ERITREAN PATRIARCH
UNCANONICALLY DEPOSED

His Holiness Abune Antonios I, Patriarch of Eritrea

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For some time past there have been serious concerns expressed over religious freedom in Eritrea. In May 2002, the Eritrean government required the registration of all religious groups, without which they would be required to cease all religious activities. It then used this legislation as the basis for the enforced closure of unregistered church groups. This legislation did not apply to the four government-approved groups: Orthodox, Catholics, Muslims and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea and although other groups applied for registration, their applications were not processed. The US Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report for 2004 noted that the Eritrean government’s “poor respect for religious freedom for minority groups continued to decline” and instanced not only the harassment, arrest and detention of members of the Jehovah Witnesses, Pentecostal and other independent evangelical groups but also so-called “reform groups” within the Eritrean Orthodox Church. In March 2004 it was reported that the Eritrean authorities had raided the private homes of Christians, arresting and jailing adults for praying and reading the Bible together. In the face of increasingly well documented evidence to the contrary, the Eritrean authorities repeatedly denied that there was any religious persecution.

It appears that Patriarch Antonios increasingly resisted government interference, especially instructions emanating from Mr. Yeftehe Dimetros, the government’s official responsible for church matters, a rôle rather similar to that of the Ober-Prokurator of the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod in Tsarist times. First warnings of the coming crisis can be traced back to 7 January 2005 when the Patriarch’s annual Nativity
message was not broadcast or televised. A meeting of the Eritrean Holy Synod met on 6-7 August 2005 with the main purpose of removing all executive authority from the Patriarch. According to a report by Asmarino Independent News there were six accusations brought against the Patriarch, including his reluctance to excommunicate 3,000 members of the Medhane Alem, an Orthodox Sunday School movement, and his demands that the government should release imprisoned Christians accused of treason, especially three prominent priests (Dr. Futsum Kuluberhan, Dr. Tekleab Mengisteab and Gebremedhin Georgis) who had been detained incommunicado in Asmara’s notorious Wongel Mermera Centre. He was allowed to officiate at church services but prohibited from having any administrative role in church affairs. It would appear that all the bishops present agreed to this measure, with the possible exception of Bishop Yoannes of Anseba, and the document was signed by Bishop Petros, the new General Secretary of the Holy Synod, one of the four new bishops consecrated by Patriarch Antonios in April.

The government denied the removal of the Patriarch and pointed to the fact that he was performing certain ceremonial functions, such as signing a public book of condolences when the foreign minister died suddenly, but it is clear that the Eritrean Synod is totally under the control of the government’s appointee. After this Patriarch Antonios has remained under virtual house arrest at his residence in Asmara.

![Image](image-url)

*Abune Antonios and President Afeworke in happier days*

A delegation of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, comprising Bishop Marcos of Massawa (formerly of London), Bishop Dioscoros and Mr. Yeftehe Dimetos travelled to Egypt on 25 July to seek the support of His
Holiness Pope Shenouda, for the deposition and replacement of Patriarch Antonios, but came away empty-handed. Although Pope Shenouda has not yet issued any official statement it may be readily assumed that the Pope does not sympathise with the actions of the Eritrean government which has similarities to his own “house-arrest” under the late President Sadat. His Holiness’ respect for canonical church order, loyalty to godly hierarchs as well as his refusal to be intimidated by secular rulers who misuse their power, all suggest that he will stand by Patriarch Antonios. The official church journal, El Keraza, of which the Pope is editor-in-chief, has also contained a request for prayers for Patriarch Antonios who “is passing through a great tribulation. We hope that the Lord will rescue him.” It also restated that the Coptic Church always prays for the Patriarch by name in its liturgies, which is a very clear reminder that there is no change in the Patriarch’s canonical status. Whilst in the USA, Pope Shenouda hosted a meeting at his residence in Cedar Grove for a delegation of the Eritrean Orthodox Church which comprised Bishop Macarios and representatives of the priests of the North American Diocese. On 23 January Pope Shenouda delegate Metropolitan Bishop to meet the Eritrean Ambassador to Egypt and explain to him the view of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The North American diocese is one of the most dynamic and well-organised of the Eritrean communities in the diaspora. At its 7th Annual Conference held at the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church in Washington, D.C., from 27-31 July 2005 the delegates were surprised that the Patriarch’s representative was Abune Lukas, Bishop of Gash Barka, who they described as “quite unfamiliar with the language and culture of the United States” and who arrived without any letter from the Patriarch. It soon became evident that Abune Lukas was really the spokesman of Mr. Yeftehe and had been sent to bring the Americans under the same control. In a spirited declaration dated 30 July 2005, the American Eritreans protested at the uncannibal situation and declared that they would only act upon directives personally signed by the Patriarch. The arrival in the USA of Bishop Sinouda, another one of the newly consecrated hierarchs, further added to the confusion and forced the North American diocese to convene a further meeting on 17 September 2005 at the Debre Gé’ezan Medhane Alem Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where a further series of resolutions were passed repudiating the disruptive activities of Bishops Lukas and Sinouda and affirming loyalty to the Patriarch.

