

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

MAMDANI V. THE ESTABLISHMENT: WHAT HIS CAMPAIGN MEANS FOR AMERICA

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LAURA FLANDERS: The New York City mayor's race is already one for the history books. When Zohran Mamdani, a young state assemblyman from Queens, defeated the state's former governor Andrew Cuomo in the primary this summer, it shocked the Democratic establishment and attracted attention from across the country. In the general election this November, Mamdani faces Cuomo, now running as an independent, and Republican Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the Guardian Angels. Mayor Adams has [withdrawn](#), and that tightened the race a bit. But Mamdani is still enjoying a two-digit lead as we record this. And if he's elected, he'd be the first Muslim American and only the second Democratic socialist elected mayor of New York City. His victory, on a promise to make the metropolis of New York affordable for working people, would have implications for politics everywhere. It's already garnering both excitement and anxiety in different quarters. And even reporters in places with a whole lot else going on are watching, as you'll find out. This month on the feature we call [Meet the BIPOC Press](#), we've invited, from New York City, [Felipe De La Hoz](#), a contributing editor for The New Republic, editor of the weekly newsletter BORDER/LINES, and a journalist at Epicenter NYC. From Dearborn, Michigan, we're joined by Osama Siblani, the longtime publisher and founder of [The Arab American News](#), the largest Arab American newspaper in the country. Siblani is also one of the founders of the local Arab American Political Action Committee. And from Chicago, we have Asha Ransby-Sporn, columnist for [In These Times](#) and co-founder of Black Youth Project 100. She was very involved in the campaign to elect Chicago's own progressive-backed mayor Brandon Johnson in 2023, and has some thoughts about what that story could have to teach the Mamdani campaign. For this week, our conversation is what would Mamdani's victory signal for the nation and why is it already so significant? Thank you all. I hope I am not overstating the degree to which all eyes are focused on New York City when you do in fact have quite a lot going on. Asha, I mean, you are in the heart of a lot happening in Chicago right now, and I appreciate you taking the time, how are you doing and are you actually as focused on Mamdani as this introduction would suggest?

ASHA RANSBY-SPORN: I'm pretty focused locally. We really are facing a military invasion. I don't think I can overstate the degree to which the chaos that Border Patrol and ICE has been causing, not only in immigrant communities, but in Black communities and working class communities all across the city. And I think that's important for the, you know, New York City folks to think about and make sure that we're connecting to a kind of national movement. And I

think that that's the type of leadership, whether it's Zohran Mamdani talking about making a city like New York work for the working class and not just the rich or Brandon Johnson, you know, standing up and saying federal agents are not welcome here, they can't use city property for, you know, harassing Chicagoans. That's the type of bold leadership that we're going to need on our side to go up against these fascists and kind of try to get some of the more run-of-the-mill establishment types who are getting in our way out.

LAURA FLANDERS: You put your finger on something really important, which is that our commercial media love to have individual heroes and individual stories, and Zohran Mamdani is certainly a great one. But, as you point out, he's not alone. Coming to you, Felipe. How are you balancing those two things and how are you thinking about his campaign right now? What's unique and special and extraordinary about it? And also what reflects, what Asha said, as a broader wave of change?

FELIPE DE LA HOZ: Yeah, I think there are a few things happening here. I mean, to have an incumbent mayor who was, up until pretty recently, running for reelection polling at 7%, 8% is almost unheard of. And I think it's sort of reflective of the ways that the local electorate has viewed, you know, Eric Adams's administration as fundamentally a corrupt one and one that's, you know, also too close for comfort to the Trump administration, which is very unpopular here and, you know, many parts of the country. And so, you know, a part of that is sort of a repudiation of that way of doing business to some extent. I also think that the Mamdani campaign, its success has been in part predicated on what everyone will tell you is, you know, the most important thing in an intellectual campaign like this, which is getting out there talking to voters, ground game. Ground game was absolutely massive for their primary win. And, you know, it's not rocket science. It's simply a fact of connecting with people who were sort of disillusioned, disassociated from politics, and presenting a vision that, while it is progressive and, you know, presents a lot of sort of progressive points, is fundamentally about affordability and about some other things that are, you know, issues that people resonate with, you know, and kind of our welcoming alternative vision of.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do you explain, Felipe, you know, New York is home to the Democratic Party's House and Senate leadership, Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries are right there. Neither one, at the time of this recording, have endorsed Mamdani. How do you explain that? Do you think that will shift and is that significant to you?

