

| Published: 03-24-2026

# Two-Thirds of Open Somali Cases Placed on "Somali Rocket Docket"

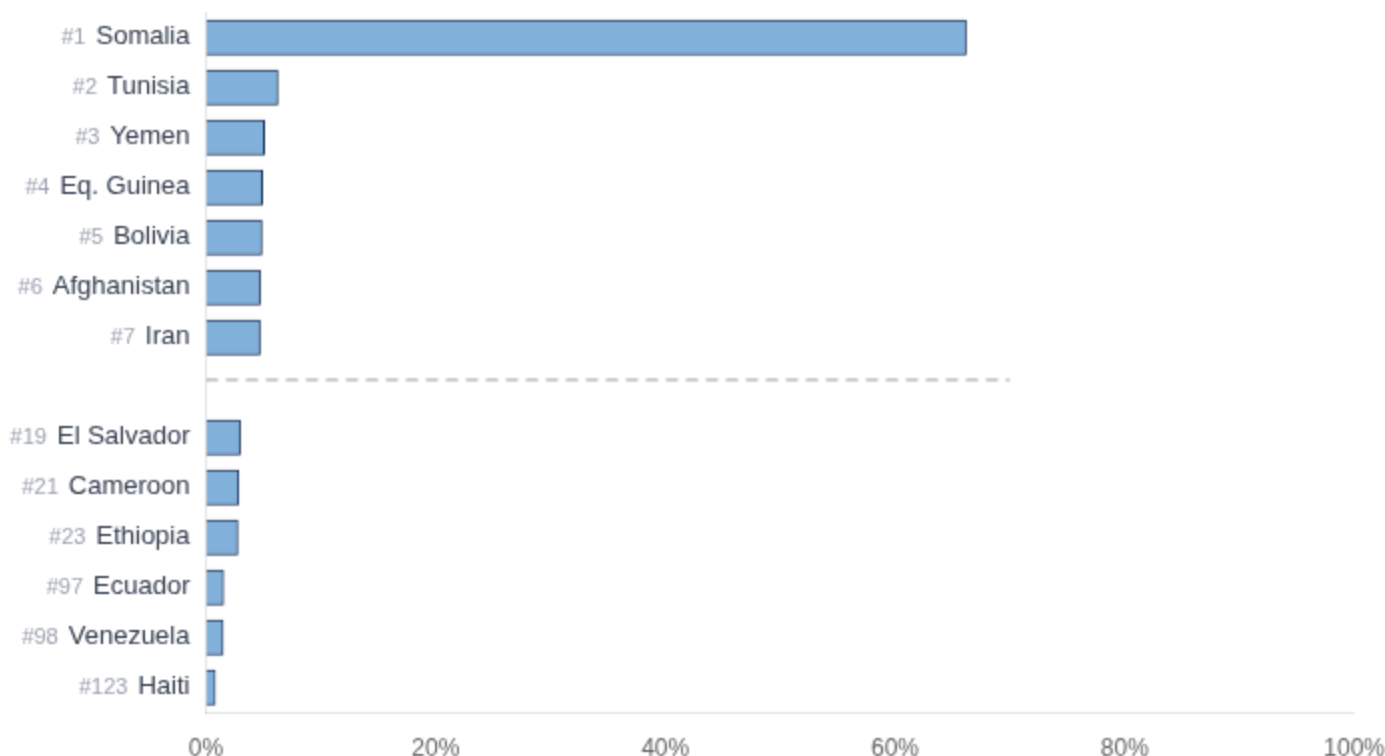
## Report on Fast-Tracked Somali Cases in Immigration Court

by [Joseph Gunther](#) and [Brandon Marrow](#)

In January and February 2026, lawyers representing Somalis in immigration court began reporting that cases with no future hearing, or with one set for years away, were suddenly being scheduled for hearings in February and March.<sup>1</sup> This was so little notice that it led lawyers to identify an unofficial "Somali rocket docket" being used to fast-track Somali cases through immigration court. Using publicly available court data, we demonstrate its scale: we found that, nationally, two-thirds (66.25%) of all Somali noncitizens with an open immigration court case were scheduled for a hearing with a new judge on short notice.

This phenomenon follows President Trump's repeated verbal attacks on Somalis and statements that "[we don't want them in our country](#)," and the [targeting of Somalis](#) in Operation Metro Surge in Minnesota. The Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR, which oversees the immigration courts) has [officially denied](#) the existence of a Somali rocket docket, claiming, "There is no 'fast-tracking' of immigration court cases." The data shows otherwise. The chart below demonstrates how no other nationality has faced remotely similar scheduling activity. Moreover, of the eleven judges we identified as being newly assigned these Somali cases, the top ranks of EOIR leadership are remarkably well-represented: the list includes the chief immigration judge of the entire court system, as well as assistant chief immigration judges in Louisiana, Ohio, California, and Illinois.

### Percentage of open cases of a given nationality that were reassigned on short notice in early 2026



Here, we count short-notice reassigned cases as a percentage of each nationality’s open cases. We define a short-notice reassigned case as one for which a hearing was input in January or February 2026 for a hearing date in the first seven months of 2026, with a different judge than previously assigned to that case as of the end of 2025. That seven-month cutoff could be further narrowed: most of the hearings we found were scheduled for February or March. We considered open cases to be cases that have not been completed or were completed in January or February 2026. Hover over or tap on the bars to see the total number of open cases.

