

Grand Island resident is elected president of Somalia



Mohamed A. Mohamed, a Grand Island resident and former prime minister of Somalia, has been elected president of the African country. (Buffalo News file photo)

- By [Jane Kwiatkowski Radlich](#) Published Wed, Feb 8, 2017

Mohamed A. Mohamed, who sought asylum here more than two decades ago and later gained U.S. citizenship, was elected president in his homeland of Somalia on Wednesday, an ironic twist to President Trump's immigration order banning people from that predominantly Muslim country.

Mohamed, a Grand Island resident who has spent most of the past year campaigning in Somalia, was elected in that country's first organized presidential election in more than two decades.

He is a former prime minister of Somalia and was selected by that nation's Parliament from among nearly two dozen candidates, including the incumbent president.

Somalia, a country wracked by terrorism and civil war for years, is one of the seven predominantly Muslim countries whose citizens were banned by President Trump from entering the United States under his executive order of Jan. 27.

Mohammed is a University at Buffalo graduate who worked for the New York State Department of Transportation in Buffalo.

Makau Mutua, a native of Kenya and former dean of the University at Buffalo Law School, offered this observation about Mohamed.

"Here's a person of Muslim faith who came to America and stayed because of civil war and political disorder in his native Somalia. UB was obviously instrumental in his education and professional development. What a loss it would have been for both us and Somalia had he been banned from coming here and going to school. I think he will be a very instrumental and forward-looking leader of Somalia, as the country seeks to emerge from the scourge of Al-Shabaab. People I have spoken with in East Africa are raving about him."

Joel Giambra, the former Erie County executive and close friend of Mohamed, said his election could have a "big impact on the fight against terrorism."

"His objective will be to establish peace and prosperity inside his homeland by aggressively going after terrorists," Giambra said. "This is an opportunity for our new president to collaborate with a new world leader who happens to be from Grand Island."

Mohamed, 54, has been campaigning in Somalia for nearly a year, said Intisar Mohamed, his daughter who lives on Grand Island.

"Not only did he win, Somalia won today," said Mohamed's daughter. "The people's voices have finally been heard."

Mohamed was one of two finalists considered by the Parliament. The other finalist was Somalia's incumbent president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.

Mohamed met Giambra while working on the former county executive's campaign in 1999. When Giambra took office in 2000, Mohamed took a job with the county working on affirmative action compliance.

"It's all pretty cool," said Giambra. "Here's a guy with a family on Grand Island. He has dual citizenship. When he was prime minister, he brought stability. He started paying policemen."

Mohamed has unfinished business in his struggling homeland where the election has been postponed four times since November, said his daughter.

"He loves his country," said Intisar Mohamed, who is 24. "At the end of the day that's where he was born."

Born in Mogadishu, Mohamed worked for Somalia's ministry of foreign affairs in the mid '80s. In 1985 he was transferred to Washington and worked in the Somalian embassy for four years.

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After applying for asylum, his daughter said he moved to Buffalo because it has a large Somali refugee community.

A few members of the Somalian community in Buffalo, which officials estimate at 1,800 people, gathered Wednesday at African Market on Grant Street when they heard reports of Mohamed's win.

Drinking Somali tea while sitting in the marketplace were group of men, many of whom emigrated here from Somalia during the last decade. They were enthusiastic and full of optimism as they discussed the future of their country and its new president.

Said Hersi translated for one of the men.

"Somalia is having a difficult time," said Bashir Hagi Abdi, 49, considered an elder by his countrymen. "There are three reasons: militant groups, instability of neighboring countries and political clans. I believe the new president will have to work very hard, and he will because he is a great leader. In the eight months that Mohamed was prime minister he pushed out militant groups and fought corruption."

Hersi, who is 27, was elated over the election that he said was the first organized race in 22 years.

"We're really very proud of him," Hersi said. "When we heard he won, we automatically came here. I know him as a person and I know the work he does."

Mohamed was working for the state DOT in Buffalo when he met briefly with Somalia's President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed in New York in 2010. Later that year, Ahmed tapped him to be prime minister of Somalia. He served for eight months.

"After so many years of turmoil, he served at a time when the people of Somalia lost hope," his daughter said. "The people were hanging by a thread. He made sure the foundation was proper."

Mohamed's campaign slogan – Dalka Danta Dadka (the land, the needs, the people) – has resonated with many Somalis, said Intisar Mohamed, who monitors social media to track her father's campaign.

The vote in Somalia was not a popular vote, she noted. Parliament members select the president based on the sentiment of their constituents.

After the first Parliament vote tally, incumbent president Mohamud held a slim lead over Mohamed, 88-72. Two runners-up – a former president and current prime minister – finished with 49 and 37 respectively.

In a runoff, the Parliament chose Mohamed as president.

With Somalia eight hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time, Mohamed's family and friends remained fixed on the web.

"The challenges he faces are mammoth," said Giambra, but he's well-equipped to deal with them with the U.S. as an ally."