



“INDONESIA COULD NEVER”: VICARIOUS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE DIGITAL SPECTRE OF COMPARISONS IN INDONESIAN NETIZENS’ DISCOURSE ON ZOHRAN MAMDANI

“INDONESIA TAKKAN MUNGKIN BISA”: KETERLIBATAN POLITIK SECARA PERANTARA DAN BAYANG-BAYANG DIGITAL PERBANDINGAN DALAM WACANA WARGANET INDONESIA TENTANG ZOHRAN MAMDANI

Muhammad Rafly Akbar^{1*}, Wichitra Yasya²

^{1*,2}Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya, Email : wichitra.yasya@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id

*email koresponden: wichitra.yasya@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62567/micjo.v3i3.2883>

Abstract

This study examines how a non-diasporic public in the Global South engages with a foreign election in which it holds no vote, no residence, and no direct material stake. Rather than asking how Indonesian netizens represent Zohran Mamdani, the first Muslim Mayor of New York City, it asks what talking about Mamdani does for these netizens as members of their own polity, and develops the concept of comparative civic imagination: the use of a foreign political figure as a discursive instrument for evaluating, criticising, and re-imagining one’s own democracy. The study applies qualitative Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) to public Indonesian-language discourse about Mamdani on platform X between 1 November 2025 and 30 June 2026, drawing on a purposively constructed corpus of 213 units—134 citizen-account units as the analytical core and 79 media-account units as contextual triangulation—recoded by comparative function and affective register rather than by stance toward the figure. The findings show that Indonesian netizens engage Mamdani through a comparative architecture organised by the vernacular frame “Mamdani Indonesia” (45% of citizen units) and enacted through three repertoires: analogical personification, institutional benchmarking, and counterfactual transposition. The discourse is animated by civic despair—crystallised in the idiom “Indonesia could never”—which operates as a participatory rather than an apathetic affect, while a domestic value-compatibility filter of doctrinal, sectarian, and purity tests renders the admired model discursively non-transferable, closing a recursive loop theorised here as a digitally networked spectre of comparisons. The article shifts the analysis of transnational digital engagement away from cosmopolitan and diasporic assumptions toward the vicarious engagement of



non-diasporic publics, re-theorises despair as a mode of civic engagement, and recovers Benedict Anderson's spectre of comparisons for platform-era political communication in the Global South.

Keywords : Vicarious Political Engagement, Spectre Of Comparisons, Affective Publics, Civic Despair, Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis.

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana publik non-diaspora di Global Selatan merespons pemilihan umum di luar negeri—sebuah peristiwa di mana mereka tidak memiliki hak suara, tidak berdomisili, dan tidak memiliki kepentingan material langsung. Alih-alih menanyakan bagaimana warganet Indonesia merepresentasikan Zohran Mamdani—Wali Kota New York City pertama yang beragama Islam—studi ini menelaah apa makna pembicaraan mengenai Mamdani bagi warganet tersebut sebagai anggota komunitas politik mereka sendiri. Studi ini mengembangkan konsep "imajinasi kewargaan komparatif" (comparative civic imagination), yaitu penggunaan tokoh politik asing sebagai instrumen diskursif untuk mengevaluasi, mengkritik, dan membayangkan ulang demokrasi di negara sendiri. Penelitian ini menerapkan metode kualitatif Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) terhadap diskursus publik berbahasa Indonesia mengenai Mamdani di platform X antara 1 November 2025 hingga 30 Juni 2026. Data yang digunakan berasal dari korpus yang disusun secara purposif sebanyak 213 unit—terdiri dari 134 unit akun warga sebagai inti analisis dan 79 unit akun media sebagai triangulasi kontekstual—yang dikodekan berdasarkan fungsi komparatif dan register afektif, bukan berdasarkan sikap terhadap tokoh tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa warganet Indonesia merespons sosok Mamdani melalui struktur perbandingan yang diorganisasikan oleh bingkai vernakular "Mamdani Indonesia" (45% dari unit akun warga) dan diwujudkan melalui tiga repertoar: personifikasi analogis, tolok ukur kelembagaan, dan transposisi kontrafaktual. Diskursus ini didorong oleh rasa keputusasaan sipil—yang mengkristal dalam ungkapan "Indonesia tidak akan pernah bisa"—yang justru memicu partisipasi alih-alih sikap apatis. Namun, adanya filter kesesuaian nilai domestik—berupa uji doktrin, sektarianisme, dan kemurnian—menyebabkan model yang dikagumi tersebut tidak dapat ditransfer secara diskursif, sehingga menutup sebuah siklus rekursif yang dalam studi ini diteorikan sebagai "momok perbandingan" (spectre of comparisons) di era komunikasi politik berbasis platform digital di Global Selatan. Artikel ini menggeser analisis keterlibatan digital transnasional dari asumsi kosmopolitan dan diaspora menuju keterlibatan secara proksi (vicarious engagement) oleh publik non-diaspora, merumuskan ulang keputusasaan sebagai bentuk keterlibatan sipil, serta menghadirkan kembali konsep "momok perbandingan" dari Benedict Anderson dalam konteks komunikasi politik era platform di Global Selatan.

