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Nashville's Somalis embrace election

New citizens recall life under anarchy

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Somalis Vote: Quaali Warsame votes for the first time.

Written by Heidi Hall
The Tennessean

Nashville's Somalis don't want to hear how inconvenient it is to stand in long lines at the polls.

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They don't like conversations about how watching TV is ruined by all the political attack ads, how Facebook friends turn on one another during election time, how life will be so much nicer once election season ends.

For them, American elections are a miracle, worlds apart from Somalia's old two-wooden-box system of voting, where the dictator in power decided the outcome. After that process ended in 1991, the country descended into anarchy, with warlords taking individual



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regions by murderous force.



Qaali Warsame, from Somali, shows her 'I Voted' sticker after voting for the first time last week. / Sanford Myers / The Tennessean

That's why Hyat Liban knocked on her neighbor's door at 11 p.m. on a Sunday night so the only time she knew the woman would be home and free to talk — and coached her through filling out a voter registration form.

Was Liban getting paid for all this, the woman wanted to know.

Liban stopped. She thought about her father, arrested, shot and killed in 1977 after demanding democratically held elections in his region. She thought about the hard life that followed in a refugee camp and then Mogadishu, the Somali capital.

She remembered her thrilling move to America nearly 25 years ago, and the struggle to learn English, go to college and earn her respiratory therapy license.

And then she answered.

"I get paid when you raise up your voice," she said.

Somalis began arriving in Tennessee in the 1990s, most of them refugees resettled by the State Department. Two decades later, they've hit a critical mass politically, those who study the community say. There are enough of them with U.S. citizenship plus an understanding of the process to participate in it.

So, for the first time, they held their own candidate forum at Coleman Community Center — even though only two candidates showed up — organized a voter registration drive and recruited the community's multitude of cab drivers to offer free rides to the polls.

The Census Bureau puts the number of Somalis in Nashville and its suburbs at 1,880, but those inside the community consider that figure low. The State Department resettled 2,718 here from 1996



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Some the State Department initially placed in other cities moved to Nashville on their own. They were drawn by its moderate climate, lower cost of living and better job outlook, said A'isha Garba, an immigration specialist with the Nashville International Center for Empowerment, which provides English and citizenship classes, job placement and health care. They choose the same neighborhoods and apartment complexes as fellow Somalis, strengthening ties with those who share their peculiar odyssey.

About 60 percent are citizens either by birth or naturalization, Garba estimates. Refugees jump to the front of the immigration line for citizenship, because they're required to apply for green cards — permanent legal resident status — within a year of arrival, and then it's a five-year wait to apply for citizenship. Some immigrants must wait more than a decade to become citizens.

But Somalis earned their refugee status with the same heartbreaking story, told with few variations from family to family. Relatives killed by warlords' gangs. Homes uprooted in an instant with the sound of approaching gunfire. Days or weeks with little or no food but what they were able to scrounge from wild-growing fruit trees.

There are generations of Somalis who have never known anything of a stable government or stable household," said Moses Tesi, a Middle Tennessee State University political science professor who studies the state's African population. "The notion of actually taking part in an election that determines who governs them is something that would be considered priceless."

The joy of voting

Tuesday was big for Qaali Warsame. She slid into her pretty, white jacket with the sequined trim, straightened the delicate gold doily on her dining room table and waited for her husband's taxi shift to end.

and

She needed him to come watch the baby.

Warsame, 26, was going to help choose the next president of the United States.

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Her story came out in rushed but halting fragments, her English near perfect, her sentences punctuated with the uniquely American “and whatnot.”

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Warsame's family fled Somalia in 1993 for a refugee camp in Kenya. They lived in the bushes, with no real roof over their heads.

The kids went to school, but there weren't jobs for adults — only waiting for the monthly United Nations' food deliveries that may or may not be enough to last.

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When Warsame was 18, a sister helped bring her to Nashville. She took a factory job.

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“People were like, now you have a job forever, building computers,” she said. “I had higher dreams, and now that I live here, I can make all my dreams come true.”

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Her first year at Nashville State Community College was taken up with English as a Second Language classes. But she persevered, earned her associate's degree, a slot at Cumberland University and, in August, a bachelor's in nursing.

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She strode into The Crossings near Hickory Hollow Mall, past the battalion of candidate signs out front, and stood in the quickly moving line. She touched the voting screen thoughtfully, deliberately, and then collected her “I Voted” sticker. When the poll worker learned she was voting for her first president, he gave her three more with the paper backing still on, “just in case you change clothes and want another one.”

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All the way through, Warsame couldn't stop smiling.

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“It's amazing to be in a country where you can vote, where that one vote can make a difference, where you can do whatever you want, where your voice matters as a normal person — even as a woman,” she said.

People have a lot of chances, but they don't

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really take the time to benefit from the rights that they have.”

