News



Patriarch Abune Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in an undated photo. (RNS/ HRCE)

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NAIROBI, Kenya— Abune Antonios, a confined Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch and the longest-serving prisoner of conscience in the Horn of Africa, died on Feb. 9 at the age of 94.

He was still serving detention in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, after his arrest in 2006, just two years after his installation as the third patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. For 16 years, 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.

Eritrea has long been on the U.S. State Department's list of worst religious liberty violators and was ranked sixth in Christian watchdog Open Doors' 2021 list of worst countries for persecution of Christians.

"It is very unfortunate that the patriarch died while in detention. There was no reason for the government of Eritrea to put him in detention," Francis Kuria, the general of the African Council of Religious Leaders, told Religion News Service on Feb. 11. "The Orthodox Church in Eritrea and elsewhere is always very supportive of the people's development."

Archbishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church in London announced the patriarch's death on social media, saying he had passed away after a long battle with illness, noting his battle with injustice had been even longer and more painful.

Antonios was buried on Feb.10 in the capital 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.

"We pray for repose for his holiness, and comfort and support for #our EritreaOrthodox Sisters and brothers in Eritrea, Britain and around the world," said Angaelos in a Tweet on Feb.9.

The patriarch's death in detention is likely to widen the split in the Eritrean Orthodox Church, triggered by the leader's removal and mistreatment. In 2007, with the support of the Eritrean government, Antonios had been replaced as patriarch by Abune Dioskoros. However, many adherents and clergy both in Eritrea and in the diaspora continued to follow Antonios during his detention. In 2019, bishops of the Holy Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church excommunicated Antonios, accusing him of heresy, a move that was condemned by the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Antonios' death brought back into focus the continued persecution and lack of religious freedom in Eritrea.

Eritrea's authoritarian regime, one of the most repressive in the world, often arbitrarily arrests, detains and imprisons its people because of their faith, according to human rights and anti-persecution groups.

At the moment, only the Roman Catholic Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam and the Lutheran Church-affiliated Evangelical Church of Eritrea are the legally permitted religious groups.

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Some religious leaders from the Orthodox, Full Gospel and Jehovah's Witness faiths have remained in imprisonment for more than 15 years, according to human rights organizations.

"We appeal to the government of Eritrea to create a conducive environment where freedom of religion and belief is fully exercised. There should be no reason to jail religious (people for their faith)," said Kuria. "The government should support religious leaders as partners. The action to constrain religion and religious leaders is

counter productive."

According to Kuria, the problem in Eritrea is that the government clamps down on any alternative voices — even the very mild and conservative — in a desire to be the only source of authority.

Antonios was arrested after he became critical of government excesses and resisted continued interference in Orthodox Church affairs by officials.

While in detention, Antonios had been denied the right to church services and was not allowed any visitors, including his followers, clergy or relatives. He was not given a chance to challenge his detention in a court of law.

"Despite 16 years of unremitting pressure, mistreatment, and defamation, the patriarch never compromised, even when it would have led to his reinstatement. He chose instead to protect the integrity and doctrine of the church with which he had been entrusted at the cost of freedom and comfort in his twilight years," said Mervyn Thomas, the founder and president of Christian Solidarity Worldwide in a statement on Feb.10.

Thomas urged the international community to honor the patriarch's courageous stand for freedom of religion by galvanizing efforts to secure the release of three Orthodox priests for whom Antonios advocated as well as thousands of others detained on account of conscience, religion and belief.