

Professor tapped for key Somali post

Niagara University scholar will take over from Grand Island man

By **Jay Rey**

Updated: June 23, 2011, 10:16 AM

A state worker from Grand Island is out as prime minister of Somalia, and you never would guess whom they got to take over for him.

A professor from Amherst. Abdiweli M. Ali, an associate economics professor at Niagara University, will serve as acting prime minister of the troubled country in northeast Africa until a successor can be found for Mohamed A. Mohamed, the local man who resigned the post under pressure earlier this week.

The story has been peculiar from the beginning and gets even more so as it goes on. One Western New Yorker's improbable rise to prime minister is hard enough to believe, but now two?

"I am disturbed by the fact that [Mohamed] is leaving office," Ali was quoted by news outlets as saying, "but I hope that he will be working with us. I have thus accepted this position until such other time that the government announces a new prime minister."

Mohamed named Ali, 45, to the prime minister's 18-member Cabinet in November, and Ali has served as minister of planning and international cooperation, as well as Somalia's deputy prime minister.

Mohamed agreed to step down Sunday, on the condition that Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed, Somalia's president, would appoint his friend from Amherst to succeed him in running the government's day-to-day operations, said a person familiar with the situation.

The president is expected to name a permanent replacement soon, and reports from Somalia indicate that Ali could be selected.

A Somali native, Ali was a research and forecast manager for the Commonwealth of Virginia before joining Niagara's faculty in 2003.

Ali has a master's degree in economics from Vanderbilt University, a master's degree in public administration from Harvard and a doctorate in economics from George Mason University.

He was a fellow in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard in 1998 and 1999.

Ali has been on sabbatical from Niagara this spring. His wife, Hodan Isse, is a University at Buffalo finance professor.

Ali's interim appointment follows a tumultuous week for Mohamed, the Grand Island father and state Department of Transportation employee who has served as Somali prime minister for nine months.

While Mohamed seemed to be enjoying popular support among the Somali people and soldiers, he was fired in a deal cut by the president and speaker of parliament.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of supporters, hit the streets of the Somali capital in protest. Boosted by the public show of support, Mohamed dug in his heels and refused to resign.

But that quickly changed.

"The political pressure was too great for him to withstand, and he did not want to risk a military conflict from within," said former Erie County Executive Joel A. Giambra, a Mohamed friend whose lobbying firm has been trying to get the U.S. State Department to take a stronger role in Somalia.

But this may not be the end for Mohamed.

He told reporters Sunday that he still is looking to play some type of role in rebuilding his homeland.

Some already have speculated that Mohamed's apparent popularity in Somalia could position him to run for president, when elections are held next year.

"This is a temporary setback," Giambra said. "He has a very strong interest in continuing what he started."