

Mamdani: Two Views: Second View

written by BC Hamilton | July 8, 2025

[*New Politics* is re-posting two views of the victory of Zohran Mamdani in the New York City Democratic primary. In addition to the article below by BC Hamilton, see [here](#) for another view by Eric Blanc.]

The Mamdani moment

New hopes and new hazards for the NYC Left



Without any doubt, Zohran Mamdani's victory in the Democratic Party primary was a referendum on the key class and social struggles of the day—a referendum on late neoliberalism, a world on fire, and the Trump moment as lived by the multi-racial working class in New York City. This was a vote on the experience of the social crisis for the city's working people: access to housing, affordable food and health care, public transportation and public education. Mamdani was up against the billionaires and a New York City ruling class that has profited from the one-sided class war in NYC over the last five decades and overwhelmingly backed his once and future opponents, including the current mayor, Eric Adams, and the former governor, Andrew Cuomo.

Perhaps most significantly, without the broad Palestine movement, the generational energy of the Mamdani campaign cannot be understood. In critical measure, the support for Mamdani is a reaction to a virulent campaign of scapegoating and gaslighting directed at migrants, trans and queer New Yorkers, and most importantly anybody (be they Arab, Muslim, Jew, etc.) who stood up against the genocide in Gaza and the Zionist whitewashing of mass murder. This has a particularly pernicious tone in NYC, one of the wellsprings of this well funded, bipartisan reactionary politics.

For socialists, this is the reality through which all the limitations, contradictions, and strategic challenges of Mamdani's general election campaign, and likely mayoralty, must be understood. The embrace of his campaign by a broad NYC Left is inextricable from the substantive social, economic, and political struggles being waged within (and beyond) New York City and from the fact that there is an apparent enthusiasm for taking up these fights. It should go without saying that the revolutionary Left should be stalwart in our *active* support of these struggles.

The urgent task before us, then, is to continue to build the organized movement capable of taking on the forces of capital and political reaction in NYC, a process which requires a serious assessment of strategy and an understanding of historical precedents. Mamdani's policy goals—most of which we should fight for unconditionally—will be challenging to win. His strategy of reforming the Democratic Party is mistaken, at best, and at worst, a contradictory project that inevitably undermines the fight for reform that is motivating the energy and excitement behind his campaign. Nonetheless, the political space created by Mamdani's campaign represents an opportunity for coalition and movement building that can—and should—aim beyond the limits of a single election or candidate, at those broader, deeper goals of systemic social change—a coalition prepared to fight for needed reforms.

Backdrop to a landslide

The chain of events that led to the victory of the self-described democratic socialist begins with a crisis inherent in the person Mamdani is hoping to replace: Republican-turned-Democrat-turned-Trump-sycophant, New York City Mayor Eric Adams. Adams's victory four years ago was born out of the right-wing social backlash following the COVID-19 pandemic. A nonstop disinformation campaign in the New York Post and on the nightly news relied on fabulists such as former New York Police Commissioner Dermot Shea to spread the false narrative of mayhem and disorder. New Yorkers were bombarded daily by claims that the city streets were running red with blood.

This text-book fear-mongering operation had its desired effect, with Adams, a former cop, eking out a win by just 7,200 votes (Mamdani, by comparison, secured a massive lead of nearly 117,000 votes over Cuomo, while also receiving about 140,000 more votes than Adams did in 2021 primary, born largely from his successful ability to expand the primary electorate.) Adams built a coalition of conservative, older home-owners, along with sections of the organized Black working class—especially in southern Queens, Brooklyn, and in the NYPD and Department of Corrections, where Adams had an established base. In office, Adams' regressive, dictatorial policies appealed to the elite of the city. And working class New Yorkers were too often the object of Adams' policies meant to unleash the police department on unhoused neighbors and Black and Brown youth, all while seeking to scapegoat huge swathes of the city's immigrant population. (His current NYPD Commissioner is billionaire heiress, Jessica Tisch, an articulate defender of this police violence and murder.) Residents watched as Adams oversaw the continued increase in rents, attacks on core institutions like libraries and the school system, and the rise of a general affordability crisis in the city. This would fuel the future Mamdani campaign.

