



## Presidential Rhetoric Amid COVID-19 Pandemic: The Unpacking of Namibia 2021 State of the Nation Address (SONA) Speech

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### Abstract

One of the significant speeches the Namibian presidency delivers is the State of the Nation Address (SONA). It is a constitutional obligation for the President to address the nation during the consideration of the national budget to review past policies and programmes and articulate the government's priorities for the next financial year. Speechmaking is one of the essential roles of presidents in announcing their policies and persuading the nation. This article is a textual analysis of the 2021 SONA speech delivered by President Hage Geingob during the crisis time of COVID-19. Using a qualitative approach, the research analyses the most common rhetorical devices that Geingob used to achieve social change during this crisis. The analysis grounds on charismatic leadership theory, by focusing on three structural components, namely leader, followers, and context, as influenced by the three Aristotelian rhetorical appeals of pathos, ethos, and logos. The speech demonstrates Geingob's presidency's ongoing response to the COVID-19 crisis. The president advanced the values of democracy, united the Namibian people, and used valence rhetoric that offers the nation a sense of security and stability as they face the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *Rhetoric, Presidency, State of the Nation Address, Charismatic leadership, COVID-19, Crisis*

### Introduction and Background

The State of the Nation Address (SONA) is a constitutionally mandated speech in Namibia, serving as a key platform for the president to demonstrate government accountability and suggest appropriate legislative responses to crises such as COVID-19. On April 15, 2021, during the second year of his second term of office, President Hage Geingob, Namibia's third democratically elected leader, delivered a pivotal 24-page SONA amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. This address encompassed diverse topics, from effective governance and economic development to international relations and the promotion of national unity.

Leaders need to illuminate, rationalise, and provide potential solutions during crises, while also offering solace to a potentially distressed nation. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between language and politics clarifies the critical role rhetoric plays in political discourse. It

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is also by using language that politicians legitimise their positions and justify their actions. This article conducts a rhetorical analysis of Geingob's 2021 SONA, in light of the significance of words in a crisis and the crucial role the language of the leader plays in the political realm (Jamieson & Campbell, 2017). Specifically, the article aims to attain the following objectives:

- explore the functions and roles of the SONA's speech in light of the national crisis of COVID-19.
- analyse how President Hage Geingob's leadership is handled the crisis based on his rhetorical performances.

### **Research Methodology**

This article is a textual analysis of President Hage Geingob's 2021 SONA speech, delivered amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Utilising a qualitative approach, the research explores the rhetorical devices employed by Geingob to effect social change during the crisis. This article investigates the elements of charismatic leadership as well as Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals: pathos, ethos, and logos. Specifically, the research examines how Geingob's use of charismatic theory and Aristotelian appeals influenced his choice of words during the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The notion that discourse acts as action and that linguistic structures both create and perpetuate ideologies is central to this research. This article examines the discourse structures employed by a politician in his communication as part of his leadership. The content of President Geingob's 2021 SONA is analysed through a qualitative method, guided by the three structural components of Weber's (1969) charismatic leadership theory: leader, followers, and context. Additionally, charismatic leadership theory is informed by the three Aristotelian rhetorical appeals of pathos, ethos, and logos. Therefore, the President's discourse is analysed with the theory of Aristotelian (2007) rhetorical proofs.

### ***Charismatic Leadership Theory***

The concept of "charisma", defined as a "gift of grace," has its theoretical roots in the work of Weber (1978). Weber originally drew upon religious contexts to formulate his theory of charisma, which he later applied to political and social systems. Weber (1978) further defines charisma as a distinct personality trait that renders an individual supernatural, superhuman, or at least extraordinary. Such attributes are deemed to be extraordinary and are not found in the average person; rather, they elevate an individual to the status of a 'leader'. In essence, charismatic leaders are exceptional orators; they are not just articulators but also able to reach their people on an emotional level. They have the ability to inspire their followers with a compelling or fascinating vision through their words.