Kata Kunci : Keterlibatan Politik secara Vikarius, Momok Perbandingan, Publik Afektif, Keputusasaan Sipil, Analisis Wacana Bermediasi Komputer.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 1 January 2026, Zohran Mamdani was inaugurated as Mayor of New York City, completing an electoral rise that had been followed far beyond the United States (Reuters, 2025). Among the publics that followed it most intensively was one with no vote, no residence, and no direct material stake in New York politics: Indonesian-language users of platform X. Between Mamdani's victory in November 2025 and the religiously charged months of mid-2026, Indonesian accounts posted about, replied to, quoted, and argued over the new mayor with an intensity normally reserved for domestic politics. In one of the world's largest digital societies—approximately 230 million internet users and



180 million social media identities (DataReportal, 2026)—a foreign mayoralty became, for a season, a fixture of the vernacular public agenda.

The empirical puzzle that motivates this article is not that a Muslim mayor of New York attracted attention in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. It is what that attention consisted of. The single most frequent thing Indonesian netizens did with Mamdani was not to praise, attack, or explain him; it was to compare him—with Indonesian politicians, Indonesian institutions, Indonesian history and, above all, with an Indonesia imagined as incapable of producing him. Nearly half of the citizen-produced units in the corpus analysed here are organised by a single vernacular frame, "Mamdani Indonesia", whose core question is whether Indonesia could ever have a figure like him, and whose signature affect is condensed in the code-switched idiom that gives this article its title: "Indonesia could never."

Political communication research on transnational digital engagement has been organised around two dominant figures. The first is the cosmopolitan spectator of a transnational public sphere, whose mediated attention to distant others is read as an outward-facing ethical and political orientation (Chouliaraki, 2013). The second is the diasporic subject, whose digital engagement with a homeland or co-ethnic community is grounded in biographical ties, as in the literature on digital diasporas and transnational activism (Ansar & Khaled, 2023; Aziz, 2024; Hitchcock, 2016; Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022). Both figures presuppose a connective tissue—a normative orientation to the world, or a biographical tie to elsewhere. Neither describes Indonesian netizens talking about New York. These users are not a diaspora of New York, and, as this study shows, their gaze is not cosmopolitan in orientation but insistently inward-looking. What the literature lacks is a theorisation of vicarious political engagement: sustained, affectively invested, evaluative engagement with electoral politics in which the engaged public cannot, and does not seek to, participate.

A second body of work, on everyday political talk, has established that politics is talked into being in ordinary and often non-political online spaces (Wright, 2012; Highfield, 2016), that popular-cultural and fan-like modes of engagement can perform serious civic work (van Zoonen, 2005), and that such talk is constitutive of civic culture rather than its degraded residue (Dahlgren, 2009). Yet this scholarship has overwhelmingly examined publics talking about their own politics. Meanwhile, research on Indonesian digital politics has concentrated on domestic elections, cyber-troops, algorithmic enclaves, and polarisation (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2017), and on the online transformation of religious authority (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). Little attention has been paid to a practice that sits at the intersection of these literatures: Indonesians using foreign politics as raw material for domestic critique—and doing so precisely at a moment when scholars diagnose democratic regression and deepening public disaffection in Indonesia (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019; Power & Warburton, 2020; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

To conceptualise this practice, the article recovers a concept coined for Southeast Asia long before social media: Benedict Anderson's (1998) "spectre of comparisons" (*el demonio de las comparaciones*), the condition—first attributed to José Rizal—of no longer being able to see one's own country except through a haunting, involuntary comparison with elsewhere, as if through an inverted telescope. This article argues that platform X gives that spectre a networked, searchable, and affectively charged infrastructure. Combining Anderson's comparative gaze with scholarship on affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), civic emotion (Coleman, 2013; Norris, 2011), cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), and the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004), the article develops the concept of comparative civic imagination: the collective, platform-mediated practice of imagining, testing, and (dis)qualifying one's own political future through a foreign figure.

The study asks three questions. First, through what comparative discursive repertoires do Indonesian netizens on X engage Zohran Mamdani as a foreign political figure? Second, how do the affective expressions embedded in this discourse function as evaluations of Indonesian political life? Third, under what discursive conditions is the foreign political model judged transferable—or non-transferable—to Indonesia? These questions are answered through a qualitative Computer-Mediated



Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2004) of 134 Indonesian-language citizen units, with 79 media units as contextual triangulation, posted between 1 November 2025 and 30 June 2026. The article develops the conceptual framework, describes the corpus and the analytical recoding that distinguishes this study, presents the findings along the three questions, and synthesises them into a model of the digitally networked spectre of comparisons.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

From Cosmopolitan and Diasporic Publics to Vicarious Political Engagement

Studies of transnational digital engagement have made two figures paradigmatic. Work in the tradition of the transnational public sphere and mediated humanitarianism examines how audiences relate to distant others through registers of pity, irony, or solidarity; Chouliaraki (2013) shows that the contemporary “ironic spectator” engages distant suffering in self-referential ways, folding the distant other into projects of the self. Digital diaspora scholarship, meanwhile, demonstrates how dispersed communities use platforms to build visibility, collective identity, and transnational mobilisation, from Rohingya diaspora publics (Ansar & Khaled, 2023; Aziz, 2024) to the rhetoric of the transnational BDS movement (Hitchcock, 2016) and digital protest cultures more broadly (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022). These literatures share an assumption: that transnational engagement flows either from a normative orientation toward the world or from a biographical tie to another place.

