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OPINION EAST IS EAST

Mamdani Brings Third World Prejudices to New York

The mayoral candidate champions policies that make countries poor and spews anti-Israel rhetoric.



By **Sadanand Dhume** [Follow](#)

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Why would someone who emigrated to the U.S. from a poor country champion ideas that keep poor countries poor? The rise of 33-year-old Ugandan-born Indian-American socialist Zohran Mamdani in the New York mayoral race raises the question.

Mr. Mamdani's ideas on economics and international relations mirror the failed policies of socialist-era India, from which his mother, filmmaker Mira Nair, emigrated in the 1970s.

That the hub of global capitalism may elect a mayor who dreams of the government "seizing the means of production" would once have been too absurd to contemplate. Yet here we are. Mr. Mamdani represents the left's failure to learn the lessons of the Cold War. He also represents a crude brand of anti-Israel rhetoric more common in the so-called Global South. To many Americans, Mr. Mamdani's background—a Shiite Muslim born in Uganda to ethnic Indian parents—may appear fresh and interesting, but his ideas are depressingly stale.

Start with rent control, which Swedish economist Assar Lindbeck called "the most efficient technique presently known to destroy a city—except for bombing." India's first rent-control laws were introduced during colonial rule. After independence, they became more draconian. In Bombay and Calcutta, landlords were forbidden to raise rents. Tenants could squat on property and pass it on to their heirs. Indian cities, once among the most advanced in the East, became known worldwide for squalor.

Mr. Mamdani opposes the rich. "I don't think we should have billionaires," he told Kristen Welker on NBC's "Meet the Press." Margaret Thatcher famously remarked that socialist governments "always run out of other people's money." India learned

this the hard way. Under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who held office for most of the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s, the highest marginal rate of income tax reached 97.5%. High taxes coupled with reckless government spending spawned a vast underground economy and pushed talented Indians to emigrate. Facing an economic crisis in 1991, India had to turn to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout.

The parallels with socialist-era India don't end there. Government-run grocery stores? Been there, done that. Government-built housing units? Their boxy contours mar urban India.

Mr. Mamdani's views on foreign affairs are as troubling as those on domestic policy. When candidates in a June debate were asked which foreign country they would visit first after becoming mayor, Mr. Mamdani said he would stay in New York to deal with its problems. Yet he's clearly fixated on foreign politics. Two countries in particular, Israel and India, attract Mr. Mamdani's ire.

Both Mr. Mamdani's mother and his father, Columbia professor Mahmood Mamdani, have long records of hostility toward Israel. Their son follows suit. "I began my political organizing life around Palestinian solidarity," he said in a 2020 interview with Jacobin, an American socialist magazine. As a student of Africana studies at Bowdoin College, Mr. Mamdani co-founded the college's chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine. In 2017, before he became a U.S. citizen, Mr. Mamdani rapped about his love for the "Holy Land Five," leaders of a U.S.-based charity who were convicted in 2008 for providing material support for terrorism to Hamas.

He supports the anti-Israel boycott, divestment and sanctions movement and accuses the Jewish state of "genocide" in Gaza. If elected, he said he would arrest Benjamin Netanyahu if the Israeli prime minister visits New York City. He has refused to condemn the chant "globalize the *intifada*." During the Second Intifada, between 2000 and 2005, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad killed more than 1,000 Israelis and wounded thousands more. Pair this with recent murderous antisemitic attacks in Colorado and Washington, and it shouldn't take a doctorate in linguistics to recognize why the slogan is worrying.

Mr. Mamdani frames his refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state in high-minded terms. "I'm not comfortable supporting any state that has a hierarchy of citizenship on the basis of religion or anything else," he said to an interviewer last month. One might ask, then, why he looked perfectly comfortable this March speaking at an event celebrating the creation of Pakistan, a country that privileges Islam and has ethnically cleansed most of its Sikhs, Christians and Hindus.

The would-be mayor's views on India are also strident. He has called Prime Minister Narendra Modi a "war criminal" for the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots that took place on

his watch as chief minister of Gujarat. In 2023 Mr. Mamdani signed a statement condemning Mr. Modi's visit to New York.

On India, Mr. Mamdani has staked out partisan positions on everything from proposed agricultural reforms to the election of a communist mayor in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Mr. Modi and his party aren't above criticism, but Mr. Mamdani's understanding of his ancestral homeland is cartoonishly lacking in nuance.

It's impossible to determine how much of Mr. Mamdani's worldview came from home versus from fellow Democratic socialists. But one thing is certain: He represents a set of failed policies and hackneyed political prejudices.



Zohran Mamdani greets a supporter during a watch party in New York, June 25. PHOTO: DAVID DELGADO/REUTERS

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About this article

East is East

"East is East" explores the most important news from India and South Asia with a focus on the region's domestic politics, economics and geopolitics. It appears every other week on Thursday evenings.

Sadanand Dhume

Sadanand Dhume writes a biweekly column on India and South Asia for WSJ.com. He focuses on the region's politics, economics and foreign policy.

Mr. Dhume is also a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington,

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