FELIPE DE LA HOZ: It's not lost on anybody that this is part of, what I would say, is a decades long now sort of struggle over what the Democratic Party is really supposed to represent. You know, everybody understands that Mamdani is positing a different approach, you know, is sort of, you know, willing to stand up to some of the, you know, party dogma. And I think there's a sort of a caution among some of the democratic leadership to embrace that even if it's

overwhelmingly clear at this point that he's probably going to win. And they're going to have to work with him, right, and that's why we've had some grudging sort of endorsements like from Governor Hochul, right, who finally came around. You know, people are realizing that the writing is on the wall.

LAURA FLANDERS: Osama, coming to you there in Dearborn, The Arab American News polled Arab American leaders, once the primary was over, about the success of Mamdani in that primary this summer. What did you find people were thinking about Mamdani from that point of view?

OSAMA SIBLANI: First of all, we're fixated on what's happening in the [Middle East](#), especially in Gaza and in Lebanon. But, again, 7,000 miles away, we are not able to make a difference there, but we're looking at what we can make here in order to make a difference. And as you can tell, it's a municipality election in New York and other areas, including Dearborn and Dearborn Heights, the capital of Arab America. This election is pretty much set. I think the result of it is set in here. However, New York and Mamdani comes in as a focus, very [important focus](#) for our community and for the country as a whole. I believe what Mamdani is representing in here is a part of the Democratic Party that has been revived. And I believe that Jeffries and Schumer are not responding to him or not supporting him, is because they represent the dying party of the Democratic Party. I don't look at Mamdani as a progressive, I look at him as representing the anger and anguish of people who have been left behind with the political apparatus, and they do not see what's happening to them, whether it's in rent, it's food, it's schooling, education, public health, everything that they've been left behind. So he's addressing these issues and that's why he has this kind of support. I believe Mamdani is leading a revolution in here. It's happening in New York, the Big Apple, but I think that it's going to spread all over the country.

LAURA FLANDERS: You have mentioned the candidacies of others in your region, Osama, and Abdul El-Sayed running for US Senate is a big one. What do you think you're seeing there in terms of a new electorate turning out or an electorate perhaps that demands that we take a different look at some constituencies that perhaps we've been making assumptions about?

OSAMA SIBLANI: So it really doesn't matter anymore what is your name. Whether it's Abdul El-Sayed or John Smith, it really doesn't matter. What matters is you're talking about issues that are important to people. And they are feeling, they're feeling, especially today, they are feeling the pain in their pockets and on their dinner table, and also in their kids' schooling, and their public health. So I really believe that there is a change in attitude also on foreign policy. Usually foreign policy is not something on the radar of American people or American voters. But today, with what's happening in Gaza and what's happening in Ukraine and how our foreign policy is being operated and conducted, people are very angry. There are polls that are being conducted, and we're looking at it, and we see the majority of American people are shifting from both

parties and going into Independent's. Like here in Michigan, we have the mayor of Detroit, Mike Duggan, who is running as an Independent for governor, because he doesn't see in the Democratic Party anything that resembles what Michiganian, Michiganders want.

LAURA FLANDERS: Vermont's independent senator, Bernie Sanders, was up there campaigning for El-Sayed, and he's been campaigning for Zohran Mamdani as well in New York. You wrote recently, Asha, that Mamdani's campaign was doing something the Sanders campaign never managed regarding Black voters, and the need for us to change perhaps our sense of that Black voter archetype.

ASHA RANSBY-SPORN: My work has been in Black communities, in Black movement, and then I also, you know, I consider myself a part of the Left and have, you know, supported progressive and Leftist and socialist candidates and all of that. And so I'm always thinking about, well, what is that intersection and why doesn't it feel bigger? You look at polling of Black American adults, and especially on economic issues but on a wide range of things, we're one of the demographics that has one of the most favorable views across the board of socialism. We tend to support things like investing in good jobs, expanding the public sector, universal healthcare. And there's a way in which our movements sometimes haven't tapped into that full potential, and I think that that is important, important organizing and political work to be done. And so, you know, we saw in the days after the primary there were some takes saying majority Black precincts went for Cuomo and use that, which is in part true, but it's not a data point that actually tells the whole story there. Because if you then look at the polling going in or some of the exit polls, what you see is that among Black voters that knew who Mamdani was, he had enormously high support. And what I see in my organizing is that I, more so than I am concerned with Black people being pulled to the Right or being pulled in by Trump while there is, you know, small, there are some people who are being pulled that way-

LAURA FLANDERS: Some disturbing polling recently, but keep going.

ASHA RANSBY-SPORN: Yes, yes, and I've dug into that. But even more so than that, I think what we see are people who are disengaged and feel like our political system isn't going to deliver for them at all, who feel let down by the establishment Democratic party that has really sold all of us out for decades. And Black people have borne enormous amount of the brunt of that impact.