While the Democratic Party establishment could stomach Adams' policies, it was a step too far when, in September 2024, he was indicted on federal corruption charges, in part revolving around his long standing ties to Turkey's authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. When Adams then returned to his Republican roots by buddying up to Trump to secure a successful dismissal of the charges against him, his pariah status among the Democratic Party leadership and their financial backers was (seemingly) solidified.

The consensus post-mortem, by party leadership in the aftermath of their utter failure in the U.S. presidential election last year, also had an effect locally. People like U.S. Sen. Chuck Schumer and Rep. Hakeem Jeffries—both from New York City and both leading their respective minorities in Congress—echoed the narrative amplified by the mainstream press, that Democrats lost because of their embrace of “woke” issues, too far left for the general electorate, namely around bodily autonomy, police reform, immigration, and the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

When this assessment led the party leadership to “play dead” in response to Trump's regime of

terror, a fundamental tension came to the fore between it and much of the voting base of the Democratic Party. For many voters, what the party leadership advocated and adopted was not tolerable.

Mamdani and the Democratic Party

On July 1, after all the votes were tabulated in the city's ranked-choice voting system, Mamdani came out ahead, decisively, besting Cuomo by 12 percentage points. While Cuomo is currently mulling whether he will run in the general election on his independently financed ballot line, the primary results solidify Mamdani's position as the odds-on favorite in November, in a city where Democrats hold an overwhelming registration advantage.

Despite the casting of Mamdani by the Right as a rabid communist, talk of revolution wasn't part of his primary night election speech. He made clear his sights were much closer to home, framing his campaign as part of an ongoing effort by "progressives" to remake the Democratic Party in their image. He told those gathered that his win represented "a model for the Democratic Party"—economically populist, uncompromising on positions popular with the base such as opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza—and a rejection of the establishment status quo.

The immediate response of the Democratic Party leadership in New York has been illuminating. A series of non-endorsements, or endorsements of Cuomo in November, were common. Garnering the greatest attention was New York's junior Senator Kristen Gillenbrand, who spouted Zionist talking points and attempted to paint Mamdani as an apologist for Hamas on a prominent radio talk show. This was picked up by other leading Democrats, including House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries. The fact that Gillenbrand felt the need to apologize for having "misspoke[n]" is telling of the moment. In fact, in words and deeds, the Democratic leadership locally and nationally have made clear they have, at best, little interest in Mamdani. And in this, as has been too often the case in recent years, the Democratic Party leadership is preparing the political ground for an arguably more dangerous version of reactionary politics. Thus, Trump greeted the Mamdani election by proclaiming "I'm not going to let this Communist Lunatic destroy New York. . . I hold all the levers, and have all the cards. I'll save New York City . . ."

It is within this divide between the Democratic Party leadership and much of its historic voting base that the Democratic primary election for mayor played out. With Adams turning into a Trump surrogate, Democratic leadership were left looking for someone who would toe the line on their possum doctrine. Enter Andrew Cuomo. Despite his status as a grandparent killer, the disgraced former governor could be trusted to take policy positions virtually indistinguishable from Adams—especially on crime—while ensuring a household name in New York Democratic politics would appear on the ballot. That ended up being essentially the extent of Cuomo's campaign strategy, which didn't seem to bother the host of Democratic Party officials, billionaires, and Trump backers who rallied around him as the safe, sane, non-socialist option, warts and all.

What those same elites had passed on was another weak field of Democratic candidates that, despite some having held citywide office now and in the past, hadn't done much to distinguish themselves, besides largely not being Andrew Cuomo. Mamdani was the exception. As a vocal democratic socialist he actively pushed a campaign message directly at odds with the genocide-coddling Zionism and warmed-over neoliberalism that Cuomo represented. Mamdani's policy goals—most of which we should fight for unconditionally—will be challenging to win. His strategy of reforming the Democratic Party is mistaken, at best, and at worst, a contradictory project that inevitably undermines the fight for reform that is motivating the energy and excitement behind his campaign.

