

COMMENTARIES

Opinion | *Building bridges over coffee in Woodbury*

What was supposed to be a brief introduction turned into a conversation lasting nearly an hour.

By **Abdi G. Elmi**

Guest contributor(s) to the Minnesota Star Tribune

MARCH 26, 2026 AT 12:30PM



"These kinds of friendships and smiles give me hope that we are in the right place, surrounded by the right people," Abdi G. Elmi writes. (Joy Summers/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Opinion editor's note: *Strib Voices publishes a mix of guest*

commentaries online and in print each day. To contribute, [click here](#).

•••

On the first Sunday following 30 days of fasting and the Eid-Al-Fitr holiday, we gathered at our regular coffee shop in Woodbury. As we sat chatting about current events and sharing updates, we noticed two older white men walking toward us. They asked if they could join us, introduced themselves and mentioned they had noticed we were back now that Ramadan had ended. I whispered to myself, wondering if these men had been “monitoring” us – but in a positive, neighborly way.

They began by sharing their own backgrounds. Their parents were first-generation immigrants from Scandinavia who settled in Minnesota, sacrificing everything to ensure their children had an education and a better future. They stressed that America is a land of immigrants and that no single group can claim ownership of the land unless they are Native Americans. “The only difference among us,” they said, “is that we immigrated at different times.” Some arrived early, while others are more recent, but we all share the immigrant experience.

They asked if our families had been affected by recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids and expressed deep sympathy for the Somali community regarding the attacks and generalizations coming from the current presidential administration. They repeated several times that these actions are “un-American.”

We welcomed their approach and appreciated their breaking the barrier that was limited eye contact. We thanked them for their courage in joining us and for sharing their stories. In turn, we introduced ourselves as the first generation of

immigrants from Somalia.

My colleague shared his journey: He moved to the U.S. 25 years ago with nothing but a small carry-on bag. Today, he is a small-business owner and a taxpayer whose business employs 24 subcontractors. He shared with pride that he was awarded his first contract with the U.S. federal government even before he was a citizen; the government trusted him with important tasks to serve this nation overseas.

My friend sitting to my left shared a story common to those who immigrated after the civil war in Somalia. After many years of hard work in corporate America – where his inventions were applied across several industries – he moved into the private sector. He is now also a small-business owner, employing 20 full-time employees.

We made it clear to our new friends that anyone who breaks the law, regardless of their background, should be prosecuted. We all agreed that a “few bad apples” have damaged the community’s image, giving the administration opportunities to insult us. The media rarely speaks about the ringleaders or the non-Somalis involved in such fraud. The community believes the sentences handed to the individuals committed who the fraud from the Somali community is not proportionate to the crimes they committed compared with individuals from other communities.

Finally, we expressed how much the Somali community appreciates the Minnesotans who have stood with them during these difficult times – those who visited their neighbors, offered support and came out in groups to protect our mosques. Somalis are resilient; we will survive these attacks and will remember when our votes can make a change.

What was supposed to be a brief introduction and a handshake turned into a conversation lasting nearly an hour

handshake turned into a conversation lasting nearly an hour.

These kinds of friendships and smiles give me hope that we are in the right place, surrounded by the right people.

Abdi G. Elmi, of Woodbury, is a Somali interpreter and translator.