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Economy is concern

Warsame and other Somalis say jobs and the economy top their list of concerns, a view that polls show they share with most Americans.

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It's not surprising those topics would rank before immigration policy, said Vanderbilt University demographer Katharine Donato. The Somalis' refugee status is well established.

But when they get here, they're highly motivated to improve their quality of life, she said, and that means looking for better paying jobs and the education they need to win those.

“They're willing to get involved because they are risk-takers and attracted to a country like the U.S. where basic forms of government work and you can rely on them,” Donato said. “Will foreign-born votes make a difference in the presidential election? I highly doubt it, because there just aren't that many of them in any given state that have voting rights. It's much more likely their kids will make a very big difference.”

She points to Latinos — a small segment of the voting population in 1990 that now could influence the outcomes in swing states in November's presidential election.

It's imperative that Somalis get involved in voting at all levels now that the state legislature has turned its attention to them, said Stephanie Teatro, policy and civic engagement coordinator for the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. Her group is helping with Somali get-out-the-vote efforts and setting up displays at polling places.

In 2011, Tennessee passed something called the Absorptive Capacity Act. It encouraged local governments to put moratoriums on resettlement over concerns about providing education, law enforcement and other government services.

It also required resettlement agencies to tell local government about any coming influx, something already required by federal law, said Holly Johnson, Tennessee refugee coordinator for Catholic Charities.

State Sen. Jim Tracy, R-Shelbyville, sponsored the act. Bedford County drew national attention over a documentary titled “Welcome to Shelbyville,” which chronicles that city's challenges with integrating hundreds of Somali refugees who moved there to work at a Tyson chicken processing plant.

It's unlikely the act helped Shelbyville at all because the State Department doesn't directly settle refugees there, Johnson said. Her agency provides housing in Nashville, but once they're settled, refugees are free to move anywhere in the U.S.

Still, Tracy insisted that the new law helped, citing the lack of complaints from local officials.

"Seems to be working fine in Bedford County," he said.

Tracy said he'd be willing to reach out to newly registered voters in the immigrant community. "I talk to everyone who votes, wherever it is — you want as many votes as you can," he said. "You represent everyone. You tell them what your views are for issues, give them an opportunity to know where you stand."

Much in common

Most members of the Somali community seem to be leaning toward re-electing Barack Obama. They say they like how he has handled economic problems. It doesn't hurt that Obama's father was East African — a native of neighboring Kenya — and the president understands life as a black man in America, said Abdulkadir Gure, 33, a Somali who came to the U.S. on a visa in 2003.

He moved with his family seven times in Somalia, bullets whizzing behind them as they ran. By age 11, he could tell the difference in gunfire between an AK-47 and an M16 assault rifle — both used by warlords to seize land.

Before a student association election in college, he'd never seen organized, fair voting.

Today, Gure works as a court translator, driving instructor and Arabic teacher. He cast his first vote for an elected official in 2011, choosing Nashville Mayor Karl Dean, who was running for re-election.

He sees lots of reasons to be happy for both his old and new countries. In August, Somalia swore in a new Parliament. They weren't elected — clan chiefs appointed them — and that Parliament elected a new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.

But even if Somalis didn't get to choose them, the top officials are "educated people," Gure said. Not like the warlords, and that's cause for hope.

"There's a lot of change going," he said. "Although some people can't feel it or see it, the world is changing."

Somalis here in America won't be discouraged from changing it, they say, even if some of their new neighbors pass unwelcoming laws or object to their unusual clothing and accented English.

Liban, 45, the woman who registered her neighbors to vote, said

Somalis can't worry themselves with what other Americans think of them.

On Tuesday, women in colorful headscarves hurried around the parking lot at her Bell Road-area apartment complex. School was letting out, children were on their way home, and there was much to do.

Liban waved over Sofia Shire, a neighbor eagerly waiting for her blue Davidson County voter card to arrive in the mail. She registered on the last possible day for the presidential election.

"I vote for president!" she said, determined to use English, waving off Liban's attempts to translate. "This is my first time."

Liban will keep up her efforts to engage her neighbors in America's political process, she said. They've paid dearly for the right to make a difference.

"I love this country," she said. "I know what else is out there.

"I love this country more than you do."

Contact Heidi Hall at 615-726-5977 or hhall@tennessean.com or follow on Twitter [@HeidiHallTN](https://twitter.com/HeidiHallTN).

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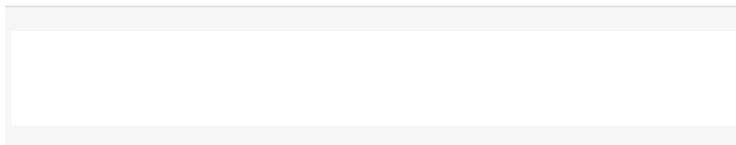
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