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ERITREA: The Patriarch of the Orthodox Church died after 15 years of house arrest

The third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church Tewahedo died after 15 years of house arrest

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (12.02.2022) – After a serious long illness, the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church Tewahedo, Abune

Antonios, died at the age of 95. He was buried on 10 February in Asmara at a monastery to which he belonged. A large crowd gathered at the burial site, many of whom had traveled long distances on foot, according to reports. He had been under house arrest for the last 15 years.

Abune Antonios (July 1927 – 9 February 2022) was the third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church. He was illegally and forcefully deposed by the Eritrean government in 2006 and was placed under house arrest thereafter. He was kept in solitary confinement under the orders of the country's authoritarian leader, President Isaias Afwerki, for his resistance to government interference in the Church.

Abune Antonios was born to a family of priests in the town of Hembrti, north of Asmara in the province of Hamasien. When he was five years old, his father gave him and his brother as a gift to the monastery of St. Andrey, where they were educated. He was ordained priest in 1942, and later elected Abbot in 1955. When the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church sought autocephaly, he was one of five abbots of monasteries that went to Egypt to be ordained as bishops so that the church would have its own Holy Synod. He was ordained as Bishop Antonios of Hamasien-Asmara on 19 June 1994 in Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, Cairo, by Shenouda III, Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria.

Following the death of Abune Yacob in 2003, he was elected Patriarch in popular elections which were unanimously endorsed by the Holy Synod of the church. His ordination and enthronement as Patriarch took place on 23 April 2004 in Asmara, at the hands of Pope Shenouda III, assisted by Eritrean and Coptic Orthodox Metropolitans and Bishops. He was

the first Patriarch of Eritrea to have been enthroned who had not previously been a bishop in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Very early in his reign as Patriarch, Abune Antonios confronted state interference within his church. He resisted government requests that he excommunicate 3,000 members and protested the arrest of priests. As early as January 2005, the Patriarch's annual Christmas message was not broadcast on television. On January 20, 2006, authorities notified Patriarch Antonios he would be removed as Patriarch and placed him under house arrest.

On May 27, 2007, the Eritrean government replaced Patriarch Antonios with Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera, forcefully removed the Patriarch from his home, and detained him incommunicado at an undisclosed location. However, many adherents and clergy both in Eritrea and in the diaspora continued to follow Antonios during his detention.

On July 16, 2017, authorities allowed Antonios to make a public appearance for the first time in over a decade. While under heavy security, Antonios attended mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Asmara, but was prevented from giving a sermon or subsequently speaking with congregants. Three days later, on July 19, the government moved Antonios to a new location, reportedly to provide better living conditions.

In 2019, bishops of the Holy Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church excommunicated Antonios, accusing him of heresy. The move was condemned by the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches. Nor do they recognize the power that changed him in the Eritrean Church.

Eritrea's authoritarian regime, one of the most repressive in the world, often arbitrarily arrests, detains, and imprisons believers of all faiths.

[Further reading about FORB in Eritrea on HRWF website](#)

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