The Indonesian discourse on Mamdani fits neither template, but it resonates with a third literature: everyday political talk. Wright (2012) shows that consequential political talk emerges in “third spaces” whose primary purpose is not political; Highfield (2016) documents how the irreverent, memetic, and affective genres of social media carry everyday political work; van Zoonen (2005) demonstrates that fan-like modes of engagement with political figures can constitute rather than corrupt citizenship; and Dahlgren (2009) locates such talk within the circuits of civic culture through which democratic agency is sustained. This article extends that tradition across borders. It defines vicarious political engagement as evaluative, affectively invested talk about a polity in which the talker holds no electoral membership, undertaken not to influence that polity but to make sense of one’s own. The concept names a spectatorship that is productive: like Chouliaraki’s ironic spectator, the vicarious political engager is ultimately oriented toward the self—but the “self” here is a national political community rather than a humanitarian subject.

The Spectre of Comparisons in a Platform Society

Long before platforms, Benedict Anderson gave Southeast Asian studies a concept for exactly this inward-turning transnational gaze. Reading José Rizal, Anderson (1998) described *el demonio de las comparaciones*—the spectre of comparisons—as the experience of the colonial subject who, having seen Europe, can no longer look at the gardens of Manila without simultaneously seeing their European counterparts: a double vision through an inverted telescope, in which the home country is henceforth perceived comparatively, and often woundingly. The spectre is not a method of comparison chosen by an analyst; it is a haunting that afflicts the political imagination of the periphery. Anderson’s (2006) broader argument that nations are imagined through shared media forms supplies the complementary insight: the instruments of imagination change with communication technology.

This article contends that platform X re-infrastructures the spectre of comparisons in three ways. First, the affordances of visibility, persistence, and re-circulability (Treem, Leonardi, & van den Hooff, 2020) turn fleeting comparative perceptions into durable, searchable, and quotable public objects. Second, the platform’s relational genres—replies, quote posts, reposts, and threads—make comparison dialogic: each comparative claim is available to be endorsed, corrected, escalated, or ridiculed, so that the comparison accumulates across users rather than residing in a single consciousness (Herring, 2004; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2019). Third, recurrent phrases operate as devices of ambient affiliation: even without hashtags, a searchable formula such as “Mamdani Indonesia” binds technically unconnected posts into one recognisable collective discourse (Zappavigna, 2018). Under conditions of deep mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), the spectre of comparisons ceases to be an individual affliction and becomes a networked public practice.



Affective Publics, Civic Despair, and Cruel Optimism

If comparison supplies the discourse's architecture, affect supplies its energy. Papacharissi (2015) shows that networked publics are convened and bound by structures of feeling: they are affective publics, mobilised around shared sentiment before—and sometimes instead of—shared programmes. The scholarship on civic emotion specifies what such feelings can be. Coleman (2013) argues that the experience of politics is governed by the felt sense of counting or being discounted; Norris (2011) documents the global spread of critical citizens who combine strong support for democratic ideals with deep dissatisfaction over democratic performance—a democratic deficit that is affective as much as institutional.

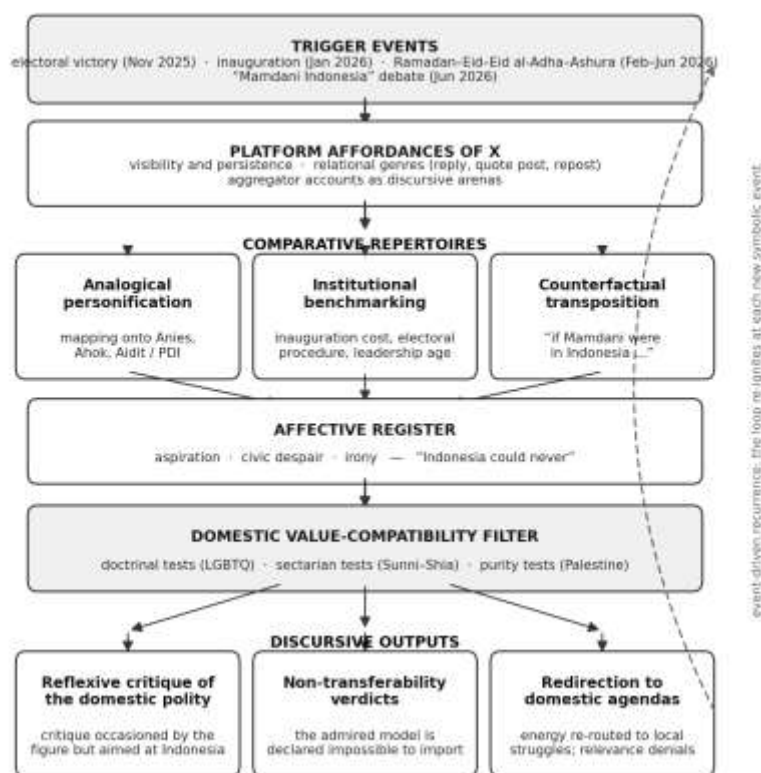
Two further concepts specify the darker registers observed in this study. Berlant (2011) names cruel optimism the condition in which one remains attached to a fantasy of the good life whose realisation the same relation forecloses, so that the attachment itself becomes the obstacle and the wound. Appadurai (2004) conceptualises aspiration as a cultural capacity—the capacity to aspire—that is unevenly distributed and exercised through concrete images of possible futures. Read together, these literatures make it possible to treat despair not as apathy, disengagement, or exit, but as a mode of voice (Hirschman, 1970): an affectively saturated, publicly performed evaluation of one's polity. The present study operationalises this insight by asking what evaluative work the affect in the Mamdani discourse performs—and for which polity.

