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ERITREA | No Improvement for Detained Patriarch

There has been no significant improvement in the circumstances of the detained head of the Eritrean Tewahdo Orthodox Church, despite official attempts to give the impression of progress. His Holiness Abune Antonios has effectively been under house arrest since being illegally removed from office in January 2006 for repeatedly objecting to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs.

According to recent information, Patriarch Antonios currently resides in two rooms in a servant quarters within the grounds of a villa occupied by Bishops Lukas and Basilios. The patriarch, who has not attended a church service since July 16, is reportedly sleeping in one room and receiving visitors in the other.

Church sources allege that while Patriarch Antonios is able to receive the occasional visitor, he is not permitted to discuss his situation with them. Several visitors have taken photographs with the patriarch, uploading them on social media platforms in an apparent attempt by the authorities to give the impression of normality. On Nov. 27, pictures circulated on Twitter and Facebook of the patriarch in the company of the Media Director of the Eritrean Embassy in London, Yared Tesfay, two bishops and a member or supporter of Eritrea's ruling party.

CSW's sources note that the patriarch is always dressed as a monk in these photos rather than in his official robes, indicating that he has not been reinstated. Instead Bishop Lukas, who currently functions as general secretary of the church synod and appears to harbor ambitions of becoming patriarch, is currently running the church. He officiates at ceremonies and meets with visiting dignitaries, including a delegation from the World Council of Churches that visited Eritrea in September.

Patriarch Antonios' reappearance in public during a church service July 16 sparked speculation about his imminent release from house arrest and reinstatement. However, he was not

permitted to speak during the service despite requesting to do so and was rushed from the premises and placed in the new location.

Elizabeth Chyrum, Director of Human Rights Concern-Eritrea (HRC-E), said, “It is an insult that the legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church is confined to the servants’ quarters in the same compound where two junior bishops live in a villa. This was clearly and deliberately done to subject him to daily humiliation.”

A church source who spoke to CSW said, “They just want to humiliate him. They did not release him – they just changed the house. It was all a marketing exercise to polish the face of the government.”

The patriarch’s case received renewed attention from Eritreans in the diaspora during worldwide demonstrations which were sparked by the use of live ammunition by the Eritrean security services against a student demonstration in Asmara on Oct. 31. Protestors in Africa, Australia, Europe and the United States carried posters of the patriarch alongside those of a fellow nonagenarian, Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur. The Honorary President of Al Daa Islamic School in Asmara was arrested Oct. 20 after opposing the government's attempt to seize the establishment.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “It is deeply concerning to note that Patriarch Antonios remains surrounded by people who clearly do not have his interests at heart. He is neither truly free nor reinstated and his circumstances appear to have been designed to humiliate him and break his spirit. We reiterate our call for the patriarch's unconditional release and reinstatement and for representatives of sisterly Oriental Orthodox churches to visit him, not only to ensure his reinstatement and wellbeing, but also to verify the reconciliation process that is alleged to have occurred between the patriarch and renegade clergy.”