



Somalia: Date of birth, age and calendar

- Is it common for Somalis not to know their own date of birth?
- How do Somali authorities relate to date of birth and age?
- What calendar do Somalis use?

Introduction

This query response provides a brief overview of conditions relating to date of birth, age and calendar in Somalia. The response is based on both openly available sources, information from oral sources and knowledge that Landinfo has gained through its own work with Somalia over a number of years.

Many Somalis do not know their own date of birth

Many Somalis do not know their own date of birth (IND, email 2021; source A, emails 2021; source B, email 2021; Somali Embassy in Berlin, meeting in Berlin 2019; Rao 2020; World Bank 2016, p. 28; Hirsi 2017; Helander, n.d.). Several sources point out in this context that Somalis who do not know their date of birth often choose 1 January as a fictitious date of birth, for example, when registering on social medias. Source A, a local source in Mogadishu, jokingly pointed out that on 1 January, the person in question had received a reminder from Facebook that a three-digit number of friends had birthdays that day.

In Landinfo's understanding, not knowing one's own date of birth is primarily related to day and month, but it is also not uncommon for Somalis to be uncertain of the exact year in which they were born. Many people state their own age in the number of years they think they are. Some may be slightly older or younger than the age they state without necessarily being aware of it, as information about their own age is often based on oral transmission from parents and other relatives. Landinfo cannot determine how large such a deviation might be, but is of the understanding that when there is a deviation, it is a matter of a few years.

Source B, a local resource person (email 2021), shares this assessment and considers a possible deviation of 1-3 years to be normal for people with a nomadic background.

According to source D, an international organisation operating in Somalia (email 2021), most parents know how many years old their children are when they start school (more on this below).

Date of birth is of little importance in Somalia

The above must be understood in light of the fact that date of birth has little practical and cultural significance in Somalia (Rao 2020; Somali Embassy in Berlin, meeting in Berlin 2019; Hirsi 2017; World Bank 2016, p. 28). Government institutions collapsed in 1991, and since then most people have lived their lives without requirements for registration and ID documents. Although government institutions are currently being rebuilt in Mogadishu and other cities, they still have very limited capacity and are unable to provide public services to the population. This is supported by the fact that nine out of ten Somali births take place at home (World Bank Group 2018, p. 40) and that only three per cent of births are registered (World Bank 2016, p. 13).

Birthdays are also not something that is traditionally celebrated with family and friends in Somalia (source A, emails 2021; Rao 2020; Hirsi 2017). According to source A, this has changed somewhat in recent times. The source supports this by pointing out that a number of friends in Mogadishu who did not celebrate their own birthdays have started arranging birthday parties for their children. Source D (email 2021) also points out that it is not common to ask about age, as many Somalis consider this rude.

Date of birth is also not a decisive criterion for when one is considered an adult in Somalia. Most people in Somalia refer to sharia and traditional law on this point, where it is puberty that constitutes the criterion for when a person is considered an adult (Landinfo 2018, p. 7; Landinfo 2015, p. 10; source A, emails 2021).

Age and schooling

Like other government institutions, the school system in Somalia also collapsed in 1991 (Landinfo 2015, p. 10). Schools exist in many places but are mainly run by various organisations, communities and individuals. In the cities, just over half of the children go to primary school, in rural areas it is one out of three children, and amongst nomads, it is only one out of ten (World Bank Group 2019, p. 24).¹ This applies to both girls and boys. For various reasons, many children start school

¹ Some families in rural areas send their children to relatives in the cities to go to school (Landinfo 2020a, p. 4).

when they are older than six years old, and one in three students in primary school in Somalia are older than the normal age for this stage.

According to source D (email 2021), it is not uncommon for children to be up to ten years old when they start primary school, because some parents insist that the children complete Koranic school² before they start regular school. The source points out that it is common to send children to Koranic school when they are around five years old and that it normally takes 4-5 years to complete this. According to available information, the proportion of children attending Koranic schools in Somalia (excluding Somaliland) is higher than the proportion of children attending regular schools (Moyi 2012, p. 3). Source D (email 2021) emphasises that the distinction between Koranic school and regular school is not necessarily absolute, as religious and other education are intertwined in some places.

Date of birth in encounters with Somali authorities

Passports and other ID documents

To the extent that Somalis obtain ID documents from the Somali authorities, they usually only do so when they need a passport, and it is in this context that most people register their own birth. As is the case in other circumstances in Somalia, Somalis primarily identify themselves in this process through clan affiliation and references (see Landinfo 2020b, 2019a and 2019b). Date of birth is not very important in this context (Somali Embassy in Berlin, meeting in Berlin 2019).

According to Landinfo's understanding, the Somali authorities have a rather pragmatic attitude towards most ethnic Somalis when applying for a passport, so the date of birth or age that the applicant themselves states is normally used as a basis, unless it is obviously wrong. Applicants who do not know the day and month they were born normally choose or are assigned 1 January as a fictitious date (IND, email 2021).

Age regulations

The Somali provisional constitution and other laws refer to various age regulations, but the limited presence of government institutions and lack of resources means that these are rarely enforced (Landinfo 2015, p. 10). In Landinfo's understanding, the Somali authorities' practice may vary and may deviate from the law. In this context, several of Landinfo's sources point out that the authorities often consider 15-year-olds to be adults (for example, source C,

² Koranic schools typically take the form of the local community paying an imam or other religious person to orally teach the children the Koran and impart Islamic values to them.

meeting in Nairobi 2015 and Somali Embassy in Berlin, meeting in Berlin 2019). According to source A (emails 2021), if there is any doubt about this age, the authorities look for signs of puberty, such as menstruation in girls and voice changes in boys.

