



What Iraq Can Learn from Zohran Mamdani's Win

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About

Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies is an independent, nonprofit think tank based in Baghdad, Iraq. Its primary mission is to offer an authentic perspective on public and foreign policy issues related to Iraq and the region.

Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policy-makers and academics.

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Last night in New York City, something remarkable happened. Zohran Mamdani—a Ugandan-born Muslim, son of an Indian filmmaker and a Ugandan political theorist— was elected mayor of the world’s most diverse city. His victory, while geographically distant, should send a quiet tremor through political circles far beyond America’s borders, including Iraq, where parliamentary elections are set to be held on 11 November.

Mamdani’s triumph was not just about politics. It was about communication. And that is where Iraq’s political class keeps failing.

When Voters Stop Listening

Also last night, I came home from Boston University, where I study and work, to find my wife watching al-Sharqiya News. On TV was a parliamentary candidate talking about their “electoral program” ahead of the November 11 elections. A few minutes into the interview, my wife turned to me and asked, “What exactly are they saying?”

I listened closely. I couldn’t tell either. The TV presenter herself interrupted the candidate and said, “But that is not your job—that’s the executive branch” in a clear frustration at the



list of abstractions and promises that had no clear meaning. The candidate was, to put it mildly, unconvincing.

That small exchange captured something much larger about Iraqi politics: the distance between words and meaning, and between politicians and the people they hope to represent.

But this is far from being the only instance. I have yet to see a candidate who speaks with a concrete plan to address everyday concerns. Instead, they promise to “fix the education system,” “improve healthcare,” or “end the electricity crisis,” as if members of parliament could simply pick up a wrench and repair the grid. Even those who seem better prepared still invoke divine blessings, not policy.

Even party leaders, with decades in power, sound no cleaner. They often speak in broad strokes about “sovereignty” or “ending corruption,” yet rarely describe a single institutional pathway to achieve those goals.

Meanwhile, Iraq's disillusioned majority, by some accounts nearly 80 percent of the population, continue to look with weary skepticism. This majority has grown alienated not only because they are inherently apathetic, but because no one offers them a story of hope or improvement. Without hope for a better future, there's no incentive to spend a day voting for candidates who sound indistinguishable from those who disappointed them before.



Disinterest, in other words, is not apathy; it is a verdict on an unconvincing performance by the political class

The Clarity of Mamdani

Back to Mamdani. His campaign was fundamentally built on clarity, both moral and practical. He ran against New York's political establishment, defeating former Governor Andrew Cuomo, a man with a dynasty name and deep institutional backing. Mamdani didn't pretend to be everything to everyone. He was unabashedly left-wing, unapologetically Muslim, and unmistakably focused on tangible issues: free public transit, universal childcare, rent freezes, and a higher minimum wage. But what made his campaign effective wasn't just the laundry list of concrete policies, it was the narrative coherence behind them. Every speech, every video, every tweet returned to the same central promise: "This city belongs to you." It was a message that transcended ideology. For a generation disillusioned by establishment politics and economic precarity, Mamdani's message of belonging and empowerment resonated deeply.

Mamdani understood what many politicians forget: politics is storytelling, and storytelling begins with empathy. Iraqi candidates, by contrast, rarely tell a resonating story at all.

Iraq's Missing Story

If you strip away the noise, a successful political message answers five simple questions:



1. What makes you qualified?
2. What do you believe is right and wrong?
3. What will you do for me, my family, my province, my country?
4. Why should I trust you?
5. Why are you better than the others?

Most Iraqi candidates answer none of them with the clarity required.

It is not about reciting résumés, because voters don't care about your job history in the public sector or the degrees you got God knows from where. Boasting about a party's sacrifices but failing to explain how that history translates into better governance today doesn't help anyone, nor does the ritual promise of reform without explaining the path to get there. And most disastrously, candidates avoid telling voters why they are running. Saying things like "I will fix the system," "I will end corruption," or "I will protect the people" is great to hear, but how exactly? Through what authority? What mechanisms? And, importantly, what exactly motivates you to do so? Unfortunately, in Iraq, politics has become a performance of intention, without the burden of implementation.

Even incumbent Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani—arguably one of the more competent Iraqi leaders in recent



years—has struggled to turn his record into an effective political message. He has a pulpit, a platform, and some achievements to point to. Yet his communication remains abstract and bureaucratic, trapped in technocratic language that doesn't connect with ordinary people.

If I were advising him, I would tell him to speak not like a prime minister, but like a neighbor: “You have been dealing with electricity shortages since 1990. If you vote for me, I will get the job done and deliver you 24/7 electricity by 2027; I need your votes to finish what I started.” That is what effective messaging sounds like: direct, practical, and personal. It gives voters a stake in your win.

The Power of Hope

The disaffected 80 percent of Iraqis are not unreachable; they are waiting for someone to make politics relevant to them. Hope is not an abstract emotion; it is a political resource. It is what convinces a young, unemployed man in Nasiriyah or a widow in Mosul to believe that voting matters, that tomorrow might be different for them and their children.

But hope must be specific. It must have a face, a plan, and a promise attached to it. Mamdani's “hope” wasn't rhetorical wishful thinking; it was a promise of affordable housing, free buses, and dignified work. It was hope with a roadmap.

In Iraq, hope has unfortunately been drained by repetition.





Every four years, the same faces appear with the same slogans of “change,” “reform,” “sovereignty” and people know the movie’s ending before it starts. Restoring hope means speaking a new political language: one that acknowledges the past but refuses to normalize it, one that focuses on fixing daily problems rather than defending political legacies.

Messaging as an Act of Respect

One of the subtler lessons from Mamdani’s campaign is that clear messaging is not just smart politics; it is a form of respect for the electorate. When politicians speak plainly, they acknowledge voters’ intelligence. When they speak vaguely, they insult it.

Iraqi voters are disenchanted, but not indifferent. They have heard decades of empty slogans and have little patience for more. What they crave is specificity: how will you make electricity more reliable? How will you create jobs for graduates? How will you prevent the next round of corruption scandals?

Each of these questions and challenges is an opportunity to craft a message that feels tangible. Mamdani’s campaign was full of such specifics: fare-free buses, rent freezes, childcare, with a specific plan of how to pay for them. Even when critics dismissed his ideas as too radical, voters appreciated that they could understand them.



From Symbolism to Substance

Iraq's democracy, for all its flaws, is real. Elections happen. Votes are counted. But democracy without credible messaging becomes an echo chamber of slogans and unproductive rhetoric.

Mamdani's win reminds us that politics can be revived by sincerity, not spectacle. His rise from community organizer to New York's most powerful officeholder wasn't inevitable. It was built on the belief that people still respond to hope when it is grounded in reality. That lesson should not be lost on Iraq's political class. The problem is not that voters have stopped listening, but it is that politicians have stopped speaking a language worth hearing.

The Way Forward

If Iraqi candidates want to learn something from Mamdani's win, it is this: voters don't reward the loudest, the richest, or the most pious; they reward the honest, the clearest, and the most empathetic.

A winning campaign doesn't need a thousand abstract promises. It needs one coherent story about how power will be used to improve people's lives. Candidates must be able to say, in a sentence, why they are running and what difference they will make. They must learn to connect their biography with purpose, conviction with competence, and empathy with action.





Mamdani's victory wasn't about ideology; it was about communication. It was a reminder that even in an age of polarization, the simplest message wins: I see you, I hear you, and I am here to make your life better.

Until Iraqi politicians learn to say that—and mean it—they will continue to speak into the void, talking past the very people whose future they claim to represent.





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