

# **Asmara si difende dalle ingerenze religiose**

di Edoardo Calcagno

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## **Asmara defends itself from religious interference**

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A controversial new scandal hits the Catholic Church in Africa. This time the scene of the clash is Eritrea where the local authorities have closed some health centres managed by various ecclesiastical orders: an extreme decision that comes after months, if not years of tension. The closure of hospital centres is the result of a precise choice. The Eritrean Government, which already gives free medical assistance to the entire population, has always strongly protected the state secularity, which is expressed in the clear relationship of reciprocal independence. The Eritrean state does not interfere in religious matters, be they Catholic or Muslim or of other faith, but it does demand that religious authorities do not interfere in the political and administrative life of the community. In short, Eritrea is an extremely attentive state to its independence and refractory to external interference of any kind. A declared secularism that has always led the Asmara government to reject the field invasions that occasionally occur both in Catholic medical facilities and in the Islamic madrassas. An intransigent attitude in defence of the secular state that over the years has created tensions for Eritrea, even at international level. In this case, however, things have become even more complicated. From what a number of local sources report, the money that came from abroad fell into the various Catholic institutions present in Asmara were in fact destined not only to health initiatives but also to other purposes. In some cases - some sources reveal -, they ended up in the hands of some hospital managers or their family members who, unquestionably, used them for personal purposes. In short, the classical case of misappropriation if not embezzlement.

In addition to these, "cultural" activities that some of these managers have carried out and that have little to do with health and much with politics. And this was the last straw that led the Eritrean authorities to take an extreme decision such as the closure and confiscation of structures. Naturally, the position of the Catholic world was very strong and protested against this provision, dismissing it as an arbitrary and unmotivated gesture. However, Asmara reminds us that the closed units have a negligible impact compared to the real health needs of the population, and above all underlines the law, effective since 1995, that states that all medical and hospital structures in Eritrea must pass under the public control and management. In short, beyond the inevitable controversy, it is clear that in these structures, with unclear funding from abroad, there was something unacceptable for the Government of Asmara.

*(Note: This is unofficial translation)*