The ability of political leaders to successfully address their followers in times of global crises is one of the central issues in this article. Managing a crisis puts a leader's communication skills, character, and other qualities to the test. Therefore, a great need for charismatic rhetoric, which is enthusiastic (Montiel et al., 2021). It is for this reason that charismatic heroes and prophets are seen as historically revolutionary forces. Weber (1947) further asserts that charismatic leadership is self-ordained and self-styled, and emerges in times of crisis when the organisation's essential ideals, institutions, and legitimacy are called into doubt. Genuine charisma is further linked to the 'fresh' concept. Charismatic leaders have a significant and extraordinary impact on their followers. These effects include commanding followers' loyalty and devotion to the leader, as well as inspiring them to accept and carry out



the leader's will without hesitation, question, or regard for their own self-interest. Therefore, charisma is reserved for leaders who can inspire others to greatness. Such leaders frequently defy the established order and achieve major social reforms.

### ***Aristotle's Theory of Rhetoric***

According to Aristotle (2007), rhetoric is the faculty of observing, in any given case, the available means of persuasion. Aristotle identifies three rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos relies on the credibility, character, and reputation of the speaker to foster persuasion. Pathos aims to appeal to the emotions of the audience, facilitating a connection and eliciting specific emotional responses. Logos focuses on logical reasoning, relying on evidence and rational discourse to persuade. Collectively, these appeals contribute to effective persuasion by harmoniously combining credibility, emotional appeal, and logical reasoning.

It is customary for a president, as the head of the government, to adopt particular styles of leadership. In executing their roles, presidents often employ various rhetorical strategies tailored to diverse audiences. The objective of analysing presidential rhetoric is to elucidate not only the president's normative judgements about what citizens should or should not do but also to delineate the political policies that are prioritised to meet public expectations. Presidents frequently use the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos as part of their political weapons.

The field of presidential rhetoric studies examines and analyses the communication strategies and techniques employed by presidents in their public addresses and speeches. "A president defines social and political reality and the context by which citizens come to understand this reality" (Zarefsky, 2004, p. 611). The SONA serves as a significant genre within presidential rhetoric. According to Article 32 (2) of the Namibian Constitution, the president is obliged to address the Parliament during the consideration of the National Budget, reporting on the state of the nation, future government policies, and accomplishments of the past year, while also being available to answer questions. Therefore, this article analyses President Geingob's 2021 SONA, by examining the use of Aristotelian rhetorical appeals in his articulation of policies and visions.

### **Literature Review**

Various researchers have examined crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Jong (2021) introduced a tool to assess crisis communication, focusing on six key areas: sense-making, leadership, and expert voices. With this, Jong further considered factors like culture, politics, and media context. Additionally, as the COVID-19 pandemic serves an example (Chiriboga et al., 2020), national leaders are accountable for effectively communicating with the general public during times of international crises. The manner in which these leaders engage with their followers significantly influences the public's perception of pressing issues, enhances trust in governmental capacity, and fosters behavioural adjustments in accordance with pivotal policy initiatives (Spector, 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020).

In handling the COVID-19 crisis, Namibia's President Hage Geingob carefully used his rhetoric during key speeches, such as the SONA, to articulate government policies and engage with the public. This implies that political utterances constitute an integral component of the comprehensive national response to the pandemic. Rhetoric serves not only as a persuasive tool but also as a means to sustain a favourable public image (Rottinghaus, 2006;



Andrews, 2011). It allows leaders to gain their audience's trust through emotional appeal (pathos), ethical credibility (ethos), and logical reasoning (logos) (Aristotle, 2007). While the discipline of presidential rhetoric is studied, research on crisis rhetoric remains limited (Kiewe, 1994). Particularly in the Namibian context, this gap necessitates further study to understand persuasion's role in social changes and influences. This article aims to enrich the existing literature on presidential rhetoric.

