



ASIA/SRI LANKA - Civil society groups say "no" to Constitution changes

Colombo (Agenzia Fides) – "In Colombo, the situation is tense and there are massive marches and demonstrations. Civil society groups are up in arms over what is a matter of civil rights and democracy. Even religious leaders have raised their voices in declaring their disapproval of the sudden change to the Constitution." This is what Fides was told by Fr. Srian Ranasinghe, a missionary of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Director of the House of St. Vincent, near the capital Colombo.

The protests of the Sri Lankan civil society and religious leaders are in regards to the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, subject to the Parliament's vote, which would allow the current president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, to run for a third presidential term.

The disagreement has led to street protests, marches organized by the opposing side, creating tension in the streets of the capital. The Civil Rights Movement, a non-governmental organization with many activists around the country, in a note sent to Fides says: "We have experienced thirty years of civil war and we have witnessed the erosion of democratic values in the first post-independence Constitution. The end of armed conflict has brought the nation high expectations of peace, strengthening democracy, and development. This proposed constitutional amendment not only places a damper on such expectations, but it also creates serious concern."

The Movement launches an appeal to "Members of Parliament, asking that they vote against the amendment; to citizens, that they show their disapproval; to the government, calling for reasonable time that would allow for a distribution of information and public debate on any eventual amendment; and to the President, asking him to stop the process set in motion," for the good of the nation.

A forum of Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims religious leaders have expressed opposition to the amendment of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the Nation, noting in a statement: "All those who cherish democratic freedoms in the country have expressed objections." Such changes should be widely discussed and evaluated to reach a consensus of public opinion.

The Center for Society and Religion, created and managed by the Oblate of Mary Immaculate in Colombo, has launched a campaign to raise awareness among religious leaders, politicians, and all citizens, reaffirming the urgent need for "citizens to participate actively in the political process." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/08/2010)