Value Boundaries and the Transferability of Political Models

Comparison and affect do not circulate unchecked; they meet the value structure of the comparing public. The sociology of symbolic boundaries shows that groups draw moral, cultural, and religious lines that determine who and what may be included, admired, or imported (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In Indonesia's digital sphere, such boundary work is intensified by the fragmentation of religious authority online, where the power to declare what is Islamically acceptable is contested by whoever speaks (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020), and by an algorithmically clustered public prone to tribal nationalism (Lim, 2017). Research on Muslim digital counterpublics has largely examined boundary work directed outward, against Islamophobia (Eckert, Metzger-Riftkin, Kolhoff, & O'Shay-Wallace, 2021). This article directs attention inward: to the discursive tests by which a public decides whether an admired foreign model is compatible with domestic values—what it terms the value-compatibility filter. The filter differs from identity negotiation: at stake is not primarily who counts as a Muslim, but which politics is admissible at home, with religious categories doing political-institutional work.

Conceptual Framework: Comparative Civic Imagination

Figure 1 integrates these strands. Trigger events render a foreign figure salient; platform affordances make the resulting talk visible, persistent, and relational; the talk is conducted through comparative repertoires; those repertoires are animated by an affective register of aspiration, despair, and irony; and the whole circuit passes through a domestic value-compatibility filter that issues verdicts of (non-)transferability. The outputs—reflexive critique of the domestic polity, non-transferability verdicts, and redirection to domestic agendas—feed back into the conditions for the next event-driven cycle. The framework guided the recoding of the corpus described in the next section; the findings, in turn, refine it.



Source: Developed by the authors (2026).

Figure 1. The comparative civic imagination model: a digitally networked spectre of comparisons

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study is qualitative and interpretive, grounded in a constructivist paradigm: the meanings attached to Mamdani, to Indonesia, and to the relation between them are treated as products of situated discursive construction rather than as fixed attributes. Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) provides the analytical approach. CMDA studies online behaviour through its observable discursive traces—words, messages, exchanges, threads, and archives—and organises analysis across four levels: structure, meaning, interaction, and social behaviour (Herring, 2004; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). The approach suits an object that is not an individual—Mamdani appears here only as a discourse trigger, not as a biographical subject—but a distributed conversational practice.

The research site is platform X, selected for its open, public, conversation-centric architecture in which single posts, replies, quote posts, reposts, hashtags, visuals, and threads form legible discursive trails. Primary data are public posts produced by Indonesian-language accounts, or accounts identifiable as belonging to the Indonesian digital public sphere, that discuss Zohran Mamdani. The data period runs from 1 November 2025 to 30 June 2026, covering the phases in which the discourse was most intense: the electoral victory and its aftermath (November 2025), the inauguration (January 2026), the sequence of Islamic religious moments from Ramadan to Ashura (February–June 2026), and the peak of the “Mamdani Indonesia” debate (June 2026). Searches combined the keywords “Zohran Mamdani”, “Mamdani Muslim”, “wali kota Muslim New York”, “Mamdani Palestina”, “Mamdani progresif”, “Mamdani Indonesia”, and “Mamdani LGBTQ”, together with combinations of the name with “minoritas”, “Islam”, and “keadilan sosial”.



Data were gathered through digital observation of public conversations and digital documentation—screenshots, links, post dates, post types, and interactional context—a necessity given the deletability of platform data. Inclusion required that a unit be public, fall within the period, substantively concern Mamdani, originate from an Indonesian-language or Indonesian-context account, and carry analysable communicative content. Exclusions removed locked or inaccessible content, spam and automated content, duplicates without added discursive value, and units whose context indicated other polities of the same language family, notably Malaysian-context posts marked by terms such as “Datuk Bandar” and “pilihan raya”. Table 1 summarises the corpus funnel: 782 retrieved units were reduced to 255 Indonesian-language units, 238 unique units, and 225 relevant units, yielding a final working corpus of 213 units—134 produced by citizen accounts, which constitute the analytical core, and 79 produced by media accounts, retained as a contextual and triangulation layer. Within the citizen sub-corpus, 52 units are single posts, 45 are replies, and 37 are quote posts, so that 82 of 134 units (61%) are relational forms. Secondary data—news reports, official documents, and academic literature—support contextual interpretation.