Furthermore, sociocultural contexts shape the dynamic relationship between leaders and followers that is charismatic leadership (Beyer, 1999a). While crises are said to foster charisma (Pillai & Meindl; 1998 Weber, 1946), empirical evidence is lacking. The study contributes to this gap by analysing President Geingob's SONA during the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, rhetoric is identified as a critical component of charisma (Antonakis, 2017) and is especially crucial during crises. It can align the leader's vision with the followers' values and beliefs, enhancing attributes like courage and competence. Therefore, this article focuses on how Geingob's rhetorical use during the COVID-19 crisis sought to connect with and inspire his followers.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### ***The State of the Nation Address (SONA)***

While SONA is often perceived as a stock-taking exercise and a celebratory presentation, it is also widely regarded as an agenda-setting activity and a prioritising address, as it specifies areas in which the government has made a promise to act immediately. The event is frequently broadcast live across the country on radio and television networks. It is also broadcast on the internet through streaming as part of the advancement of the modern presidency.

The effective use of rhetoric is considered a fundamental component of charismatic leaders' visionary conduct (Emrich et al., 2001). As a result, this paper conceptually broadens the rhetorical content of charismatic discourse in times of the COVID-19 crisis in order to include a greater number of structures that have been proposed to underpin charismatic leadership. In addition, the three appeals of Aristotle's rhetoric are employed to analyse Geingob's SONA 2021 speech.

### **Crisis Rhetorical Constructs**

In times of crisis, political leadership is crucial for guiding the nation through uncertainty and disruption (Ansell et al., 2014). Particularly, charismatic leaders can alleviate public anxieties by presenting innovative solutions and visions for the future (Pillai, 1996; Tucker, 1968). In his SONA, President Geingob of Namibia exemplifies such leadership. By opening the speech with the theme of "effective government", he established his constitutional obligation and duty to deliver the speech under Article 32(2), thereby setting the tone and validating his presidency.

Geingob emphasised the importance of peace for development, employing parallelism to stress the symbiotic relationship between the two. His ethos is in line with Aristotle's theory that a speaker's credibility is essential for persuasion (Demirdogen, 2010), which strengthens his persuasive authority. The speech also highlights Namibia's constitutional democracy and governance structures, reinforcing Geingob's authority and the nation's democratic values.

Finally, drawing upon rhetorical devices such as historical allusions and value-driven narratives (Davis & Gardner, 2012), Geingob's speech effectively unites the public around



democratic principles. Therefore, it serves as an example of how charismatic leadership can guide a nation through a crisis, using rhetoric to foster trust and consensus.

### **Namibia's Socio-Economic Development and the COVID-19**

In times of crisis, charisma is evident through both words and deeds. President Geingob exemplified this during the COVID-19 pandemic. Framing the issue under “economic advancement” didn't just pinpoint problems but inspired hope. Geingob asserted that the government has deployed an 8.1 billion Namibian dollar stimulus programme and a 500 million Namibian dollar SME intervention. This action sent a unifying message that government and business are in this together. This was more than a financial move; it was a masterful rhetorical play that rallied a nation, showcasing how charismatic leadership seamlessly blends rhetoric and action.

Therefore, Geingob evidently used crisis rhetoric to legitimise the situation, inform followers, and urge collective action, in line with theories that leaders become more charismatic in crises (Bligh et al., 2009; Merolla et al., 2007). He further cited the ‘Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP) II’ as a cornerstone for economic recovery, with built-in mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. In addition to crisis rhetoric, Geingob also incorporated discourse on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), acknowledging its significance in the new information era and its role in shaping political communication (Sell et al., 2016). Overall, the president's rhetoric serves as a multi-faceted tool to guide Namibia through both immediate challenges and long-term transformation.