In fact, Mamdani's actual policy proposals are well within the parameters of a standard progressive

program of reform. While improvements on the status quo—perhaps most importantly ensuring that the rent board does not increase rents on the approximately 1 million rent-stabilized units in the city—his other offerings are somewhat small bore (publicly owned grocery stores sound good, but won't come close to addressing the food insecurity crisis in New York City), often require approval from other parts of government hostile to even mild socialist policies (new taxes and free buses need Albany's approval), and frankly don't go far enough (20,000 publicly-funded units of relatively affordable housing a year sounds like a lot until you remember 60,000 New Yorkers are in housing shelters each night).

Mamdani's unapologetic message made few allies among the Democratic Party leadership, but it had a galvanizing effect on the electorate. Despite being at first ignored, and then later mocked, Mamdani had what no other campaign could manage: a massive fundraising operation with hundreds of individual donors, an army of volunteers that could spread out far beyond his base areas of support, and, most critically, a message that spoke directly to tens of thousands of working-class primary voters disgusted and fed-up with the way Democrats have continued to operate, especially under the daily assaults of the Trump regime.

A democratic socialist as NYC's chief-executive?

In the immediate aftermath of the primary, there appears to be little to no movement towards a reconciliation with Mamdani by the party he's dedicated to reforming. Meanwhile, the predictable right-wing Islamophobic, red-baiting onslaught has started its inevitable ramp-up. As the campaign now moves into the general election, Mamdani's biggest challenge is not the independent campaign by the incumbent Adams and a perennial far-shot bid by Republican gadfly and wanna-be Brownshirt, Curtis Sliwa. It's the war he's facing as the soon-to-be mayor of the largest city in the United States who is opposed by the leadership of his own party and subject to their willingness to let the right wing do the dirty work of endlessly undermining him.

The leap that Mamdani is about to make is unparalleled in modern politics. The victories that other DSA-aligned candidates have secured have all come in relatively progressive districts for single seats within legislative bodies. In New York, that's meant a handful of avowed democratic socialists winning as Democrats in the New York City council, state assembly where Mamdani has served since 2021, and even a few in the state senate. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez had up to this point been the most high-profile DSA-backed candidate to win as a Democrat (a point worth returning to below), but even that was to the 435-member U.S. House of Representatives.

Mamdani is poised to not only be the mayor of a city of 8.5 million people, who, despite the party enrollment statistics, are as diverse in their political and social views as anywhere. He is also going to be the city's chief executive in charge of the wildly labyrinthian, bureaucratic city government structure that includes the largest school district in the country and the nation's largest police force—for whom he will now be their boss. In relation to city workers, he is now at the top of the management chart. As such, he is also the fiscal manager of the city, and it will be his responsibility to navigate and negotiate the impossible task of prioritizing popular policies amid a ruthless budgetary process. It's one thing to talk about raising taxes on the wealthy, but doing so is a challenge as New York City itself has only limited power to unilaterally raise funds before it must go begging in Albany for the state's support—a prospect as dim as Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul's view of Mamdani himself.

To put it mildly, this is not a system built for the kind of socialist vision of city government Mamdani or those further to his left would ever hope. One recent observer saw New Deal-era mayor Fiorello La Guardia as the kind of mayor Mamdani should look to model himself after. Unfortunately, the far

more likely analogy is 1970s “Drop Dead”-era mayor Abraham Beame, complete with a hostile Republican president and unsympathetic Albany leadership. Since the city’s fiscal crisis that Beame had the misfortune to oversee, the combined capitalist interests in New York City have kept a tight leash on the scope of the city’s ambitions for its working class residents, in a early example of the shock doctrine austerity politics that would come to define neoliberalism going forward. Unfortunately for Mamdani and city residents over the past five decades, those same interests have never ceased to hold sway over the city and have the ability to quickly turn any fiscal issue into a political nightmare for a mayor who runs afoul of their interests. Dennis Kucinich’s experience as mayor of Cleveland in the 1970s, similarly, presents a cautionary tale.