Table 1. Corpus construction funnel

Stage	Action	Result
Retrieval	Keyword searches across platform X	782 units (all languages)
Language filtering	Restriction to Indonesian-language markers	255 units
Deduplication	Removal of duplicates by post identity and text similarity	238 unique units
Period and relevance selection	Restriction to 1 Nov 2025–30 Jun 2026; removal of non-Indonesian and irrelevant units	225 eligible units
Actor separation	Separation of citizen accounts (core) from media accounts (context)	134 citizen + 79 media = 213 units

Source: Primary data, platform X, 1 November 2025–30 June 2026 (processed by the authors).

Analysis followed the qualitative sequence of data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing and verification, operationalised through staged coding: open coding generated descriptive codes close to the data; axial coding grouped codes into categories; selective coding formulated core themes. Coding was managed in a matrix supported by NVivo, and codes were mapped onto CMDA’s four levels: structure (word choice, code-switching, emoji, formats), meaning (how Mamdani, Indonesia, and their relation are made to mean), interaction (replies, quote posts, corrections, disputes), and social behaviour (patterns of alignment and boundary-drawing).

The decisive analytical choice of this study—and what distinguishes it from stance-based readings of the same material—is the orientation of the coding. An initial mapping by stance toward the figure (support 34%, critique 28%, ambivalence 15%, informational 13%, rejection 10% of the 134 citizen units) proved analytically misleading, because the largest share of “critique” was not directed at Mamdani at all but reflexively at Indonesia; stance-toward-figure coding misidentifies the discourse’s object. The corpus was therefore recoded by comparative function: for each unit, the analysis asked whether and how it performs comparison (its target, direction, and evaluative outcome), what affective register it mobilises (aspiration, despair, irony, deflection), and whether it issues a transferability claim about the foreign model. Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, an audit trail (search keywords, retrieval dates, links, screenshots, coding matrices, memos), thick description, and researcher reflexivity. Only public posts were analysed; quotations are reproduced verbatim with unit codes and dates, and, in line with internet-research ethics guidance (franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, & Ess, 2020), handle anonymisation can be applied at the journal’s



discretion. The study analyses discourse about a political figure; it neither verifies nor adjudicates the claims that circulate within it.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Comparative Architecture of the Discourse

The discourse is event-driven and comparative in its very architecture. As Table 2 shows, citizen units cluster in two peaks—November 2025 (40 units), around the electoral victory, and June 2026 (54 units), around Ashura and the viral “Mamdani Indonesia” debate—with religious and political trigger events igniting each wave. Structurally, the discourse is marked by intensive Indonesian–English code-switching in which the key evaluative vocabulary (“progresif”, “triple minority”, “PoC”, “inklusif”, “pro-LGBT”) is imported untranslated: a micro-comparative practice in which the lexicon of another polity’s politics is adopted before its politics is judged. Emoji and written laughter (“wkwk”, 🤔, 🤔, 🤔) operate as stance markers rather than decoration. Interactionally, conversations concentrate beneath aggregator and public-figure accounts (such as @tanyarlfe and @bennysiauw89) that function as arenas where replies collide—so that, technically, the node of the conversation is never Mamdani but domestic accounts.

Table 2. Temporal distribution and trigger events (citizen sub-corpus, n = 134)

Period	Units	Main trigger events
Nov 2025	40	Electoral victory; the “Mamdani Indonesia” framing begins to circulate
Dec 2025	1	Transition period; the conversation subsides
Jan 2026	9	Inauguration (oath taken on a Qur’an); greeting to Palestine
Feb 2026	5	Start of Ramadan; criticism over a security case
Mar 2026	10	City Hall iftar; Eid al-Fitr; dinner honouring a Palestinian activist
Apr 2026	6	First 100 days; tax and education policies
May 2026	9	Eid al-Adha; absence from the Israel parade
Jun 2026	54	Ashura; the “Mamdani Indonesia” debate; AIPAC/Palestine issues

Source: Processed from the research corpus (2026).

Within this architecture, the master frame is comparative. Sixty of the 134 citizen units (45%) are organised by the question of whether Indonesia could have a figure like Mamdani. The frame’s most formulated version is also the highest-reach unit in the corpus:

“Ini alasan tokoh “Mamdani Indonesia” itu ga ada ... tripel minoritas di US: imigran, non kulit putih, non kristen ... berani mendukung hak lgbt DAN pro-palestina. Politisi Indo mana bisa” (N098; @shandya, 21-06-2026)

[This is why an “Indonesian Mamdani” does not exist ... a triple minority in the US: immigrant, non-white, non-Christian ... brave enough to support LGBT rights AND be pro-Palestine. No Indonesian politician could.]

The frame is enacted through three repertoires, summarised in Table 3 and elaborated below.

Analogical personification

The first repertoire maps the unfamiliar figure onto the domestic political taxonomy. The most frequent analogy is Anies Baswedan, proposed and contested in the same breath:

“Persamaan Visi dan Gagasan antara Zohran Mamdani dan Anies Baswedan” ... keduanya memiliki visi politik progresif yang menekankan keadilan sosial” (N018; @Rahadi0816, 06-11-2025)

[“The shared vision and ideas of Zohran Mamdani and Anies Baswedan” ... both hold a progressive political vision emphasising social justice.]



