

Eritrean Orthodox leader continues to be detained after a decade

Patriarch Antonios, who is 90 and has diabetes, has been denied medical care.

People in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue

For a decade, Patriarch Antonios of Eritrea has been detained at an unknown location by the Eritrean government.

Recently, several weeks after the tenth anniversary of his detention, he was seen at a mass but then confined again.

“We now know he is still alive, but our brief hopes for his freedom were dashed by a regime that shows no end to its cruelty,” wrote Thomas J. Reese, a priest and a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, who is advocating for Antonios’s release.

The independent, bipartisan commission highlights human rights violations abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Abune (Father) Antonios is 90 and has diabetes; he has been denied medical care.

The 2017 USCIRF annual report describes Eritrea this way: “Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations include torture or other ill treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities of unregistered religious groups, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups.”

In 2004, Antonios was elected head of Eritrea’s largest religious community—the Eritrean Orthodox Church. In 2005, the patriarch called for the release of political prisoners and rejected a government order to excommunicate 3,000 members of the church who opposed the government.

“He refused to betray his flock,” Reese wrote. “He refused to betray his conscience.”

In 2007, the government illegally replaced him as leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, which other Orthodox churches globally have refused to recognize.

“Orthodox priests continue to see Antonios as the church’s leader and dozens have been arrested for protesting the government’s illegal replacement,” Reese wrote. “Antonios’s flock has proved as loyal to him as he has been to them.” —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on July 31, appears in the August 16 print edition under the title “People: Patriarch Antonios of Eritrea.”