



ASIA/MALAYSIA - 8 arrested for church attacks; Christians say government is trying to regain credibility

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) – The debate and the results on the case regarding the name "Allah" continue to hold the stage in Malaysia. Today, the police arrested eight young people, between ages 21 and 25, suspected of having participated in the acts of vandalism that have occurred in recent days against Christian churches. A young man had been arrested (after a search through the social network Facebook) and today's arrests "are a positive indication that the government will not let these acts go unpunished. It is also a question of credibility with the public, at a time when the coalition government is divided and is losing consensus," note sources of Fides in the Malaysian Church.

Today, after days of tension, the situation in the country is peaceful and "every effort is being made to resolve the situation on the name of Allah through dialogue," Fides sources say. This is the wish expressed by the Christian community, however it has not been welcomed by some members of the executive.

In recent days Seri Nazri Aziz, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, publicly attacked the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, Archbishop Murphy Pakiam, saying: "It was the Church who dragged us into court. The time of dialogue is over." Christians deny the charges, noting that "several times in the past the Church has sought to open negotiations with the government to settle the issue, but the dialogue has always been postponed or denied. For this reason, they decided to resort to the court to verify the violation of a right and submit the case to justice," says the source of Fides.

In any case, the UMNO (United Malays National Organization), the governing party, appears to be internally divided: there are those who advocate a softer line and dialogue, which favor a negotiated settlement in order to maintain consensus even among non-Muslim segments of society, while some leaders are more radical, more susceptible to pressure from extremist Muslim groups. The government has, however, announced that it will not give up an appeal with the Court of Appeals.

The contradictions of the government led by Najib Abdul Razak have seemed evident in the discrimination of granting only a few Christians in the Malaysian federation permission for using the word Allah: the faithful in the states of Penang, Sabah and Sarawak (the latter two in Malaysian Borneo) may continue using the word "Allah," since "the head of state is not a Sultan," as the explanation goes.

The three states are home to large Christian communities, which in Sabah and Sarawak represent 47% of the population and are the majority religious group. Located northwest of the peninsula, Penang is the only state without Malay ethnic majority: 42% of the population is ethnic Chinese, 40% Malay, and 11% Indian. The Chinese are, usually, Buddhists or Christians, while the Malays, as prescribed by the Malaysian Constitution itself, are identified as Muslims. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 20/01/2010)