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ERITREA | Concerns Expressed About Patriarch's Wellness

Concerns are being expressed regarding the well-being of the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC), as further information emerges of the circumstances surrounding his first public appearance since his house arrest in 2007.

According to local sources, Patriarch Antonios was surrounded by guards during Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Asmara on July 16, while plain-clothed policemen dissuaded church goers from taking pictures. The patriarch's first public appearance for over a decade followed the publication, on the EOC official website, of a letter from the church's Holy Synod stating that the rift caused by his removal from office was over. Also published were pictures of the patriarch and a reconciliation committee consisting of members of the "Union of the Monasteries and Church Scholars," who had participated in a process that had allegedly ended in "full reconciliation." While the signatures of the other attendees appear on the letter, the patriarch's does not.

In August 2016, the same website published pictures of a purported reconciliation meeting and a letter alleging that Patriarch Antonios had apologized for events leading to his removal from office. After the details of the story were debunked by several credible sources, the conditions of his house arrest were reportedly made even more stringent.

Contrary to church protocol, the patriarch played no part in the July 16 church service. Instead, a statement from the reconciliation committee was reportedly read out to the congregation by a deacon, and the service was billed as a celebration of this reconciliation. According to the statement, the patriarch had been removed from office because of his association with heretical teaching and for exceeding his authority, presumably by questioning unwarranted government interference in church affairs. It also articulated Antonios' rejection of these charges. He did so initially in a strongly-worded letter of rebuttal written immediately after his removal from office, and has maintained this stance throughout the reconciliation process.

Antonios has yet to speak about or issue an independent statement on the reconciliation process or its outcome. According to Arbi Harnet (Freedom Friday), a network of activists inside Eritrea, the congregation was also informed the patriarch was unwell and thus would not address those assembled. This is particularly concerning, given recent reports alleging he had been injected with a substance on or around May 7 that had caused him to fall gravely ill. When the service was over, instead of being returned to his official residence, the patriarch was confined in another house where he is reportedly surrounded by armed guards.

Patriarch Antonios, who is 90 years old, has been under house arrest since January 2007, after being removed from office, in violation of canon law, for repeatedly objecting to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs. His removal cemented the government's control of the EOC, and his reappearance in public followed mounting international pressure.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Sadly, as information filters through from Eritrea, it is becoming apparent that Abune Antonios may not have been released, let alone reinstated. Instead, his reappearance increasingly seems to be part of an official attempt to seize control of the narrative following a wave of international pressure for his release, and to provide a fig leaf for individuals, nations, businesses and organizations that seek to engage with the regime in spite of its appalling human rights record. Patriarch Antonios, who suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure, has been detained incommunicado for a lengthy period and for no legitimate reason. CSW calls once again for his unconditional release and reinstatement, and echoes the request from the EOC Diocese of North America for the presence of representatives from sisterly Oriental Orthodox churches to observe and confirm the reconciliation process. We also urge the international community not only to make urgent representations with the Eritrean authorities regarding the patriarch's current situation, but to also hold them accountable for his continued wellbeing, reminding them his removal from office constitutes unlawful interference in church affairs and calling for his immediate release and restoration."