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# TIME

## The Meaning *of* **Zohran Mamdani**

by  
**MARK CHIUSANO**



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# ‘A Politics of No Translation.’ Zohran Mamdani on His Unlikely Rise

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It's not easy to move around New York City as Zohran Mamdani anymore.

Like when the 33-year-old Democratic nominee for mayor leaves a union meeting to walk to his Manhattan campaign office, as he did one Monday morning in July. Within a block, a phone-wielding crowd forms and follows. “Oh my God, hello,” someone blurts. People clap. Cars honk. Traffic down Fifth Avenue comes to a standstill as a plumber’s van stops and a guy hops out to shake Mamdani’s hand. There is some heckling. “Antisemitic!” someone shouts. But mostly it is star treatment, in multiple languages and from all generations.

All this is new: the adulation, the notoriety, the xenophobic death threats that have prompted an entourage of men with spaghetti earpieces. Before 2025, basically no one knew who Mamdani was. Over the course of eight months, the democratic socialist and backbench state assemblyman went from local long shot to likely mayor of America’s biggest city. Suddenly he is a main character in national politics—the ubiquitous subject of cable news segments, a lightning rod on the left and right. Senior Democrats have weighed in for and against him. President Donald Trump has pioneered a dark new birtherism by questioning his immigration status and floating his possible arrest. (Mamdani, who would be the city’s first South Asian and Muslim mayor, was born in Uganda and became a U.S. citizen in 2018.) To many progressives, his style of politics—principled, pocketbook-focused, and online—was an electrifying answer for a moribund party.

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Mamdani says he wants to be a mayor who breaks down barriers between politicians and the public. “I think the most important thing is that people see themselves and their struggles in your campaign,” he tells me during an hour-long interview in mid-July in a windowless conference room in his Manhattan campaign office. “And I think the larger struggle for us as Democrats is to ensure that we are practicing a politics that is direct, a politics of no translation, a politics that when you read the policy commitment, you understand it, as how it applies to your life.”

In interviews with more than 30 lawmakers, political figures, supporters, friends, and critics, Mamdani emerges as both more interesting and more complicated than the caricatures suggest. He is a very eloquent, very young man who is both less experienced than his predecessors and more gifted than almost any of his peers at connecting with the party’s voters. He is an ideologue interested in creative solutions, less radical than painted when you dig into his policy proposals and yet more sincere in his left-wing ambitions. He is a movement politician who won by being in touch with the streets, and who must now cloister himself inside as he prepares for the business of governing, not betraying the people by not failing them.

[video id=ghq0J0c1 autostart="viewable"]

If that all seems like a tall task, it’s worth remembering Mamdani’s master class in the June Democratic primary. He started in single digits, introducing himself via viral videos and cross-borough walkabouts, from conservative precincts to immigrant neighborhoods to mosques, pitching free buses, rent freezes for regulated units, and universal childcare. In the world’s financial capital, he wore the mantle of democratic socialism; in the jurisdiction with the largest Jewish community outside Israel, he refused to back away from criticism of that country’s war in Gaza. He amassed an army of 50,000 volunteers, who helped knock on 1.6 million doors. In the end, his multicultural coalition trounced Andrew Cuomo, a former governor and scion of a New York political dynasty boosted by more than \$20 million in super-PAC spending. He looked, in the words of one of his opponent’s own advisers, like “one of the best political athletes I’ve ever seen play the game.”

**Read More:** [Mamdani Delivers Decisive Victory in Democratic Primary](#)

The prospect of Mamdani's mayoralty scandalized many of New York's power brokers, some of whom vowed to stop him in the November general election. It also alarmed many national Democrats, who see Mamdani's politics—his past support for defunding the police, his criticism of Israel and defense of the Palestinian cause, his proposals for city-owned grocery stores and higher taxes on the wealthy—as a dangerous step left for a party searching for its footing in the Trump era. "Tackling the city's challenges will require top-notch management and fresh approaches," James Whelan, president of the Real Estate Board of New York, tells me, "rather than the same old ideas like raising taxes and restricting rents."



