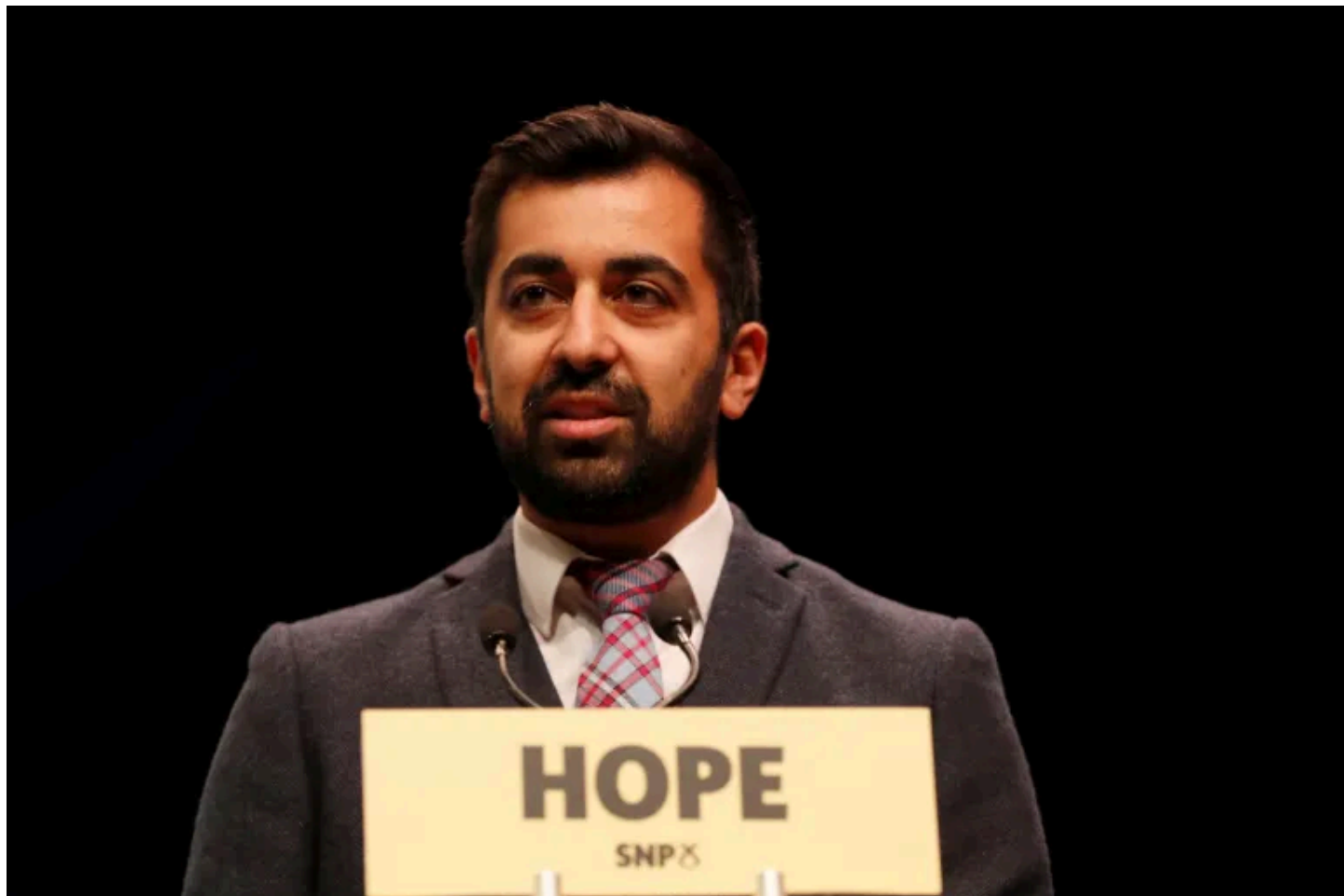


News | Politics

# Who is Humza Yousaf, SNP favourite to replace Sturgeon?

The 37-year-old Scot of Pakistani heritage hopes to lead the country in the wake of Sturgeon's shock resignation.



Yousaf hopes to lead Scotland as first minister and follow in the footsteps of Nicola Sturgeon [Russell Cheyne/Reuters]

By Lorraine Mallinder

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**Glasgow, Scotland** – Mention the name Humza Yousaf at Silverburn shopping centre, and reactions are fairly muted.