On 13 January 2006 a secret session of the Holy Synod was held, at which Bishops Lukas, Petros and Marcos (recently returned from London) and Mr. Yeftehe Dimetross were present. This formally removed the Patriarch from office. According to some reports Dimetross reportedly forced some if not all the senior clergymen whose names appeared on the
document to sign it. Patriarch Antonios openly challenged the decision, declaring that it was a direct violation of Orthodox church canons. Under canon law, a Patriarch’s election is considered a lifetime appointment that cannot be revoked. In addition, Dimetros’ usurpation of the church administration contravenes church statutes, which require that the position be held by an ordained bishop appointed by the Patriarch. Patriarch Antonios promptly excommunicated Dimetros from holding any position within the church and suspended the three bishops from officiating at liturgies or delivering any sermons.

To symbolise the Patriarch’s changed status, Dimetros ordered the confiscation of the Patriarch’s car and dismissed his personal chauffeur; but this gesture seems to have backfired as two days later, Abune Antonios caused a stir in Asmara when he emerged from his home, walking along the street to attend the Sunday prayers and liturgy at St. Mary’s Orthodox Church. Shocked that the elderly Patriarch was not being driven to church as usual, several of the faithful stopped their cars to offer him a lift. The 78-year-old Patriarch was quickly surrounded by a crowd of Orthodox faithful who escorted him to and from his residence for morning worship. Since then, other, unconfirmed reports state that he is prevented from receiving visitors and his telephone and fax have been disconnected; his residence in Asmara ss surrounded by the military and guards are in his house; he is attended by only one female member of his family and is allowed no other visitors; his salary has been cut and he is suffering serious economic hardship; his health is fragile and although he is suffering from diabetes he is receiving no medication or treatment; and whilst he had the foresight to hide his seal, the authorities have copied it and it is being used illegally.

Text of Abune Antonios’s Letter

To: Your Grace Arch Bishops, Bishops, Episcopet-. Member of the Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church:

I send you my spiritual greetings. Also, I acknowledge receipt of your letter, dated 13/1/2006 (January 13, 2006) (FN1/225/41/98) informing me that you have removed me from my position as the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church.

The grave action that you have taken is illegal as it is in total contravention of the Constitution of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, the Canon of the Church, the guidelines enumerated in the Didascalia, the Fith’a Negest (Law of the Kings), and the writings of St. Clement. According to the above, which are the legal foundations of our church, a Patriarch, once consecrated, can be removed only under the
following three specific circumstances: (1) grave moral failure, such as adultery (2) falling into heresy, or (3) physical and/or mental infirmity.

In this case, the false accusations that you have raised against me, and used for my illegal removal, are neither within the bounds of the legal framework of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, nor substantive enough to merit the slightest consideration. The reasons for your actions can not be the result of your ignorance of the Canon of the church; it is rather because you have become a law unto yourselves. There is one thing that you need to be reminded of: No one can be above the law. Whosoever tries to trample the law underfoot will himself end up being trampled over by the law. This is a veritable truth.

Even if, in the very unlikely event, you were able to raise legitimate grievances against me, it is not proper for the accused to face his accusers, be presented with the accusations in a formal and properly constituted church tribunal, and the accused given the right to defend himself? Instead, you have appointed yourselves - the very accusers - jury and judges in order to accomplish your sordid plans. Your accusations are all baseless. For this illegal act of yours, the first in the long history of our apostolic faith and tradition, therefore, the Canon and the Constitution of our church will judge you.

This one fact remains unchallenged. What has propelled you into such a deplorable act, without regard to the life of our Church, is my longstanding belief and vehement stand that it is illegal and unacceptable for Mr. Yoftahe Dimetros, a layperson of absolutely no clerical credentials, to become the highest administrator of our Church.

Considering the grave danger into which you have put our Church, a council consisting of all the abbots of the monasteries and the learned men (liqawnti) of our Church should immediately convene, in front of whom I will respond to your accusation. Furthermore, the traditions of our sisterly Oriental Churches and the relevant articles in the Fitha Negest (Law of the Kings), and the Canon of the church clearly state that if an accusation is brought up against a patriarch of one church, another patriarch from a sisterly Oriental Orthodox church has to sit in the adjudication of the matter. A patriarch cannot be removed unless these preconditions are met. In ignoring such important procedures, you have, of course, rendered any decision you have made against me totally invalid.

Since the matter has now come to a head, I hereby appeal my case to: (1) the Council of the Monasteries of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and (2) The Egyptian Orthodox Church through which we have received our apostolic mandate.

There is no doubt that the person who is orchestrating all that has transpired behind the scene is Mr. Yoftahe Dimetros. Therefore, in
consideration of all the above; pending the above mentioned appeal; and until the matter is adjudicated legally and in accordance with the Canon and traditions of our Church; and, as the duly consecrated Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, and with the consequent power that is vested in me, I hereby issue the following binding injunctions: I order you, in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit, to desist from:

(1) Anointing a Patriarch
(2) Consecrating bishops, episcopes, or ordain priests and deacons.
(3) Furthermore, since the person responsible for the confusion in our Church is none other than Mr. Yoftahe Dimetros, he is hereby excommunicated, and should immediately vacate the position he holds in our church as the chief administrator.
(4) Fr. Habtom Russom, deputy secretary of the Synod, has been engaged in an illegal and malicious campaign against the person and authority of the patriarch. Hence, from 6/5/1998 (Ge’ez calendar) (January 14, 2006) on he is to be considered excommunicated. Consequently, he is to desist from any clerical activities either as a deacon or as a priest.
(5) On the basis of the above, I implore Abune Dioscoros to refrain from your negative activities.