In the meantime, Mamdani's shoe-leather primary campaign has given way to his indoor era. As a newcomer now in training for one of America's toughest jobs, he lives life in 15-minute increments, working to assure skeptics that he's ready and reasonable and won't send businesses fleeing to Florida. In conference rooms and on calls, he is exploring the boundaries of what it means to be mayor, even saying "it's an open conversation" whether he'd move into Gracie Mansion.

It appears he will get the choice. Recent polling shows Mamdani with double-digit leads over Cuomo and incumbent mayor Eric Adams, both of whom are running on independent ballot lines. How the nation’s financial and cultural capital fares under his leadership would be Exhibit A in the fight for the Democrats’ future. At stake is the trust of voters thousands of miles from Midtown, for whom Mamdani would be a test case—another failed figurehead of a major Democratic city, or the leader who can get people believing in government again.

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**In 2021, Mamdani** was a newly minted state assemblyman looking to make his mark in the halls of power. He had swept into Albany on the currents of racial-justice protests and pandemic activism. But now he was stuck on Zoom.

Forging connections was a challenge. Albany is always a cipher for newcomers, a “place of an asymmetry of information,” says Elle Bisgaard-Church, Mamdani’s then chief of staff, who later became his primary campaign manager. Even understanding how to file legislation, she says, “was something that we had to learn from scratch.” Mamdani was serious about using the perch to help working people. He put Bisgaard-Church through four hiring interviews, including one with New York City Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) reps. But in a world where it can take a decade to get a committee chair, the road to making change would be long. Mamdani was eager to change the script, leveraging skills learned in his brief but varied pre-political life.

Zohran Kwame Mamdani was raised in Uganda, South Africa, and New York by public-facing parents: Mahmood Mamdani, a scholar of postcolonialism who landed at Columbia University, and filmmaker Mira Nair, an Academy Award nominee who has directed such luminaries as Denzel Washington. “In a sense he does come from a showbiz family,” says Amitav Ghosh, a Man Booker Prize–shortlisted writer and friend of Nair’s. From his father, Ghosh says, Mamdani took “his very deep commitment to social justice,” and from his mother, an “incredible energy” and “fine aesthetic sense.” His charmed upbringing instilled the stage presence that aided an amateur rapping career, plus opportunities like working on music in

his mother's film *Queen of Katwe* and getting celebrities Madhur Jaffrey and Lupita Nyong'o to appear in his music videos.



The family moved to a Manhattan apartment for Columbia faculty when Mamdani was 7. According to Mamdani, the university chipped in half the cost of his enrollment at the progressive Bank Street School for Children, where elementary tuition now runs north of \$60,000 per year and gym contests would end in ties even when one team had clearly “come out on top,” Mamdani says. For high school he enrolled at Bronx Science, one of the city’s most rigorous public schools, where he ran for student-body vice president, promising fresh juice. These extremes in education were an example of Mamdani straddling the city’s divides. He both tutored and received tutoring for standardized tests. “To be a New Yorker is also to live in multiple worlds at once,” he says. “There is no one part of New York City more New York City than another.”

Mamdani’s political education came in the world of progressive activism. He co-founded a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at Bowdoin, a small liberal-arts school in Maine. After graduation, he toggled between organizing and music, and cut his teeth working on losing campaigns for left-leaning city candidates. He also spent a formative year and change as a foreclosure-prevention counselor at the Queens housing organization Chhaya Community Development Corporation. Executive director Annetta Seecharan remembers Mamdani as creative and committed, bringing a “very positive, can-do energy” to a job that requires patient engagement to help vulnerable people stay in their homes.