“lucu bgt narasi anies mirip mamdani ini, bedanya itu JAAAAUUUUUUHHHHH banget ... masih jauh kita buat punya pejabat progresif kyk dia 🤔🤔” (N117; @vampiresunblock, 26-06-2026)

[The narrative that Anies resembles Mamdani is hilarious; the difference is ENORMOUS ... we are still far from having a progressive official like him.]

Others relocate the analogy to Ahok on the ground of shared minority status—“Mamdani kalo di Indonesia ya itu dulu Ahok, sama-sama triple minority” (N113; @hujanyangturun_, 26-06-2026)—while a further strand reaches into the historical left, nominating D. N. Aidit (N116) or noting that Mamdani’s party is ideologically closer to PDI than to any Islamic party (N119). The analogical repertoire is not neutral sense-making: choosing Anies, Ahok, or Aidit is position-taking within Indonesia’s own cleavages, and each analogy imports the domestic conflicts attached to the analogue. Comparison, here, is a way of continuing domestic arguments by foreign means.

Institutional benchmarking

The second repertoire compares institutions rather than persons, converting the foreign case into vernacular accountability metrics: the cost of inauguration, the age of leaders, the electoral procedure.

“Dengan biaya ±Rp150 ribu dan waktu 30 menit, Zohran Mamdani dilantik sebagai Wali Kota New York ... Biaya pelantikannya lebih murah dari pelantikan kepala desa di Indonesia ... @DPR_Aceh @KPU_ID @DPR_RI @DPDRI @officialMKRI ...” (N049; @Aceh, 01-01-2026)

[At a cost of about Rp150,000 and thirty minutes, Zohran Mamdani was inaugurated as Mayor of New York ... his inauguration cost less than that of a village head in Indonesia.]

The unit’s most telling feature is its address structure: the comparison is delivered to tagged national institutions—the electoral commission, both legislative chambers, the constitutional court—turning a benchmark into a civic summons. Another unit converts the benchmark into procedural critique, mourning that Indonesians cannot even dream of an alternative, progressive leader while direct regional elections are being debated away, because parties “lebih milih bayar-bayar orang daripada adu program dan gagasan” (N058; @efraimstoughts, 10-01-2026). The vernacular diagnosis converges with the scholarly one: elections structured by clientelism and money politics (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Benchmarking is the repertoire in which vicarious engagement most resembles monitorial citizenship—except that the monitored polity is the netizens’ own.

Counterfactual transposition

The third repertoire runs a thought experiment: transpose the figure into Indonesia and observe what the imagination does to him. The outcomes are uniformly diagnostic. “Mamdani kalau di Indonesia malah gak akan menang” (N084; @nakaharadz, 19-05-2026); there is simply no one comparable, because the landscape is “kebanyakan konservatif nasionalis” (N005; @lannabistdelrey, 05-11-2025); were he here, he would be judged “melenceng dan kufur” (N059; @Akikin160, 07-02-2026); his Shia-associated background alone “pasti udah didebat tiada akhir” (N014; @wembynyama); and, in the sharpest version, the figure himself would adapt—in Indonesia, Mamdani “jg mana berani mau ngikut kemauan agamanya ... Langsung hancur si karir politiknya” (N134; @lesternookies, 28-06-2026). The counterfactual is not fantasy but instrumentation: it uses the foreign figure to measure the domestic opportunity structure—what kinds of politician the local religious-political field would permit, elect, or destroy.

Table 3. Repertoires of comparison in the citizen sub-corpus

Repertoire	Discursive operation	Illustrative units	Dominant CMDA level
Analogical personification	Mapping the foreign figure onto the domestic political taxonomy (Anies, Ahok, Aidit, PDI)	N018, N113, N116, N117, N119	Meaning, interaction



Repertoire	Discursive operation	Illustrative units	Dominant CMDA level
Institutional benchmarking	Converting the foreign case into accountability metrics (cost, procedure, age), addressed to institutions	N049, N058	Meaning, structure
Counterfactual transposition	Transposing the figure into Indonesia to test the domestic opportunity structure	N005, N014, N059, N084, N134	Meaning, social behaviour

Source: Authors' analysis (2026).

Read against the framework, these repertoires operationalise Anderson's (1998) inverted telescope in platform genres. The comparison is not an analyst's method but a public compulsion: news about New York is almost never allowed to remain news about New York. The relational forms that dominate the corpus (61%) make the spectre dialogic and cumulative—each comparison is endorsed, corrected, or escalated in replies and quote posts (Herring, 2004; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2019)—while the searchable formula “Mamdani Indonesia” binds dispersed posts into one recognisable discourse in precisely the manner of ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2018), hashtag or no hashtag.

“Indonesia Could Never”: Civic Despair as Participatory Affect

What kind of feeling powers this machinery of comparison? Table 4 reports the stance distribution of the citizen corpus alongside its functional re-reading. The re-reading is licensed by the data themselves: the plurality of “critique” units are critiques of Indonesia occasioned by Mamdani, not critiques of Mamdani—which is why stance-toward-figure coding mistakes the discourse's object, and why the affective structure matters more than the stance structure.