While many here, at the heart of the nationalist politician's constituency of Glasgow Pollok, support his bid to be Scotland's next first minister, few are convinced he will succeed in leading the nation to independence.

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"I'm all for independence," said Sandeep Adhikari, a 32-year-old chef in the mall, which recruits three-quarters of its staff from the local housing estates. "But it's got to the point where they're wasting their breath. Nothing happens."

Charismatic and quick-  
later this month after h

ottish National Party

As a cabinet member, the 37-year-old has been tasked with some tricky briefs, most recently as the health secretary in charge of a crisis-ridden National Health Service (NHS) during the coronavirus pandemic.

Now SNP bigwigs believe he is the man who can hold together an increasingly fractious party – now 16 years in power – while persuading a convincing majority of Scots to go it alone and leave the United Kingdom amid a deepening cost-of-living crisis.

But his rise comes just as the SNP juggernaut has run into the sand.



Sandeep Adhikari, a 32-year-old chef, wants Scottish independence but doesn't have faith in politicians to fight for it [Lorraine Mallinder/Al Jazeera]

While most Scots rejected independence in a 2014 referendum, the party's drive for self-determination was given fresh impetus by the 2016 Brexit vote, which forced Scotland out of the European Union along with the rest of the UK. In the EU membership poll, most Scots voted to remain in the bloc, unlike the English.

But Holyrood requires a transferral of legal powers from Westminster to hold another vote – a request so far refused.

Under Sturgeon's stewardship, it has focused on progressive policies in areas like transgender rights and welfare reform, but the big question of how it will achieve its number one priority looms ever larger.

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The leadership contest has exposed long-suppressed divisions within the party, raising questions about its future direction.

Yousaf has differentiated himself from his two arguably more radical rivals, pro-business social conservative Kate Forbes and instant independence warrior Ash Regan, by simply promising more of the same.

Pledging to preserve the SNP's "winning formula" of progressive values, he has exhorted the party to quit "obsessing" with process. "If we build that consistent majority then those political obstacles that are put in the way, they will disappear, they will dissipate," he said.

As platforms go, it's thin stuff. But, groomed as a future leader for over a decade, enjoying the backing of the party elite, Yousaf is not about to make any rash moves.

Fergus Mutch, the party's former head of communications, believes he's refrained from baring his teeth in the leadership contest.

"There's an element of being the frontrunner, trying not to trip up," he said. "But if he thinks he should go into battle for something, for example, social justice, oh boy, he will go for it."

Having tacked racist abuse head on throughout his career, including a well-publicised Islamophobic jibe from a former Labour councillor in 2018 – the politician had said after a meeting, "no one would have seen [Yousaf] under his burqa" – the SNP hopeful has developed "well-tuned moral antennae".

### **Yousaf's compelling backstory**

The son of immigrants who arrived in Glasgow in the 60s, Yousaf is a conviction politician with a compelling backstory that takes some beating.

His father hailed from the town of Mian Channu in Pakistan, while his mother was born into a South Asian family in Kenya, forced to flee the country after a rise in violence against the Asian population.

Launching his campaign in Glasgow's Clydebanks, where his paternal grandfather worked in a Singer sewing machine factory, Yousaf said: "I see my ancestral roots as being not just Pakistani but running through Clydebanks, which brought me to where I am today."

He is seen as someone who incarnates radical change.

"He is saying radical change is what I am. It is what I represent," said an SNP insider at Westminster.

In interviews, he has often spoken of how 9/11 changed his world and sparked his political awakening.

He was at Hutchesons' Grammar School in Glasgow at the time, his classmates asking questions like: "Why do Muslims hate America?"



Humza Yousaf (centre), smiles as he walks down stairs after the Oath and Affirmation ceremony at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, Scotland on May 11, 2011 [David Moir/Reuters]

The fallout prompted him to find out more about his religious and cultural heritage.

By 2003, he was marching against the United States-led invasion of Iraq in London.

“We joined more than two million others who took to the streets to voice our anger at what was an illegal invasion predicated on a lie,” he later wrote.

Reading politics at the University of Glasgow, he joined the SNP in 2005 after hearing an anti-war speech by former SNP leader Alex Salmond.

His convictions were further deepened after another speech by the mother of Gordon Gentle, a 19-year-old boy from Pollok, who’d been killed by a roadside bomb in Basra. It struck Yousaf that only independence would prevent Scotland from being dragged into an illegal war.