In 2020, Mamdani ran a campaign for state assembly focused on issues like “housing as a human right” for the kinds of vulnerable people he’d recently advised. He beat a five-term incumbent in a Queens district that included hip Astoria cafes as well as public-housing complexes. As a junior figure in state government, he quickly became part of a progressive ecosystem nudging the Democratic caucus left. In April 2021, Mamdani joined a “sleep-out” in the capitol’s so-called War Room [to push](#) for higher taxes on the wealthy and easier access to housing relief. He and a handful of other young lawmakers came prepared with sleeping bags and a tent, trying to pressure the party leaders negotiating the \$200 billion state budget mostly behind closed doors. “It was part of an impatience with the nature of politics as it was,” says Mamdani, “and wanting to break out of the manner in which these issues are discussed and closer to the way in which they will actually be felt by New

Yorkers.” In the end, the state budget did include [some tax hikes](#) on the rich—more than what then governor Cuomo had proposed, but much less than the tens of billions of dollars Mamdani and his progressive allies had called for.

Later that year, Mamdani took direct-action protest a step further, joining a 15-day hunger strike to support debt-ridden taxi drivers struggling to make payments on the wildly expensive “medallions” that allow them to legally pick up passengers. “Throughout that entire process, he treated us as equals,” says Bhairavi Desai of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance. Mamdani helped liaise with senior politicians like U.S. Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer in successful negotiations for a city-backed relief deal for drivers. After two weeks without food, he left the protest in a wheelchair.



He settled into the Albany routine, which could sometimes feel like being “freshmen in college,” says Jabari Brisport, a newly elected state senator and fellow democratic socialist who became Mamdani’s roommate. The two shared single hotel rooms with two double beds, trading notes on their new

jobs and entertaining themselves after long days. “He likes his TikToks,” Brisport said. Sometimes Mamdani would indulge in reality-TV shows like *Love Island*. A practicing Muslim, Mamdani regularly attends Friday prayer services, and in the evenings during Ramadan, Brisport recalls, he would prepare for the coming fast with a big scoop of peanut butter.

Mamdani was learning how to manage relationships and build legislative narratives. He launched a “Fix the MTA” campaign to overhaul the behemoth Metropolitan Transportation Authority through frozen fares, free city buses, and better subway service. He cajoled potential allies and threw himself into promotion, with a slick website and [campaign-style videos](#) featuring relatable commuters. “His strengths were mobilizing public support on behalf of policy,” says Queens state senator and deputy majority leader Michael Gianaris, Mamdani’s partner on the campaign, “which is a very rare trait.”

The pair ended up winning a pilot program for one free bus route per borough in 2023—a modest but tangible victory that became a key part of Mamdani’s mayoral campaign. Friends and foes alike have scrutinized this episode as an example of how he might govern: working the inside and outside games for big progressive moon shots and, in this case, landing something creative and concrete, if not complete. “We’ve been guided by the principle that you put the stake as far to the left as possible—of course, within some reason, and grounded in the actual material stuff,” says Bisgaard-Church. “But that, as a negotiating position, is the starting place.”

Yet the bus pilot was also an example of Mamdani’s learning curve. There were limits, he found, to what you can achieve outside the real negotiating rooms. The pilot did not get expanded or even renewed in 2024. A state lawmaker with knowledge of the matter says that Mamdani had complained to the Democratic assembly speaker, Carl Heastie, about a part of the state budget he feared would lead to higher rents. The budget was not yet close to finalized, this lawmaker told me, and it included other tenant protections. The showdown ended with Mamdani casting a largely symbolic no vote on the budget bill, and his bus pilot disappearing.

Both Heastie and Mamdani deny the lost pilot was punishment for Mamdani’s protests. Certainly the state transportation authority was

lukewarm on the pricey program. In an interview, Heastie praises Mamdani as knowledgeable and honest. Asked how Mamdani changed in Albany, the Bronx power broker says the young socialist learned “that you can’t always let the perfect be the enemy of the good.”

For example? “This year,” Heastie notes, “he voted for the entire budget.”

