

Ethiopian Orthodox Church leaders resolve schism through dialogue, restore Church unity “based on church’s canon”



Abune Sawiros kisses the hands of His Holiness Abune Mathias I, Patriarch of the EOTC. Photo: EBC

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The Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the breakaway archbishops have announced that they resolved their differences ending a near month-long schism that threatened the unity of the church through “constructive discussion” and according to “the canon of the church.” In [a joint statement](#) released following the agreement, the two groups have reached a consensus to work together on the issues of language within the church’s services that led to the three breakaway archbishops, Abune Sawiros, Abune Eustatheos and Abune Zena Markos, to unilaterally ordain 26 episcopate resulting in the ex-communication of the archbishops and causing the schism.

Accordingly, the religious fathers have agreed to enhance the use of Afaan Oromoo language in all churches across Ormonia Regional State and to allocate additional budget for this and other administrative purposes, according to the statement.

Activities initiated by the church to serve the mass using their native language and assigning religious fathers who could serve the people in their own local languages will also be strengthened in a way that could answer the questions of the people, the statement added.

“The necessary budget and manpower will be allocated for this purpose in addition to what has been done before, more colleges and training center should be opened to train servants who know the language to serve in Oromia and other areas, as well those that opened before should be strengthened,” it stated.

It was decided that the three archbishops, Abune Sawiros, Abune Eostatheos and Abune Zena Markos, would return to their former dioceses and titles, and that the episcopate ordained by them would also return to their former ranks. Those who meet the church’s laws and regulations will be reappointed by the Holy Synod, the statement added.

“We will use the challenges we faced to test ourselves more deeply, to strengthen our unity, to use it for the good to preach the gospel more and expand the service of the church” EOTC leaders

The media, activists, teachers and religious figures have been cautioned to refrain from doing activities that exacerbate “hatred, poisons love and widens divisions”, according to the statement.

The leaders also vowed to “use the challenges we faced to test ourselves more deeply, to strengthen our unity, to use it for the good to preach the gospel more and expand the service of the church.”

Holy Synod of the EOTC in [a separate statement](#) said that it accepts the agreement and thanked the government of Ethiopia mainly Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed for his greater contribution in assisting the church solve the problem according to its canon.

“Now the problem has been solved, and in the future, the sovereignty and unity of the church will be preserved and it will live in its unity and sovereignty until Christ comes,” the statement reads.

In his congratulatory [remarks](#) following the agreement Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said, “today is a success; what remained is to quickly go to Tigray and bring the rest. We want you to be united.”

On 26 January the principal Holy Synod of the EOTC [excommunicated](#) three breakaway Archbishops and 25 appointee episcopate accusing them of involving in “illegal anointment” without the knowledge of the church. On Saturday 28 January, the three archbishops and 25 episcopate also [excommunicated 12 Archbishops](#) of EOTC Holy Synod members in a countermeasure, followed by [dispatching over the weekend](#), bishops to their assigned dioceses.

The event that led to what has now potentially become a split of the EOTC happened at the [Haro Beale Wold Church](#) in Woliso city of the South-West Shoa zone in Oromia Regional State, on 22 January, where His Holiness Abune Sawiros (PhD), Archbishop of South West Shoa Diocese, together with two other Archbishops, appointed 26 bishops: 17 bishops for dioceses located in the Oromia region, and nine bishops for dioceses outside Oromia without the involvement of the Holy Synod, creating widespread shock and anger among many of the church’s followers.

His Holiness Abune Sawiros explained the decision to appoint the 26 episcopate was made to resolve long lasting problems within the church for failing to serve believers in their native languages and detached of their culture, which resulted in loss of millions of believers over the past years particularly in Oromia and Southern region.

Following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s remarks in which he [weighed in with a call for dialogue](#) and remarked on the schism saying that it was “possible to resolve it without suppressing people’s right and demand to use one’s own language, the tensions between the Holy Synod in Addis Abeba and the government were heightened.

The Holy Synod [slammed the PM’s remarks](#), and accused the government of direct involvement in the crisis and called on faithfuls to wear black for three days in protest of the government’s position.

On 04 February, [clashes lash between followers](#) of Orthodox Christianity and the local police in West Arsi zone, Shashemene city of the Oromia Region “claimed the lives of many people.” The clashes erupted at St. Michael Church during a reception ceremony for members clergy appointed by the new “Holy Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities.”

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said in [a report](#) that eight people were killed following “excessive use of force” by government security forces during the clashes.

A nationwide protest rally which was planned for 12 February was called off after church leaders discussed with the PM on 11 Saturday leading to the agreement that has now been reached. **AS**