

A People's Victory in New York City

On January 1, 2026 Zohran Kwame Mamdani was sworn in as New York City's first South Asian and Muslim mayor, and the youngest in 134 years. Nilita Vachani followed his campaign.

4-minute read



From grassroots outsider to the people's mayor. Photo: AFP

The new mayor took his oath just after midnight with his hand on the Quran in a simple private ceremony at an ornate but defunct subway station underground. By choosing to hold the event within the public transit network, Mamdani was demonstrating his allegiance to the city's working class.

Later that day tens of thousands of supporters converged around City Hall to witness the public inauguration. An open invitation to a "block party" filled several streets with exuberant New Yorkers huddled together in the warmth of jubilation on a bitterly cold day.

Mamdani inherits Punjabi-Hindu and Gujarati-Muslim lineage from his eminent parents, Indian filmmaker Mira Nair and India-born Ugandan political scientist Mahmood Mamdani. His middle name 'Kwame' pays homage to Ghana's visionary pan-Africanist leader, Kwame Nkrumah. Widening his cross-cultural background is his marriage to Rama Duwaji, an American Syrian from Dubai. Gracie Mansion, New York's elegant mayoral abode, is now home to the quintessential American

dream. An assemblyman with scant administrative experience and no name recognition until a year ago is now chief executive of the world's financial capital.



New York Attorney General Letitia James administers the oath of office to Mayor Zohran Mamdani as his wife, Rama Duwaji, holds the Quran and looks on, just after midnight on Jan. 1, 2026. Photo: AFP

In a speech following his electoral victory in November Mamdani demonstrated his ancestry: “A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance.”

Many will have recognised the words uttered by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, celebrating his country's freedom from colonial rule. By invoking Nehru's words, as well as the clarion call of labor organizer Eugene Debs for the “dawn of a better day for humanity,” Mamdani established his socialist legacy drawn from disparate histories.

In an extraordinary campaign Mamdani won the hearts, minds, and indomitable energies of more than 100,000 volunteers who



More than 100,000 volunteers knocked on nearly three million doors, building one of the largest grassroots field operations in New York City history. Photo: AFP

knocked on an estimated 3 million doors to bring in 52.3% of the overall vote. A grassroots movement led by the winsome and charismatic candidate was backed by disciplined strategic planning by the Democratic Socialists of America in the largest field operation in the city's history. Fueled through creative digital media, the victory was ultimately sealed through human connections. "This victory is not mine," Mamdani said, "It is ours," as he thanked the "Yemeni bodega owners and Mexican abuelas, Senegalese taxi drivers and Uzbek nurses, Trinidadian line cooks and Ethiopian aunties."

Community groups mushroomed around the candidate, proud to identify through racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious affiliations. There were South Asians for Zohran, Muslims for



Mamdani's mother, the film-maker Mira Nair, leads a campaign march. Photo: Zayira Ray

Zohran, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Blacks, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, Nepalis, even Dalits for Zohran. For once, class was not a barrier. Senator Bernie Sanders, Mamdani's political mentor, told the crowds on inauguration day: "When working people stand together... there is nothing we cannot accomplish."

This triumph of local democracy comes as the US witnesses a decimation of its democratic institutions through unchecked executive power. While the federal government under President Trump impoverishes its own citizens by imposing unauthorized tariffs, cutting social spending and medical subsidies, firing employees, de-funding universities and science labs, dismantling



Tens of thousands gather in freezing temperatures for Mamdani's public inauguration, turning City Hall into a jubilant neighborhood block party. Photo: AFP

venerable institutions, Mamdani pledges to restore dignity to every New Yorker whether they voted for him or not.

The campaign's focus on affordability resonated deeply in New York City where the cost of living is 132% higher than the national average. According to political analyst Michael Lange, Mamdani won by 13 percentage points over his rival Andrew Cuomo in households earning between \$30K-\$50K and by 20 percentage points where incomes were between \$50K-100K. While Cuomo fared better with the Chinese community, South Asians came out overwhelmingly for Mamdani according to an Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund exit poll. Sixty thousand Trump voters moved over to Mamdani in the mayoral election. The candidate had walked through swing neighborhoods asking people why they had voted Trump. Many cited the high cost of living, others the unconscionable war in Gaza. Trump had promised to cut inflation and end all wars.

Mamdani is that rare breed of politician who is unafraid to stand by his moral conscience. "I am young, despite my best efforts to grow older. I am Muslim. I am a democratic socialist. And most damning of all, I refuse to apologize for any of this." He has not budged from his position that the Israeli reprisal in Gaza is a genocide. He has accused Prime Minister Netanyahu of war crimes as he has India's PM Narendra Modi for his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots.

New York's mayor lost no time putting his economic agenda into action. Legal scholars, regulators and labor experts fill posts in the

new administration. Many are Asian, many are women. There's a new Department for Economic Justice and an Office of Mass Engagement to ensure that public momentum does not dissipate.

While free universal childcare and the creation of affordable housing can take months if not years, freezing the rent on a million rent-stabilized units, adding a few fast bus lines and a handful of price-capped government grocery stores are within



Zohran Mamdani built something New York had not really seen before: a winning citywide campaign for mayor, created from nothing in a matter of months.
Photo: AFP

reach. His erstwhile canvassers are lobbying the state to raise taxes on corporations and millionaires in order to raise funds to cover the mayor's more ambitious goals.

'Affordability' is now the new catchword countrywide as voters push back against 'establishment' politics in municipal and primary elections. Gen Zs and millennials, like those who came out in full force for Mamdani, will constitute almost half of the eligible voters nationwide in the congressional elections later this year. A recent poll suggests that 61% of the population disapproves of Trump's handling of the economy (Navigator). If the mid-terms are held freely and fairly, Democrats appear well poised to win back the House of Representatives.

Less than two days after Mamdani's inauguration, the US invaded Venezuela in a surprise attack. That same day Mayor Mamdani called President Trump to lodge his protest at the "violation of federal and international law". 2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. At this tumultuous time in the nation's history that witnesses the erosion of its democracy, the positivity and hope unleashed by New York's young mayor, whose name 'Zohran' means radiance, holds the world's attention. Will he be allowed to succeed?

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