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**Just days after** Donald Trump’s second presidential win in November, Mamdani donned his dark suit and tie and went to parts of Queens and the Bronx that had seen surprising shifts toward the Republican. Extending a microphone to people on the street, Mamdani asked about their reasons for voting for Trump. The answers would form the spine of his campaign. High rent. Elevated prices. *La comida. Gaza.*

The snappy Trump-voter video went viral, helping Mamdani introduce himself to voters through the prism of policy. He cut more videos: talking “halal-flation” with street-cart workers, jumping into the wintry ocean off Coney Island to dramatize “freezing” the rent. They were a marked shift from the doom and gloom enveloping the party. Mamdani seemed intent on having fun.

Some of this was natural for a digital native. Mamdani also credits his wife Rama Duwaji, 28, an illustrator and animator with work in the *New Yorker*. “She has before this campaign been someone that has taught me how to better use social media,” Mamdani tells me. “Mostly just thinking about Instagram, how I am very much a millennial.”

Signs of momentum were apparent early. At the campaign’s first big canvassing event in mid-December, primary field director Tascha Van Auken noticed something strange happening. Even raw recruits said they’d had a great experience—a far cry from the typical slammed doors. Over and over, Van Auken recalls, canvassers reported that “talking about affordability really resonates.” The canvassers themselves were also becoming a weapon. Door-knocking is central to New York City races that demand retail politics, and progressive challengers often boast about their volunteers. But Mamdani was doing it on a different level.

**Read More:** [The New York Socialist Mayor Who Came 100 Years Before Mamdani.](#)

The operation was unleashed not just on his far-left base but also new and more moderate voters. There was always going to be a section of the electorate that would not stomach old tweets like “Taxation isn’t theft. Capitalism is,” and his posts supporting the “defund the police” movement. Yet the city must consult the state on tax changes, and during the campaign Mamdani notably backed away from the “defund” position, promising to sustain the NYPD’s head count and praising its current technocratic commissioner. He spent more time channeling the economic insecurities of a broad group of New Yorkers into simple policy slogans like “fast and free buses.” He framed such ideas as common sense, not Leninist. Supporters noted they had precedent: the billionaire former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg once discussed free mass transit, an experiment that has been tried in jurisdictions as distant as Boston (which has multiple free bus routes) and the entire country of Luxembourg.



He also had the good luck to run against the right primary opponent. Cuomo was attempting a comeback after resigning in 2021 amid sexual harassment allegations (which he denied) and questions about an undercount of COVID-era nursing-home deaths. The former governor embodied a Democratic establishment voters were increasingly leaving behind. Cuomo ran what one former aide [called](#) a “grim and joyless campaign,” relying on name recognition, TV ads, and old relationships with organized labor. Mamdani’s campaign, meanwhile, was direct messaging people on Insta-gram and basking in supporter-made T-shirts. His connections in elite New York circles helped land the support of local icons like Alison Roman of cookbook fame and model Emily Ratajkowski. Opponents scoffed, not realizing that Mamdani was experiencing a virtuously reinforcing cycle of vibes, field, and message: the names brought attention, which brought volunteers to knock on doors of people who thought groceries cost too much.

Something was happening in an electorate angry at Trump and willing to give a newcomer a chance. “We came out of the pandemic with the kind of spiritual malaise in the country that I think is unaddressed by the 10-point policy plans that everybody’s got,” says Patrick Gaspard, a senior national Democrat informally advising Mamdani. Once he got traction, Mamdani didn’t let up. In their Albany hotel room, Brisport had to ask him to take a curfew of 11:30 p.m. and cut the never-ending strategy calls. On top of the door knockers, there were 100 policy volunteers alone; the campaign launched voter-education outreach in languages like Urdu and Bangla. Seasoned New York pols recognized the force of his message. “I think FDR would recognize him,” says former mayor Bill de Blasio. “The whole campaign was about affordability.”