Table 4. Discourse positions (n = 134) and their functional re-reading

Position	n	%	Stance-based reading	Comparative-function re-reading
Support	46	34	Praise and affirmation of Mamdani	Aspirational benchmarking: the figure as a model of desired politics
Critique	37	28	Negative evaluation	Reflexive national critique: “Indonesia could never”, aimed at the domestic polity
Ambivalence	20	15	Mixed acceptance and doubt	Negotiated transferability: admiration filtered through value tests
Informational	17	13	News-sharing without stance	Importation work: making foreign politics locally tellable
Rejection	14	10	Refusal of the figure	Non-transferability verdicts; imported culture-war amplification

Source: Recoded from the research corpus (2026).

The corpus's signature affect is a compound of admiration for the foreign case and despair over the domestic one, condensed in a code-switched idiom:

“jends! seru banget ngikutin bekas pemilu new york, kek aahh indonesia could never 🤔 dengerin Mamdani jelasin sesuatu kek makesense banget, trus ngebayangin kl di indo bakal di teriakin “OMON OMONN DOANG” 🤔🤔🤔 kok gue indo ya” (N027; @unsoedmfs, Nov 2025)



[Friends! Following the New York election has been so exciting, like, ahh Indonesia could never 🇮🇩. Listening to Mamdani makes so much sense, then imagining that in Indonesia he would be shouted down as “ALL TALK” 🇮🇩🇮🇩🇮🇩. Why am I Indonesian.]

The unit compresses the whole affective grammar: fan-talk address (“jends!”), the English idiom of foreclosed possibility, the crying emoji as stance marker, the mocking citation of domestic political rhetoric (“OMON OMON DOANG”), and a closing turn of despair against the self (“kok gue indo ya”). Its counterparts run from the hopeful—a unit that opens with the Islamic prayer-form “Amin. Kita perlu pemimpin-pemimpin progresif seperti Mamdani” (N001; @karimnas_, 05-11-2025)—to the cynical prohibition on comparing at all (N005), to irony at the public’s own inconsistency: “Homofobik tapi suka Zohran Mamdani ... Orang Indonesia kagak jelas semua ye” (N111; @alotofjahe, 24-06-2026). Despair can even convert into mobilising talk that abandons the foreign figure for domestic struggle—“Gue berhenti ikut euforia Mamdani. Urusan kita msh banyak. Kibarkan lagi tinggi2 bendera anti oligarki di Indonesia ...” (N013; @MurtadhoRoy, 06-11-2025)—while its outer boundary is marked by relevance denial: “In Indonesia blok, ape urusannya sama Mamdani 🇮🇩” (N040; @AnakTakoyaki, 19-11-2025).

Three theoretical consequences follow. First, this is an affective public in Papacharissi’s (2015) sense—convened by feeling before programme—but the binding sentiment is not enthusiasm for the figure; it is shared disappointment in the netizens’ own polity, an inward-facing variant that the affective publics literature has not anticipated. Second, the despair is evaluative and participatory, not apathetic: it is Norris’s (2011) critical-citizen deficit and Coleman’s (2013) felt sense of being discounted, performed publicly and collectively—despair as voice rather than exit (Hirschman, 1970). Third, the structure is one of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011): the discourse lovingly elaborates the fantasy of the progressive leader while, in the same breath, declaring its domestic realisation foreclosed (“could never”), so that the attachment itself renews the wound. In Appadurai’s (2004) terms, the corpus documents a public exercising its capacity to aspire through a proxy—borrowing a concrete image of a possible political future from another polity because the domestic repertoire supplies none.

The Value-Compatibility Filter and Conditional Transferability

If despair answers how the comparison feels, the third question asks what decides its verdict. Across the corpus, admiration is repeatedly routed through discursive tests that determine whether the admired model could be imported. Three tests recur. The doctrinal test turns on Mamdani’s support for LGBTQ rights, judged incompatible with domestic religious boundaries however valued his other commitments: he is “kader DSA ... Ia jg pro LGBTQ” (N012; @MurtadhoRoy, 06-11-2025), and even his pro-Palestinian stance cannot redeem him—“mau dukung palestina pun tetep najis menurut warga sini krn dukung kelompok tertentu” (N121; @miadmelmiora, 26-06-2026). The sectarian test turns on his Shia-associated observance: the same Ashura commemoration that one account celebrates as love of the Ahlul Bait (N145; @SekhahAli, 30-06-2026) is anticipated by another as an endless domestic controversy (N014). The purity test operates within the most solidarity-generating issue, Palestine, where support is withdrawn by self-described allies who judge the figure insufficiently uncompromising: “Muak bgt denger Mamdani dipuji-puji dan dibilang pro Palestina. Minta maaf dulu sm Susan Abulhawa” (N128; @rchlgrtl, 27-06-2026), echoed by accusations that he recognises Israel (N142) and deflated by the observation that his stance is merely neutral (N122).

