government:

“The only successful foreign trade in your term is exporting young people.”
“You have pushed the whole nation to beg.”
“You only care about your self-interests” (Chabat).

These statements reflect key features of populist discourse—simplification, emotional appeal, and overgeneralization—while lacking statistical or empirical grounding. Furthermore, her sarcasm enhances the emotional impact, as in the statement:

“The only ones you haven't taxed yet are the dead” (Chabat).

Here, Chabat draws on cultural references and irony to depict the ruling elite as morally bankrupt and insatiably greedy. Her speech illustrates how language is used to challenge dominant power structures, making it an ideological battleground (Fairclough 87).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has explored the intricate relationship between language, politics, and rhetoric, as well as the multiple views offered by ancient scholars on rhetoric. The article demonstrated that rhetoric is not merely a tool used by rhetoricians to persuade the audience; rather, it is a critical method for analyzing political discourse. In particular, the article shed light on the evolution of Moroccan political discourse from a controlled and cautious language under King Hassan II to a more open and inclusive form of expression. This shift created space for the emergence of political voices like Benkirane, who used a distinctive rhetoric that is highly charged and embedded in a populist style. Similarly, Rim Chabat's political speech was brought under scrutiny and showed that her interventions are marked by confrontational and emotionally charged populist rhetoric. The analysis of both figures demonstrated a heavy reliance on pathos, with relatively limited use of ethos and logos, and highlighted the strong presence of populist style in Moroccan political expression suggesting the need for continuous evaluation of the quality of political speech in order to enhance public taste and promote a more rhetoric-based discourse.

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