### **COVID-19 pandemic in Namibia**

President Geingob demonstrated ideal crisis leadership following the country's first COVID-19 cases on 13 March 2020 (Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2020). Acting swiftly in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, the government exhibited transparency and encouraged public compliance (Kaunatjike, 2020). Geingob conveyed satisfaction with the majority of Namibians for adhering to the Rule of Law. According to Wooten and James (2008), effective crisis management requires leaders to communicate persuasively and empathically. Geingob met these criteria, acknowledging the global challenges posed by the pandemic while also maintaining a sense of hope and community responsibility. Geingob asserted that:

*The past 13 months have not been easy. Life and work have been upended and thrown into a state of flux, with many families plunged into financial vulnerability and distress and many more left at a loss, grieving the sudden departure of loved ones (Geingob, 2021, p. 9).*

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely tested global and national resilience, affecting health, social, and economic sectors. It has compromised individual and state security and raised challenges for governments in managing rapid and effective responses. Adapting to the changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the government implemented the social vaccination strategy, which included social restriction regulations and lockdown in reaction to the crisis (Valerisha & Putra, 2020). Namibia declared a state of emergency and President Geingob's SONA outlined the government's COVID-19 response. He asserted that joint efforts had averted a larger crisis, citing statistics of 46,051 confirmed cases, with 44,162 recoveries and 592 deaths. Geingob employed both logical and emotional appeals, offering get-well wishes to affected citizens. He also mentioned Namibia's



participation in the COVAX scheme and the anticipated delivery of 24,000 AstraZeneca vaccine doses, fostering hope among Namibians despite ongoing challenges.

Geingob finally criticised the developed world's self-focus during the COVID-19 crisis, while acknowledging vaccine donations from China and India. He encouraged voluntary vaccination for Namibians and committed 8.08 billion Namibian dollars to healthcare in the 2021/22 budget. Geingob also raised concerns about a significant increase in COVID-19 cases among students, teachers, and healthcare workers, pledging collaborative efforts between the Ministries of Health and Education to address the issue. His use of statistics and fiscal commitments enhances his rhetorical effectiveness, a characteristic deemed crucial for visionary leadership (Emrich et al., 2001).

### **Social Progression, Infrastructure Development, International Relations and Cooperation**

President Geingob outlined government priorities, achievements, and challenges for the upcoming year. The topics covered included social advancement, infrastructure, international relations, and cooperation. The COVID-19's impact on social issues and progress was highlighted. Geingob underlined the role of language in politics for influencing public opinion and building relationships. Geingob asserted that:

*We have not lost sight of the reality of countless Namibians who have lost their incomes and who are struggling on a daily basis to put a meal on the table. The interventions of the Harambee Prosperity Plan I, including the increase in the Old Age Social Grant by 100 percent between 2016-2017; the rolling-out of Food banks, and the drought relief programme to all 14 regions, helped to avert starvation for many Namibian families at risk (Geingob, 2021, p. 11).*

The metaphor "lost sight" underlines that the government has acknowledged the impoverished majority in Namibia, contrary to neglect. In times of crisis, the world requires charismatic leaders' adept at exceptional language use. This mitigates fears by outlining hopeful future plans, breaking stagnation, and fostering new societal structures (Tortola & Pansardi, 2019). During crises, instilling confidence and security represents charismatic leadership. Amid intense pressure, leaders exhibit compassion and statesmanship, demonstrating steadfast dedication.

Geingob also employed statistics to validate his claims, using logic (logos) for persuasion. Geingob asserted that:

*In the 2020/21 Financial Year, the Government spent 6 billion Namibian Dollars on social grants, which include the Old Age Social Grant (N\$3 billion), Food Bank (N\$70 million), Disability (N\$546 million), Veterans (N\$766 million), Marginalised (N\$45 million), Funeral Benefit (N\$45 million), Orphans and Vulnerable Children (N\$1,05 billion), and the School Feeding Programme (N\$73 million), among others (Geingob, 2021, p. 12).*

Considering that infrastructure fuels economic growth and social progress, enhancing investments and global competitiveness, Geingob's HPPII aims to boost jobs through extensive infrastructure. Geingob demonstrated awareness of national initiatives, addressing energy challenges like load shedding. Electrification stands at 45% nationwide, 71% urban, and 19% rural (Geingob, 2021, p. 17). The President also highlighted advancements in water,



road, rail, and educational infrastructure. The significance of water was emphasised, with appreciation for plentiful rainfall in the South, Central, and North during the rainy season. Namibia's top-quality roads were praised and acknowledged as superior on the continent by the World Economic Forum (2021).