Two further patterns complete the filter’s portrait. A materialist reading reframes identity itself as electoral currency—“Sebenarnya Mamdani ini juga jual identitas kak.. tapi yg dijual identitas PoC sama migrant-nya” (N124; @bukanrameen, 26-06-2026)—withdrawing the premise that his success carries any moral lesson. And outright rejection appears largely as amplification of imported narratives, as when a unit quoting a US outlet demands he be deported “back to Uganda” (N140; @merrylynn06, 29-06-2026): even the discourse’s hostility is comparative, borrowed from another polity’s culture war.



In terms of the framework, these tests are boundary work (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) applied to a transfer decision. What is being policed is not, at bottom, Mamdani's soul but the domestic corridor of admissible politics: which combinations of religiosity and progressivism may legitimately exist in Indonesia. The religious categories in play—kufur, najis, Shia, purity—perform political-institutional work, adjudicating importability rather than mere membership. This shifts the emphasis of digital-religion accounts of contested authority (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020) from identity to institutional imagination, and it relocates the boundary struggle inside the Muslim public rather than between Muslims and Islamophobes (cf. Eckert et al., 2021). The filter also explains the discourse's most striking feature: the peaceful coexistence of intense admiration and confident impossibility. The model is admirable there and inadmissible here—a verdict that reflexively confirms the despair (“could never”) and closes the loop of the comparative circuit.

Synthesis: A Digitally Networked Spectre of Comparisons

Figure 1 can now be read as a summary of findings rather than only a framework. Trigger events—a victory, an inauguration, Ashura—ignite the circuit; the affordances of X give the resulting talk persistence, relationality, and arenas; three comparative repertoires convert the foreign figure into instruments for measuring Indonesia; an affective register of aspiration, despair, and irony powers the measurement; and a value-compatibility filter issues the verdicts—reflexive critique, non-transferability, redirection—that feed the next cycle. Table 5 summarises the dialogue between the findings and the framework.

Table 5. Dialogue between findings and framework

Dimension	Core finding	Framework engaged	Contribution
Comparative architecture	“Mamdani Indonesia” frame (45%); three repertoires; relational genres (61%)	Spectre of comparisons (Anderson, 1998); CMDA (Herring, 2004); ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2018)	The spectre re-infructured as a networked public practice
Affective register	Civic despair as participatory affect (“Indonesia could never”)	Affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015); critical citizens (Norris, 2011); cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011)	Despair theorised as engagement, binding an inward-facing affective public
Transferability	Doctrinal, sectarian, and purity tests produce non-transferability verdicts	Symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002); religious authority online (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020)	The value-compatibility filter converting transnational attention into domestic meaning

Source: Authors' synthesis (2026).

The synthesis yields the article's central concept. Comparative civic imagination names the collective practice in which a public imagines its own political future by comparative means, through a foreign figure, on a platform, under a value filter. It is Anderson's (1998) spectre of comparisons equipped with a networked infrastructure: no longer the double vision of a solitary colonial intellectual, but a searchable, quotable, event-driven public practice in which thousands participate. The concept specifies what is vicarious about vicarious political engagement—the engagement is with one's own polity, conducted through another's—and it identifies the mechanism, the filter, by which transnational attention is converted into domestic meaning. For the study of Global South digital



publics, the implication is pointed: what looks like outward-facing transnationalism may be, in structure and function, inward-facing civic self-examination.

4. CONCLUSION

This article asked what Indonesian netizens' discourse about Zohran Mamdani does, and answered: it compares, it grieves, and it filters. On the first research question, the discourse engages the foreign figure through three comparative repertoires—analogical personification, institutional benchmarking, and counterfactual transposition—organised by the master frame “Mamdani Indonesia” (45% of citizen units) and conducted predominantly in relational genres. On the second, the affect saturating this discourse functions as civic evaluation: a participatory despair, condensed in “Indonesia could never”, that performs disappointment in the domestic polity as public voice rather than private apathy. On the third, transferability is adjudicated by a domestic value-compatibility filter—doctrinal, sectarian, and purity tests—that renders the admired model inadmissible and thereby completes the circuit of despair.

The study makes three contributions. Conceptually, it introduces vicarious political engagement and comparative civic imagination, extending everyday-political-talk scholarship across borders and correcting the cosmopolitan and diasporic assumptions that dominate accounts of transnational digital engagement. Theoretically, it recovers Anderson's spectre of comparisons for the platform era and re-theorises despair—via Berlant, Coleman, Norris, and Hirschman—as an engaged civic affect. Methodologically, it demonstrates that stance-toward-figure coding can misidentify the very object of a discourse, and that recoding the same corpus by comparative function yields a different, and arguably truer, account of what the discourse is about. Practically, eruptions of “Indonesia could never” talk are better read not as cynicism to be corrected but as aspiration in negative form: diagnostic moments revealing which qualities of leadership and procedure a public wants and believes it cannot have.

The study's limits mark its future. It examines a single platform, privileges text over visual modes, relies on interpretive coding by the research team, identifies “Indonesian context” heuristically through language and conversational networks, and infers functions from traces rather than motivations from interviews. Research to come should test comparative civic imagination on other global figures and other national publics to establish the concept's transferability; compare platforms with different affordances; add multimodal and longitudinal designs; and interview discourse participants to connect traced functions with lived motivations.

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