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The third Patriarch of the Eritrean 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 [Hamasién](#). 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.

About the persecution of Eritrean Orthodox Christians

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (12.02.2022) - Eritrea is ruled by a totalitarian one-party dictatorship of Maoist inspiration.

Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after 30 years of continuous armed struggle by the Eritrean Liberation Front. Since then, national presidential or legislative elections have never taken place.

As of July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of Eritrea to be six million but there are no reliable figures available on religious affiliation. Some government, religious, and international sources estimate the population to be 49% Christian and 49% Sunni Muslim. In 2016, the Pew Foundation estimated the population to be 63% Christian and 37% Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly [Eritrean Orthodox](#).

The only [recognised religions](#) in Eritrea are the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Evangelical Church and Sunni Islam.

In Eritrea, Orthodox Christians cannot be considered Coptic because the Coptic Pope granted autocephalous status to their church in 1994. However, the Eritrean Orthodox Church was historically under the authority of the Patriarch of Alexandria and still is. Since the current government in Eritrea took power, this Church has experienced severe restrictions despite being one of the four recognised religions. After years of objecting to state interference in religious affairs, Patriarch Abune Antonios was deposed by the government in January 2006 and placed under house arrest. Another patriarch, who was selected and imposed by the regime, has governed the church since that time.

Three high-ranking Orthodox Christians detained in a maximum-security centre since 2004

[Gebremedhin Gebregioris](#), a theologian expert and the head of the Sunday Schools department in the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarchate

[Futsum Gebrenegus](#), a senior doctor who appeared regularly on Eritrean TV and had positions on many government-appointed commissions

[Tekleab Menghisteb](#), a deacon and priest in the Eritrean Church

were all detained in 2004 for their involvement in the renewal movement of the Orthodox Church.

They have been kept incommunicado since then, and no formal charges have ever been brought against them.

International advocacy

On 6 July 2017, [the European Parliament adopted a resolution](#) on the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak. The resolution stated that:

“Abune Antonios, the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the nation’s largest religious community, has been in detention since 2007, having refused to excommunicate 3000 parishioners who opposed the government [...] since then, he has been held in an unknown location where he has been denied medical care.

The European Parliament called ‘on the Eritrean Government to release Abune Antonios, allow him to return to his position as Patriarch, and cease its interference in peaceful religious practices in the country’. Additionally, it reiterated ‘that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, and strongly condemned any violence or discrimination on grounds of religion’.

In its 2021 Annual Report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed its concern for the continuation of religious repression in the country and highlighted the domination of the government in the internal affairs of the four recognised religious communities, including the Orthodox Church of Eritrea.

[USCIRF recommended to the US government to](#)

- Redesignate Eritrea as a country of particular concern (CPC);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States;
- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to release unconditionally detainees held on account of their religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios.
- Urge the Eritrean government to release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios;
- Call on the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses; and
- Encourage the Eritrean government to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross.

Since 2004, USCIRF has designated Eritrea as a [Country of Particular Concern](#).

On 21 June 2019, the [UN Human Rights Council issued a press release](#) by Special Rapporteur Daniela Kravetz about human rights in Eritrea, especially the government's crackdowns on various religious communities. Concerning the arrest of Orthodox believers, she said that on 13 June 2019, 'security forces arrested five Orthodox priests from the Debre Bizen monastery. The priests - three over 70 years old - were allegedly arrested for opposing the government's interference in the affairs of the Church'. [She also pressed the government to 'release those who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs'](#).