Different calendars and time references

The Gregorian calendar

Somali authorities use the Gregorian calendar, which we also use in Norway (IND, email 2021). In Landinfo's understanding, this also applies to most Somalis, especially in the cities (Hirsi 2017; Helander, n.d.; source A, emails January 2021).

Landinfo is not aware of any information indicating that al-Shabaab has banned the use of the Gregorian calendar in areas under its rule or influence. Local sources A (emails 2021) and B (emails 2021), which are both well-informed, are also not aware of any information that indicates such a ban. This assessment is supported by the fact that al-Shabaab's "press releases" refer to both the Gregorian and Islamic calendars (see, for example, Al-Kaitab Media Foundation 2020).

The Islamic calendar

According to the Swedish Somalia anthropologist Bernhard Helander (n.d.), Somalis in rural areas prefer to use the Islamic calendar (the Hijri calendar).³ This is also the calendar that is used for the marking of Muslim events such as Ramadan and Hajj. Most Somalis, including in the cities, are thus familiar with this calendar, even if they do not use it on a daily basis (IND, email 2021; source A, emails 2021; Abdullahi 2011, p. 163).

Both the Gregorian and Islamic calendars have twelve months. The difference is that the Gregorian calendar is based on the earth's cycle around the sun, while the Islamic calendar is based on the moon's cycle around the earth. This not only means that the Islamic year is 11-12 days shorter than the Gregorian year but also that the Islamic year is not tied to the seasons (Ringnes & Vogt 2017). Amongst other things, this is why Ramadan takes place at different times from year to year in the Gregorian calendar.

³ Hijr means migration in Arabic and refers to the event when Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Medina, where the first Muslim community was founded (umma) (Abdullahi 2001, p. 69). Hijr constitutes year zero in the Islamic calendar (year 622 according to the Gregorian calendar).

The Somali calendar and/or references to historical events

Several sources point out that some Somalis still use the traditional Somali calendar, for example, by saying that one's mother died "five Sunday years" ago (Besteman 2014, p. 35; Luling 2002; Helander, n.d.). Like the Gregorian calendar, the Somali calendar is based on the earth's cycle around the sun and is consequently "locked" to the seasons (Hussein 2011). Consequently, Somali New Year's Day, *dabshiid*,⁴ which is still celebrated in Somalia, always falls on one of the last days of July or one of the first days of August according to the Gregorian calendar (Luling 2002, p. 240-241; Adams 2011, p. 236; Abdullahi 2011, p. 163).

The Somali calendar divides the years into seven-year intervals, where each year bears the name of the day of the week on which the year began according to the Islamic calendar, i.e. Monday-year, Tuesday-year, Wednesday-year etc. (Helander, n.d.; Bestemann 2014, p. 35). Interpreting age as specified with this reference requires a little mental arithmetic. Hussein (2011, p. 7) gives the following example:

[...] suppose we happen to ask an elderly traditional man his age. Instead of telling us in exact years, he may prefer to tell us that he is 11 Thursdays old. In this case, we need to keep three things in mind: first, 11 Thursday-yearly cycles correspond to $7 \times 11 = 77$ years, because there is only one Thursday year every seven years; second, our present year is a Monday year; third, we have to add to that number the three years that are between Thursday and Monday (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday), because the man is in the middle of his 12th seven-year cycle. Using this calculation, he is 80 years old.

References to the Somali calendar may also be combined with references to seasons⁵ (Somali Embassy in Berlin, meeting in Berlin 2019) and/or historical events that occurred that year (Hirsi 2017). Helander (n.d.) gives the following example: "Tuesday-year with the long tail" probably refers to the year 1961, when people in southern Somalia first saw a jet cross the sky.

Some sources give the impression that it is also possible for someone to refer to an event as the only time reference, for example, by stating that they were born "abaartii dabadheer" (Hirsi 2017). *Abaarti dabadheer* means "long drought" and, in Landinfo's understanding, refers to the prolonged drought that took place in 1973 to 1975 (Tsui, Ragsdale & Shirwa 1991, p. 132). Without reference to the seven-year cycle, this referral thus involves some tolerance of movement.

⁴ *Dabshiid* is celebrated by people making bonfires in the evening which they then jump over.

⁵ The seasons in Somalia generally consist of four seasons (Muchiri 2007): 1) *gu*, the long rainy season, lasts from April to June, 2) *hagaa*, the short dry season, lasts from July to September, 3) *dayr*, the short rainy season, lasts from October to November, and 4) *jiilaal*, the long dry season, lasts from December to March.

In Landinfo's understanding, the traditional form of calendar is primarily used by older generations and especially people who have lived a nomadic lifestyle (source A, emails 2012; source B, email 2021; Hirsi 2017; Hussein 2012, p. 7). As far as Landinfo is aware, it is no longer a given that most Somalis, especially in the cities, are familiar with this calendar and way of reckoning time. According to source B (email 2021), young Somalis need help from elders to be able to interpret such references.

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Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

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Oral sources

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- Source C, international organisation A operating in Somalia, meeting in Nairobi, 9 February 2015
- Source D, international organisation B operating in Somalia, email 10 February 2021
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