In most of the reassigned cases—at least 88%—Somali noncitizens were transferred to an out-of-state judge. These hearings would likely be conducted over video. Five of the eleven judges who had Somali cases reassigned to them are part of the Office of the Chief Immigration Judge. The Office of the Chief Immigration Judge explicitly has “the power, in his discretion, to set priorities or time frames for the resolution of cases...to regulate the assignment of immigration judges to cases, and otherwise to manage the docket of matters to be decided.”<sup>2</sup>

Judge	Court	New Somali Cases
Tida, Abdias	Houston	375
Taylor, Philip	Atlanta	309

<b>Judge</b>	<b>Court</b>	<b>New Somali Cases</b>
Riley, Kevin	Los Angeles	304
Caborn, Andrew	Conroe, TX	270
Brisack, Chris	Conroe, TX	189
Grande, Guy	San Diego	165
Defoe, Craig	Chicago	140
Ashworth, Sherron	Baton Rouge	141
Carbone, Nina	Denver	131
Riley, Teresa	Cleveland	93
Owens, Jonathan	Cleveland	70

Somali cases were reassigned to these judges beginning at the end of January. This came shortly after DHS announced it would terminate Temporary Protected Status for Somalis (though this has been stayed by a federal judge). Based on entry data available in the dataset, it appears that most of the Somalis whose cases were reassigned had entered the country before the July 12, 2024 eligibility cutoff for Somali TPS.

We found that there were an estimated 3,366 open Somali cases nationwide. Of the 2,230 that had been reassigned on short notice as of February 28, almost all appeared to be non-detained cases (over 96%). Somali immigrants living in 34 different states were affected, with Minnesota (54% of 2,230) and Washington (16%) predominant.

At the moment, there is not a lot of information on case outcomes for these reassigned cases in the most current data release. However, previous rocket

dockets have raised serious concerns about access to representation and due process.<sup>3</sup>

It's possible that aspects of the Somali rocket docket will become more prevalent in immigration court in the near future. In late 2025 and early 2026, the administration widely used a court process called "pretermission" to abruptly deny the asylum claims of many thousands of noncitizens and give them "third-country" removal orders, but that tactic was paused without explanation in mid-March. As a replacement tactic, we may see a rise in EOIR scheduling noncitizens for hearings on short notice, perhaps over video with unfriendly out-of-state judges. Already in San Francisco, one week in March saw many more hearings than usual scheduled on short notice, resulting in over 800 automatic removal orders for non-appearance.

## Other work

Shortly before publishing this report, we learned of an anonymous report on the Somali rocket docket available at a website called EOIRdata.com. There are significant methodological differences between that report and ours, and we would welcome discussion with the author(s).

## Methodology Notes

We used public immigration court data—which is updated monthly—that we downloaded from the Department of Justice in March. The data is current through February 28.

For the purposes of this analysis, we considered open cases to be cases that have not been completed or were completed in January or February 2026 (*completion* references the "comp\_date" field of the proceedings table in the dataset). We then looked at the percentage of these cases that had been assigned to a new judge by comparing their most recently scheduled hearing as of December 31, 2025, with their most recently scheduled hearing as of the latest data release (using the "input\_date" field of the hearings table).

We determined home courts for judges using the [EOIR website](#) and compared them with the "alien\_state" field in the cases table of the dataset.

**Questions?** Reach out to Joseph at: [joseph@josephgunther.me](mailto:joseph@josephgunther.me). Reach out to Brandon at: [info@bklg.org](mailto:info@bklg.org).

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1. Ximena Bustillo, "[Immigration courts fast-track hearings for Somali asylum claims](#)," *NPR*, Feb. 9, 2026; Judd Legum, "[How Trump is rigging immigration courts against Somali migrants](#)," *Popular Information*, Feb. 9, 2026; Christopher Magan, "[Fast-tracked asylum hearings for Somali refugees being held in secret](#)," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, Mar. 12, 2026; Lauren Leamanczyk and Kelly Dietz, "[Somali 'Rocket Docket' | Lawyers say fast-tracked asylum cases could have life or death impact](#)," *KARE 11*, Mar. 12, 2026; Anshu Patel and Nicolas Scibelli, "['We just want a fair trial': How the 'Somali rocket docket' is upending the asylum process](#)," *Sahan Journal*, Mar. 17, 2026; Ubah Ali, "[Attorneys say Somali cases are now being fast-tracked after judge temporarily pauses termination of TPS](#)," *CBS News/Associated Press*, Mar. 17, 2026. ↩
2. It's possible that these cases will not end up being heard by the chief/assistant chief immigration judges themselves. These cases may be reassigned to other judges in their courts. ↩
3. The term "docket" is a case management term EOIR uses to outline procedures for prioritizing cases and assigning them to immigration judges. Within an immigration court, there is usually a detained docket and a juvenile minor docket where cases that fall into these categories are assigned to one or two judges at the court. Since 2014, presidential administrations have used a variety of "rocket dockets" prioritizing hearing scheduling for unaccompanied minors, recent arrivals, and family units over cases long pending with the court, see: "[surge dockets](#)" (Obama), "[Family Unit \(FAMU\) docket](#)" (Trump 1), "[dedicated docket](#)" (Biden & Trump 2). Presidential administrations bill these dockets as tools to manage the immigration court backlog, but they have been widely criticized as an attack on due process. In a 2022 piece on the dedicated

docket, TRAC shows that "expedited hearing processing substantially reduced the odds that families were able to have their asylum claims considered and asylum itself granted." A central issue was lower access to representation due to the rapidly scheduled hearings on these dockets. ↵

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