May God grant his peace to our Church
May God bless our Country, Eritrea.

Official seal and His Holiness’ signature

cc:
Department of Religious Affairs of the Government of Eritrea
All the monasteries of our Church
Council of the Learned Men (liqawnti) of the Orthodox Church
Department of Censorship
All the Orthodox Tewahdo Churches of Asmara
All the dioceses, including the Diocese of Asmara
All the Oriental Orthodox Churches
Fr. Habtom Russom
Debre M’ewan Abune Aregawi Church, Asmara.

Fears for the Patriarch’s health (he suffers from diabetes and hypertension) and well-being grow as he continues to challenge the government interference in church affairs and most people expect him to be arrested soon. Equally, the Patriarch’s moral stature and principled stand has earned him huge respect among the Eritrean faithful, both at home and in the diaspora. This may protect him from personal arrest as well as force the government to adopt a more conciliatory line. In
February 2006, a London based group of “Concerned Eritreans” addressed a letter to the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches asking that an official delegation should be sent to Asmara to visit the Patriarch.

Patriarch Antonios’ appeal to the Coptic Orthodox Church and to the Monastic Council of the Eritrean Orthodox Church follows canonical procedure. One presumes that he has more faith in the independence of the Monastic Council than the Eritrean Holy Synod, which can no longer be reckoned an independent body capable of acting apart from government pressure.

**British Orthodox Response**

Abba Seraphim’s known affection for the Eritrean community led him to request a meeting with the Eritrean Ambassador, His Excellency Negassi Sengas, which took place at the Eritrean Embassy in London on 7 July 2004. At this meeting Abba Seraphim addressed the concerns about human rights and requested further documentation. He asked the ambassador to obtain authorised translations of the relevant legislation concerning the registration of religious communities and other specific documentation concerning the cases of the Rema Church, the Full Gospel Church and the Hallelujah Church in Asmara as well as the text of the government order of 22 May 2002, allegedly closing these and other independent Protestant organisations. In a subsequent letter to the Ambassador Abba Seraphim wrote,

"I believe that those of us who are anxious for the well-being of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and also well disposed to the State of Eritrea, which although a secular state, has both demonstrated its support to the Orthodox Church and encouraged positive relations between the different religious communities, need to confront these issues and rebut them with authoritative and well-documented statements. The persecution of people for their religious convictions (whether actively or through discriminatory legislation) is a human rights issue which deserves exposure. As an Orthodox bishop whose clergy and flock are all British nationals I believe we would be able to speak with authority and honest detachment in the cause of truth. I have already established myself as an outspoken opponent of religious persecution in other areas (notably the persecution of Christians by Islamicists) and my credibility is therefore well respected. You will appreciate that it would be inconsistent and dishonourable for me to condemn religious persecution in one area and condone it in another."

Following the government’s admission of the Patriarch’s removal from office, Abba Seraphim write to the Eritrean Ambassador in London:
"I write to you on behalf of the clergy and people of the British Orthodox Church to express our grave concerns over the Eritrean government's treatment of His Holiness Patriarch Antonios of Eritrea.

As a church of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate we British Orthodox enjoy full communion with the Eritrean Orthodox Church and, as Your Excellency knows well, we have always held the Eritrean Church and its clergy in the highest affection and honour. It is my privilege to have known Patriarch Antonios since before his episcopal ordination and, in fact, in 1994 we were ordained in the same ceremony by His Holiness Pope Shenouda.

According to the canons of the Orthodox Church, the removal of the Patriarch by the civil authority is irregular and uncanonical. The charges brought against His Holiness are vague and unsubstantiated and no opportunity has been accorded His Holiness to defend himself in public at a transparently open and independent hearing. Equally, there is little confidence that the Eritrean Holy Synod, as presently constituted, is independent of government interference, especially in view of the imposition of Mr. Yofiehe Dimitos, a layman, as a government appointee over church matters. In accordance with Canon Law, His Holiness Patriarch Antonios has appealed to the Council of the Monasteries of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and The Coptic Orthodox Church through which the Eritrean Orthodox Church received its canonical status.

The clergy and people of the British Orthodox Church are also concerned for the health and well-being of Patriarch Antonios and have been greatly distressed at reports that his telephone has been cut off, his chauffeur and other servants dismissed, his official car removed and general harassment to which he appears to have been subjected.

I would ask Your Excellency to convey to your government in Asmara our concerns. In addition I ask firstly for assurances that His Holiness is being treated well and with the respect and dignity befitting his high office and secondly, that His Holiness' position will be determined only by a duly convened ecclesiastical tribunal, independent of government interference and subject to proper canonical procedures, presided over either by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III in person or by his duly appointed delegate."