These and other factors (he will find no sanctuary from assaults in the press) combine into as uninviting and inhospitable an environment as one can imagine. This creates a real urgency for the Left to build an extra-electoral force capable of organizing and fighting to win both the promised minimal reforms of Mamdani and the much more substantive changes that are needed.

Reforming the Democrats, a strategic non-starter

Within these conditions, Mamdani, like so many before him, is set on pursuing the quest to reform the Democratic Party. This pursuit is destined to fail, as it has always been, but for two specific reasons, one of which actually speaks to the best, and only, way forward.

The first impediment, which is more than enough, is that the entire structure and purpose of the Democratic Party is to not be reformed. Single candidates can engender hope that change is possible. But the decades of attempts have proven, again and again, that those same Democratic Party candidates are typically co-opted by the leadership and party structure, which has been bought and paid for by the capitalist donors for whom the party singularly works. You cannot change the Democratic Party; the Democratic Party changes you.

To name one example close to New Yorkers, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has gone from being the insurgent DSA-backed reformist firebrand that bedeviled the right and enamored the Left to being just another Democrat, interested in giving political cover to her party leadership above any policy commitments, like an end to genocide. Simply put, the ability to make change from within the Democratic Party is always going to run up to the biggest, best-resourced, longest-running opponent to that: the Democratic Party itself. We are in a period of remarkable independent political activation. Mamdani was the beneficiary of this much bigger, broader working-class, bottom-up democratic surge. It’s time to take the next steps to building a future free from the inevitable failure of Democratic Party reform efforts and let loose the strength of a real movement to change the foundations of our society

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Given the absolute low the Democratic Party brand has sunk to it’s a wonder anyone is looking to tie themselves to the party. In New York, a “blue” state is seeing non-affiliated independent voters outpace all party enrollment in recent years. This speaks to the other reason the Democratic Party reform project is destined to fail—and why we should draw hope from it. An election is not a movement; the act of voting is not democracy. Yes, more than 500,000 New Yorkers turned out to give Mamdani support enough to win the Democratic primary, but the victory of the agenda he outlined, as modest as it is, was never going to survive the host of obstacles and derailers in positions of power that are lined up against it simply because he won a primary or gets elected to an office. It is what might be born out of the Mamdani campaign—building on the energy, the excitement, the will to act—that can deliver on the goals and visions that go beyond one candidate, one campaign, one election.

This same energy is today motivating the pushback to Trump’s ICE shock troops kidnapping our

neighbors. It's turning people out to demand a better union in our schools and equitable pay for our legal service providers, and giving them the strength to show up for trans kids under attack. It's powering the growth of mutual aid groups, Palestinian solidarity networks, and anti-racist support efforts. We are in a period of remarkable independent political activation. Mamdani was the beneficiary of this much bigger, broader working-class, bottom-up democratic surge. It's time to take the next steps to building a future free from the inevitable failure of Democratic Party reform efforts and let loose the strength of a real movement to change the foundations of our society, beginning here in New York City.

Given its material roots, Mamdani's campaign and its victory is something socialists cannot but be excited about. On the further end of the spectrum some have disavowed Mamdani as a candidate for his position firmly within the Democratic Party. There's merit to the argument, if not the conclusion. Mamdani is certainly fully committed to the kind of reformist agenda that has come to dominate the strategic thinking of groups like Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), of which he is a long-time, dedicated member. He is now the embodiment of that belief in practice: If only we elect enough of the right kinds of Democrats the system can be saved and good policies can get enacted.

Despite this, it would be a tragic, self-defeating error to brush off the legitimate upsurge of enthusiasm and excitement this campaign has generated, not just here in New York City, but across the country. The Mamdani moment is just the latest iteration (Bernie, the Squad, Brandon Johnson) of a strategic path now well known to the Left. A sober understanding of the limitations of Mamdani's electoral strategy of inside-out reform must be married to a proactive campaign of solidaristic organizing to rebuild the forces capable of carrying forward the fights already being born out and by the remarkable outpouring of support that Mamdani has earned.

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