LAURA FLANDERS: Felipe, the race has changed a little, I think, since New York Attorney General Letitia James came on board strongly behind Zohran Mamdani. And in just the last few weeks, we've seen huge rallies happen with Letitia James and Mamdani specifically representing a sort of face of defiance against ICE raids and in support of the immigrant population in New

York. What are you seeing that you think is important about all that and is it significant for policy going forward?

FELIPE DE LA HOZ: Sure, yeah. I mean, I think Letitia James has enormous credibility here, for a number of reasons. I mean, she has, you know, a very interesting and sort of varied career in politics. She was public advocate, became attorney general at a pretty pivotal moment, and was actually sort of one of the forefront, you know, national figures actually holding Trump to account during his first term, you know, and subsequently, right, you know, famously brought the prosecutions, you know, against him, the only ones that really ultimately stuck. Those were more like Alvin Bragg, but, you know, the investigations on to the Trump organization and whatnot. And, you know, now has been actually indicted by the Trump administration in a nakedly political fashion, which I think, you know, goes to show the extent to which she was a real antagonist to that administration, which actually I think helps Mamdani, again, because of the unpopularity of the Trump administration here. And so she's someone who's got a lot of credibility and a lot of, you know, clout in different sort of parts of the party, right? She's someone who is actually very well-respected in sort of moderate parts of the party here, if a little begrudgingly, and she has a lot of credibility in sort of Left-leaning circles. And so I think she is a good avatar to kind of bring together some of those things. And I think, you know, do what Mamdani increasingly doesn't need, but has needed for a good part of this campaign, which is essentially have people vouch for him, right? He was, you know, a virtual unknown, you know, seven, eight months ago. I mean, zero name recognition. And so, you know, to kind of ping off what Asha was saying as well, you know, he's someone who I think needed kind of trusted local interlocutors to really say like, "No, this guy's for real." So he is someone who, you know, he'll be at an event, someone will be like, "You're a socialist." And he'll be like, "Yep, now let's talk about the buses," right? And I think that, you know, that seems like a simple enough strategy, but it's one that I think a lot of, you know, sort of Left-leaning candidates haven't adopted because there's this sense that they have to essentially be like apologizing for their policy prescriptions and their stances. And, you know, Mamdani has not done that. He's fully embraced the positions that he's taken, the things he said. He's obviously been questioned a lot about certain, you know, sporadic statements that he's made, and he's walked back on some very, very like minor points, like something he said about the police, like, years ago or whatever. And that's just politics for you. But for the most part, you know, he very much embraces who he is and what his policy prescriptions are. And, you know, he's someone who will say, "Yeah, we're going to get ICE out of New York City. We're going to, you know, defend, you know, we're going to freeze the rents the entire time that, you know, I'm mayor." Can he get ICE out of New York City? Probably not, right? There's not really a legal mechanism for that, but it doesn't really matter, right? You know, you campaign in poetry and you govern in prose, people like that. People, you know, understand what he's trying to convey even if, you know, some of it is kind of, you know, procedurally iffy. And so I think that, you know, his sticking to the script and sticking to his message, unapologetically, not, you know, all the time saying, "Sorry, sorry, sorry for having these

positions," is partly what his secret sauce is. And then he just seems like a nice guy. You know, go up down on the street and have a conversation.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now that hasn't necessarily saved him from some pretty brutal coverage in the media. And we have to say The New York Times especially has spent a lot of ink reminding people of his position, criticizing US support for Israel during the Gaza War, standing up for Palestinian rights, showing up at demonstrations. Coming to you, Osama, what perhaps, this is a leading question, are commercial media getting wrong about that part of his platform as it relates to his popularity?

OSAMA SIBLANI: I'm sure you've heard of this saying that you believe in one person that can change the world. I think that I do. Mamdani is one of those people because he is really changing the world from the largest city in the United States in this campaign. And he's changing a lot of things. And that's why the mainstream media is going after him. Because the mainstream media, unfortunately, this is the same media that went for the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and they beat Trump for war. And they had George Bush and Tony Blair in their invasion of Iraq, for unsubstantiated accusations of weapons of mass destruction. So I think that they have lost a lot of their respect and a lot of their, you know, readership because of this. And also social media has taken a toll on them as well, because they are telling what's happening. We know right now what Mamdani is saying, not through The New York Times, not through The Washington Post, unfortunately, but through social media. And it's making its way to the hearts and minds of people around the country. And that's why, I believe, one person can change the world. Mamdani is one of them.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now Asha will say, but there's movement behind Mamdani, not to say a coalition. And I love the phrase that you used in a [recent discussion](#) with our friend Dan Denvir at The Dig where you talked about the lessons of the Brandon Johnson experience there in Chicago as mayor for the Mamdani future, and you say we have experienced a certain amount of, I think you said coalitional strain. What is the takeaway lesson, Asha, from Chicago so far from your point of view?