The government is enhancing the railway network to double freight capacity between Kranzberg, Windhoek, Walvis Bay, Tsumeb, and Oshikango. The Tsumeb-Kranzberg-Walvis Bay train segment is being restored (Geingob, 2020, p. 18). President Geingob used "our" to unify the audience with his efforts, a trait of charismatic leaders who inspire collective action (Blight et al., 2004, p. 217).

Geingob's rhetoric also reflects increased budget allocation in response to COVID-19. He cited the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture's additional 800 million Namibian Dollars for schools' readiness. This allocation benefits hundreds of schools with facilities, highlighting his people-centred governance.

### **International relations and cooperation**

In his address, President Geingob skillfully appealed to unity, peace, and dignity, emphasised social cooperation, transparency, and diplomatic ties. He stressed that these values would secure Namibia's global success.

Geingob highlighted congratulations from international leaders during the 31st Independence Anniversary. References to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and President Xi Jinping exemplified his ability to connect past and present, a hallmark of charismatic leaders. Acknowledging a message from Joe Biden, Geingob lauded Biden's principled stance against apartheid, fostering confidence in their collaboration. This resonates with charismatic leadership, employing symbolic language that aligns with higher ideals.

Geingob also mentioned Vladimir Putin's interest in bolstering bilateral relations and messages from other leaders, showcasing his networking skills. Addressing the COVID-19 crisis, Geingob exhibited faith in Namibians and their resilience. Drawing parallels to historical challenges, he conveyed hope and empathy, qualities charismatic leaders embody.

Finally, Geingob's rhetoric strategically matched prevailing concerns, building rapport by understanding his audience's perspectives. By fostering this "community of minds", he demonstrated his charismatic connection with his followers.

### **Conclusion**

In his constitutionally mandated speech that addresses the state of the nation, Geingob evaluated government performance, offered recommendations, and urged adherence to COVID-19 measures. The article explored Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (pathos, ethos, and logos) and their influence on charismatic leadership. Geingob's use of Aristotelian appeals, and charismatic theory, shaped his language during the pandemic. Equally, charisma, rooted in beliefs and sentiments, results from Aristotle's logos, ethos, and pathos, which combine powerful rhetoric, personal credibility, and emotional resonance for effective persuasion. Geingob's 2021 SONA speech exemplified this process.

Finally, the COVID-19 crisis arguably revealed Geingob's crisis leadership during his presidency. Amid growing media reliance, effective leadership's connection to clear communication becomes intricate. Consequently, rhetoric emerges as the primary medium



for presidential leadership (Antonakis, 2017a). In addition, rhetoric serves as a conduit for conveying ideals, beliefs, emotions, and symbolic meanings to followers, sparking imagination. Overall, this article evidently demonstrates that presidential rhetoric is the primary means through which the presidency is exercised.

### Recommendation

The article demonstrates how Geingob's incorporated rhetorical appeals shaped his language during the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in a charismatic leadership style. For more valuable insights into the dynamics of crisis leadership and persuasive communication, it is recommended that future research should juxtapose the president's communication style, and its subsequent impact, with that of other national leaders who have similarly addressed their nations during this global health crisis. Such an analysis would provide a more robust understanding of the efficacy of different rhetorical strategies in achieving social change, fostering unity, and promoting stability amidst a crisis situation.

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