

Ethiopia: Analysis - PM Abiy Weighs On Deepening Crisis Within Orthodox Church With Call for Dialogue As Accusations of State Interference Grow Louder



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Holy Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa, the seat of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

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Addis Abeba — Addressing cabinet members who were convened for a six-month performance evaluation of government ministries, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed broke his silence with a remark on the ongoing controversy within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), and called on leaders of the Church to resolve their differences through dialogue and discussion. He also defended his government's track record of helping the Church in the face of growing criticisms, including by the Ezema party, of roles being played by the ruling party to divide the church by helping the breakaway Archbishops.

The PM's remark came amid growing criticisms that his government is siding with the breakaway archbishops and security forces are detaining and pressuring religious leaders who are against the breakaway archbishops.

In a [video posted to his Facebook](#) page on Tuesday, PM Abiy said that religious institutions should cleanse their insides from "politics, thievery and racism", which he said were contrary to the principles and values of religious. But the trend has been repeatedly witnessed in the Ethiopian case, he said, leaving a trail of "breaking up history, hindering development, and damaging social coexistence."

PM Abiy compared his government with the government's of the past, specifically the Derg, which he said had "killed", and the EPRDF, which he said had "expelled" with a letter, the respective Patriarchs of the Church.

Further refuting growing claims that his government was playing a role in the current controversy between the two groups of the church and went on calculating the number of buildings and the size of land his government made available to the Church

He credited the incumbent Prosperity Party-led government of his as one that has supported the Church unlike the previous regimes by mentioning the involvement of the government in bringing the late Abune Merkorios, the 4th Patriarch of the Church, after 27 years in exile. The Patriarch was deposed during the early days of the EPRDF government in what is widely believed by the faithful to be a politically motivated decision, leading to the exile of the late Abune Merkorios who had established a separate Synod in the U.S., effectively splitting the Church until the exiled Synod was reunited after the late Abune Merkorios and his Synod members arrived in Addis Abeba on 01 August 2018. In his remark yesterday the Prime Minister credited his government as having accomplished. "What we did was to try and reconcile and unite the two", he said, adding that this was one of the "fundamental differences" of his government with the governments of the past. "This is not an ordinary matter."

Further refuting growing claims that his government was playing a role in the current controversy between the two groups of the church and went on calculating the number of buildings and the size of land his government made available to the Church; he said that his government has facilitated the return of two buildings which were confiscated by previous regimes to the Church, and "granted" the size of 1,045,000 square meter land in the capital Addis Abeba only in he last four years alone, "three times more" than his government "granted" to other major religious institutions including Islam, Catholic and Evangelical denominators combined, which he said was about 350,000 square meter land.

While defending his government against the accusations, PM Abiy also admitted that the government has sent mediators to advise the leaders of the EOTC to calmly discuss and resolve the issues, which he said was rejected.

"It is possible to resolve it without suppressing people's right and demand to use one's own language" PM Abiy

He reflected on the complaints from the breakaway Archbishops of long standing discrimination on appointments of bishops and problems in relation to getting religious services in one's own languages as major causes of the ongoing disagreements, the PM said his government cannot stop the demands of the people from getting answered.

"It may not be possible to appoint hundred bishops overnight for Oromia but over a longer period, and by listening to the people's demands, it is possible to resolve the issue, so that such issues of language, race, politics etc cannot destruct a big institution like this," he said.

"It is possible to resolve it without suppressing people's right and demand to use one's own language," he added, noting that the government cannot ignore questions being raised in Oromia and Southern regions; why they cannot be ministered with their own languages like Amhara and Tigray regions where Amharic and Tigrigna are used for church services.

PM Abiy has also remarked about the decision taken last year by Tigray region members of the Church to distance themselves from the Holy Synod in Addis Abeba and establish the Tigrayan Orthodox Church Patriarchate over the latter's silence of the killings of priests and destruction of churches in the Tigray war; he said that no one had objected the decision.

The PM's remarks, however, may not sit well with the Holy Synod after on Sunday 29 January, His Holiness Abune Mathias I, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo

Church (EOTC), the principal holy Synod [urged the government and the wider population](#) to help with ensuring respect to the dogma and canon of the "historic Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church", and pleaded for caution and protection by security forces to avoid "the blood of innocent Christians" from being spilled.

In what seems to be the exact opposite of that, PM Abiy said "there is no group that we either support or oppose, both groups are Orthodoxes, and both have demands and their own truths".

He warned that the consequences can be disastrous for both groups and for the country at large if they fail to resolve the issue with discussion and in a calm spirit, adding that there are forces who want to intervene and use the agenda for their own interests. He also warned his cabinet members not to intervene in any way.

The video of PM's denial of government intervention was released a few hours after the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (Ezema) party issued [a statement](#) in which it accused the government of interference in the matter and expressed "concerns" by "measures that security forces are taking."

"Several interventions by the government has been noted" the party said, without revealing the nature of the interventions, and called on the government to refrain from its acts. The party also inquired the government to take measure against individuals and groups with political agenda who want to intervene in the internal issues of the church.

Background

On 26 January the principal Holy Synod of the EOTC have [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 counter measure, 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.

However, the appointment was called "illegal" by his Holiness Abune Mathias I, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) who convened an [emergency meeting](#) to deal with the event he described as "a great event that has targeted the church." **AS**