ASHA RANSBY-SPORN: Yeah, and I just want to appreciate Osama's point, which I think is an important compliment to mine about movements and coalition, is that I do also think this is a time when we need leadership. And I think that we should want that. I think sometimes our communities are so used to being let down by people in positions of power that we actually like take this posture that we don't want any power at all or we don't want the people who are on our side to be successful. And so it's a growing edge to figure out how do we actually, like, support and have the back of people who we do believe can be champions and can be leaders in their own right. And, you know, getting really good at being able to distinguish a leader when they are going to champion the demands and the vision of a movement.

LAURA FLANDERS: Correct me if I'm wrong. My feeling around Chicago was there was huge anticipation and excitement around Brandon Johnson's campaign and his victory as a progressive win for the Left. And since then a lot more criticism, although maybe that's changed in this confrontation with ICE.

ASHA RANSBY-SPORN: Yeah, I do think that it took reorientation, you know? We have decades of mayors in Chicago that have sold off parts of public infrastructure to make money for their friends who have, you know, run the city like a, you know, deal-making machine with, you know, a patronage system just to hold onto political power. And we have run campaigns in a city that has been the heart of experimenting with neoliberal reforms that have made our city more unequal along the lines of race and class. So movements have come together and blamed Chicago mayors for the choices that they've made. And so the way that we understand politics is through the eyes of kind of like the, you know, the buck stops with the person on the fifth floor, as we say in Chicago, or that's where the mayor's office is in city hall. And I think that one of the big lessons is that, you know, there are real challenges to governing a big city as a progressive executive, and there are a lot of other people and power structures that influence the decisions that you can make or the things that happen. And I think just the public education to show that we may have elected a mayor, but the same people, the same companies, the same money that elected Rahm Emanuel, who closed 50 schools or, you know, made other decisions, you know, along the line with a kind of privatization, neoliberal agenda of like cutting back spending that supports the everyday people in the working class, that political class, those operatives, that political money is still in the ecosystem being spent to shape the political reality, to oppose or support measures that do or don't hurt their pockets and they're very much still activated. And then, you know, there are things that only the governor has the power to do. Now we're in this moment where Trump is making massive cuts. He just pulled \$2 billion that was meant to fund the extension of our Red Line, our train to reach more of the like Black and working class parts of the south side. He's finding all of these ways to really target our city economically too. And I think what we're seeing is a lot of unity and a lot of clarity about what side we're on, and the sides feel very clear.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Osama, in that delicate balance that you've identified between individual history makers and the movements that they're a part of, and I hear you, we need both, where do you think your reporting and the reporting of institutions like yours has strength perhaps over the commercial media that at this point seems so incredibly cowed in any case but never covered movements well?

OSAMA SIBLANI: For the last 41 years, since the establishment of The Arab American News, many things have changed in the cities that we were operating in, especially in Dearborn. Dearborn, in the history, was a racist town. It was pushing everybody who was not white outside

of the city. And actually when I started the newspaper in 1984, the mayor launched a campaign headlined "Let's Talk about the Arab Problem," because the Arabs were coming in from the windows when the doors were shut in the face of African Americans and other, you know, ethnic groups. And he won. He was number three in the polls. And he came out to win in 1985 and become the mayor of Dearborn. But what happened 40 years later? Abdullah Hussein Hammoud is the mayor of Dearborn today, the president of the City Council is Michael Sareini, the head of the District Court is Sam Salamey, all of them are Lebanese American. The head of the police is Issa Shahin, who is an Egyptian American. So we have changed. Also in Dearborn Heights, in Hamtramck, in Canton, everywhere, in Birmingham things are moving forward. So I think we've made a difference in trying to bring our community back into the political and the electoral process. This is where you can make a difference. This is why we admire what Mamdani is doing, what Abdullah Hammoud is doing, what Mo Baydoun is doing in Dearborn Heights because they are lifting our community, bringing them in order to participate, vote, because voting is the power of the people. And they have a chance to make it every year, whether it's municipality, whether it's midterm or presidential election. We have made a great deal of progress in here in Michigan. It's a swing state as you know, Laura, and we have done a great deal in educating our community on how to vote. So we try to educate our community, we try to encourage them to become public servants, to engage with other communities, and to participate in the political process. And that's how we can change.

LAURA FLANDERS: Asha, Felipe, Osama, thank you so much. It's been a great conversation. I look forward to having you again back on the program. Viewers, don't forget, we have uncut versions of every conversation available free to the subscribers to our podcast and all that information is at our website. 'Till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious. Thanks for watching.

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