The Friday before the election, Mamdani made an hours-long trek down the spine of Manhattan, dapping up pedestrians and outdoor diners. “Every time that we walked on the street in the last couple of weeks, it was bedlam,” says state senator Gustavo Rivera. At Mamdani’s primary-night party in Queens, the two cop cars closing down the quiet street soon seemed like an omen. Mamdani and his team crash-wrote a victory speech in which he hit a new register compared with the early fun videos. “A life of dignity should not be reserved for a fortunate few,” he said, framed by the words *Afford to Dream*. “I will never hide from you,” he promised. “Your concerns will always be mine.”

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**A few weeks later**, Mamdani found himself on a dais on the 27th floor of Rockefeller Center, looking out at some 150 CEOs and high-ranking members of the business world, talking about the power of the World Cup.

It was one of many stops on what might be called his Don't Worry Tour, which also included visits with Jewish groups, Black businesspeople, and unions. The tour is Mamdani's attempt to allay fears about the unabashedly left-wing candidate. Financier Bill Ackman pledged to "take care of the fundraising" for a centrist opponent. But many more sober-minded skeptics were concerned Mamdani was unprepared to manage 300,000 municipal employees, let alone a city of some 8.5 million people. "In order to be an effective mayor," says Charles Lavine, Mamdani's veteran state assembly colleague and president of the New York Chapter of the National Association of Jewish Legislators, "it's going to require a lot more than merely a theatrical bent."

Mamdani tried to answer the suspicions by showing up. He would wear his suit. He'd clasp his hands and smile warmly. He'd spend close to an hour with the family of NYPD officer Didarul Islam, killed by a mass shooter in Manhattan. He would listen, and reassure, and say that he'd be a mayor "for everyone who calls this city home."

Few events got as much attention as the closed-door one with the CEOs, hosted by the Partnership for New York City, a nonprofit business leadership group. In a conference room floating above the city and stocked with a spread of cookies, fruit, and cheese, Mamdani was not swarmed for selfies upon entry, as he usually is these days. He did a fireside chat and Q and A, during which he was grilled about his thoughts on the "globalize the intifada" brouhaha. These three words had threatened to derail the close of his primary campaign when he was asked in [a podcast interview](#) with the *Bulwark* about the pro-Palestinian phrase—which he maintains he does not use—and declined to condemn it, saying he was "less comfortable with the idea of banning the use of certain words."

Outrage ensued. Democrats like Rahm Emanuel and Josh Shapiro criticized him. The phrase, which one of his top Jewish allies [says](#) can be interpreted as "open season on Jews," became shorthand for the broader concerns about

Mamdani's record of Israel criticism. He has supported the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and suggested that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should be arrested for war crimes. The day after Hamas' terrorist attack on Oct. 7, 2023, Mamdani's response mourned the dead but quickly turned to criticism of Israel's actions. He has often talked about the problem of anti-semitism and the need for anti-hate-crime funding, and his campaign attracted Jewish supporters—including many on board with his advocacy for Gaza—but during the primary he stuck more or less to his original take on “intifada.”



To the CEOs, however, Mamdani said he would discourage the use of the phrase—a small but pointed evolution in language. In our interview, Mamdani frames the shift as the consequence of listening to New Yorkers, including Jewish leaders, as well as a rabbi who said the phrase evoked memories of bus bombings in Haifa. “The job of the mayor is to deliver for New Yorkers,” he says. “And it’s also to take care of New Yorkers.”

Mamdani has walked this tightrope throughout his post-primary appearances. A less-parsed example was his comment about being excited for the economic potential of the World Cup, for which the greater New York area will be a host next summer. “He saw an opportunity to use that the same way the Bloomberg administration used the failed Olympics bid, to look at the infrastructure of the city,” says Kathryn Wylde, CEO of the Partnership for New York City, referencing the former mayor’s efforts to land the 2012 Games and build housing and new transportation ahead of them. Mamdani has embraced the idea of using a major event like this to achieve “virtuous growth” in other settings, even name-checking Bloomberg’s business-friendly deputy mayor and establishment favorite Dan Doctoroff in our interview.