Akhtar Khan – a Glasgow activist who has known Yousaf since their school days, when they played football together in Queen’s Park, and who crossed paths with him again when they volunteered at UK charity Islamic Relief – noticed from the get-go that he had a knack for convincing people.

“His wittiness and humour helped because it made him likeable. He could attract people because they were attracted to him as a person. The rest of us were quite in-your-face and a bit too passionate.”

### **Political career**

When the SNP came to power in 2007, Yousaf worked for the late Bashir Ahmad, the first non-white member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), who had arrived from Pakistan in the early 60s, starting out as a bus driver.

Over the two years they worked together, Yousaf has said, Ahmad became a mentor who taught him through his character, rather than by telling him what to think.

Ahmad’s son, Atif Ahmad, says his father viewed Yousaf as a third son.

“He is very well-mannered, a good listener, conscientious in his work. He also took advice well,” he said.

When Bashir Ahmad died of a heart attack, Alex Salmond quickly recruited Yousaf as an aide.

“The SNP could just have let Humza leave,” said Atif Ahmad. “They didn’t want that to happen. They saw him as someone who had talent.”

By 2011, Yousaf had been elected as an MSP, taking his oath of office in English and Urdu.

His ascent was rapid, but bumpy.

As transport minister in 2016, he was fined 300 pounds (\$363) for driving a friend’s car without insurance.

Promoted to justice secretary in 2018, he attracted more controversy with his hate crime bill, a messy piece of legislation that has yet to become law, its ban on “stirring up hatred” sparking rancorous debate over freedom of speech.

As health secretary, his track record has again been called into question, particularly on accident and emergency waiting times.



Margaret Hay says her sister waited too long for an ambulance and died, and that Yousaf’s office failed to engage with her case [Lorraine Mallinder/Al Jazeera]

Margaret Hay, 50, told Al Jazeera that her 57-year-old sister died after a 10-hour wait in an ambulance outside a local hospital.

The pain was made worse when Yousaf’s constituency did not respond to her email messages, she said.

“He’s got some explaining to do. He’s been a minister for 11 years. In politics, that record eventually comes with negatives,” said Gerry Hassan, an academic and political commentator.

Hassan said that the party is in a “nervous, agitated state”.

“They’ve gone through a golden generation of the SNP and they’re trying to keep that story alive. His personal story is powerful, but what does he stand for?”

### **Scotland’s first ‘activist’ leader?**

During his campaign, Yousaf has promised to be the country’s “first activist”.

It’s an area where he has demonstrated commitment, particularly on refugee rights.



Roza Salih – an SNP councillor for Greater Pollok, who arrived in Scotland as a refugee from Iraq in 2001, and rose to prominence as a schoolgirl campaigning against deportations of asylum seekers – first met him at a protest for refugee rights in 2015.

“He’s always turned up, always spoken,” she said.

“For many people, that comes across as leadership. People understand that they are part of the community. Humza understands people from different backgrounds. He has that understanding of people’s struggles.”

As the leadership debates raged on this week, support for independence nationwide slumped to 39 percent, according to a survey by Sky News.

Back at Silverburn, it is clear that while Yousaf is appreciated for his warmth and his quick-fire Glasgow banter, he may struggle to reinvigorate the movement on more substantive issues.

Of the many people Al Jazeera approached, only two – both SNP party members – saw independence as a realistic prospect.

Adil Arif, 33, is wary of independence as he works for an English company as a web developer.



Adil Arif says racism is still a problem in Scotland, and backs Humza Yousaf [Lorraine Mallinder/Al Jazeera]

But like many, he sees the SNP as a party sticking up for Scots and would like to see Yousaf become the country’s leader.

He’s been shocked at some of the hate Yousaf has received online.

“Racism is still a problem here,” he said. “I think if you want to change the dynamics to create a successful society, there has to be more representation.”

SNP member Scott Barclay thinks Yousaf’s strength lies in his ability to connect first with people, resisting the urge to force-feed them arguments on the cause.

It’s a counterintuitive way of operating that harks back to the approach of his former mentor, Bashir Ahmad.

Barclay has no doubt that Yousaf is the only candidate capable of succeeding Nicola Sturgeon.

“Of all the candidates, he has the best leadership skills,” he said. “He’s not overpowering like other politicians.”

The 44-year-old will soon be casting his ballot in the leadership election, running until March 27, and Yousaf can rely on his vote and many others.

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