With examples like these, Mamdani has signaled an interest in making government work better, much like the nascent “abundance” movement among Democrats eager to cut red tape to build new housing and infrastructure. “Democracy is not just under attack from authoritarianism from the outside,” Mamdani tells me. “It’s also under attack from a withering faith on the inside of its ability to deliver on these material challenges in working-class people’s lives.”

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**For some national Democrats,** the Don’t Worry Tour will never be enough. Their concern is Mamdani’s very presence in office, which would punctuate the party’s leftward turn in major cities and give ammunition to Republicans eager to paint them as outside the mainstream in the 2026 midterms. “A socialist is not the face of the Democratic Party,” says Long Island Representative Laura Gillen. The irony is that Mamdani’s victory was the kind of affordability-focused, podcast-conversant campaign Democrats have called for after 2024.

Mamdani’s performance as mayor would be scrutinized for portents of the Democrats’ future. Potential lessons abound. To progressives, his rise is the product of his policies. Centrists who loathe those policies praise his style. Republicans are all too eager to cast him as the face of the opposition. And for some Democratic leaders with an eye on 2028, the question is not whether a Mamdani clone should be the next Democratic standard bearer—

historically unlikely—but whether the party can win in other places not by emulating his ideology but by borrowing from his tool kit.



Despite his growing national profile, Mamdani remains focused on local issues. On his core pledge to freeze rents for the city's approximately 1 million regulated units, a board controlled by the mayor decides the increases each year. De Blasio's administration imposed rent freezes three times. Yet housing experts raise concerns about buildings with lots of regulated units where the costs of maintenance couldn't be covered by bumps on the other apartments. "The concern is that that could really lead to lower-quality buildings," says Vicki Been, a top housing official under de Blasio and faculty director at the NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. Even de Blasio cautioned that a freeze was "doable" but "each year should be evaluated unto itself." Mamdani has committed to four years of no increases, pointing to broader ways to help landlords, like reducing water bills.

**Read More:** [How Mamdani Plans to Fix New York City's Housing Crisis.](#)

Some of his campaign issues cross ideological boundaries, such as universal childcare starting at 6 weeks. It is an expensive proposition; Mamdani's campaign estimated a [price tag](#) of \$5 billion to \$7 billion. It is also an issue where Mamdani's position aligns with New York's more moderate Democratic governor, Kathy Hochul. The city has led the way before with universal pre-K in the de Blasio administration, while Mayor Adams embraces a childcare pilot program for low-income children 2 and under. Mamdani appears eager for the negotiation. "There are real questions of phasing in and stages," he says, "but they cannot be used as a means by which to avoid reaching the milestone."

In preparation, Mamdani's team has reached out to Bloomberg. He has picked the brains of former NYPD chiefs, and conferred with leaders as varied as state Democratic Party leader Jay Jacobs (who found Mamdani "anxious to work with everyone"), former Federal Trade Commission chair Lina Khan, and Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, whom he praises as "one of the inspirations for me in this moment." He is still adjusting to his new reality. "I already miss being outside," he tells me. "I now go to cemeteries a lot between meetings," he adds, "because they are parks without people."

**Uptown &  
Queens**



One day in mid-July, Mamdani opted for the train en route to a musicians' union event. Such trains are the city's public forum, and soon the nominee was swarmed once more on the uptown R. A kid with shaking hands approached: "Mr. Zohran, can we get a photo?" Someone claimed Mamdani must know her. Someone else offered him their priority seat. Four stops later, the train deposited him near Times Square, and Mamdani was out in the street again, walking by a woman passed out on the sidewalk, a thicket of competing hot-dog and falafel stands, a building security guard who shouted "I voted for you!" from across the street. It was the complex and ever changing tapestry of New York, and also a totem of the kind of politics that Mamdani said he wants to practice: "one that is in person, that is in public, that is with people." —*With reporting by Simmone Shah*

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