



ASIA/INDONESIA - Corruption, intolerance, poverty: challenges in a nation hosting Obama

Jakarta (Agenzia Fides) – "President Obama knows Indonesia and has lived here. We are asking him to work, on an international level, to build peace and harmony with Islam." This is what Fides is told by Bishop Johannes Pujasumarta of Bandung, Secretary General of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference, during the visit of President Obama, now in Indonesia, on the second leg of his Asian tour. On behalf of the Bishops' Conference, Bishop Pujasumarta presents Fides with the major challenges - intolerance, corruption, poverty - in the most populous Muslim country in the world. The nation is home to a Christian minority (about 10%) that promotes the values of pluralism, dialogue, respect, freedom, democracy, and human dignity.

Your Excellency, what would you say to President Obama?

As Christians in Indonesia are asking him to dialogue, to work tirelessly and with conviction on an international level in order to build harmony and peace between the West and the Islamic world. The President knows the situation in Indonesia, a country that could be a model of pluralism, dialogue, and mutual respect between different communities, despite the difficulties.

Are there risks for growing religious intolerance?

I would like to, first of all, present a general picture: Indonesia is a vast country, a mosaic and harmonious composite, a society in which we live daily dialogue, respect, pluralism, and cooperation between different religious communities. But when religion is manipulated for political interests, the harmony of living together is disturbed: this is especially the case in the activity of small radical Islamist groups, which should be considered as groups that intend to change the very foundations of the state.

In this context, what is the role of Christians in the country?

Indonesia is not a theocratic state or a secular state, but a state that could be called 'secular-religious', based on five principles (the 'Pancasila') that refer to a public religiosity and common values of humanity. As citizens of this nation, as Christians, we have a great responsibility - especially those of us who are bishops - to help build a civil and democratic lifestyle, along with all people of good will. It is also our task to defend the national identity, based on the principles of 'Pancasila', which guarantee our life, our freedom, and our mission, just as it does that of all citizens. This goes against any attempt, latent or manifest, to impose Sharia, the Islamic law, in society. We are well aware of the difficulties, but our guide in acting is dialogue with everyone, including fundamentalists.

"Dialogue" is a key word for you, but is it always possible?

This is our situation: we live in a nation with a large Muslim majority. The future of Indonesia depends on how we will be able to foster and live out the word 'dialogue' today, among the different religious communities, as a way to peace and harmony. We are convinced of it and this is an integral part of our mission in this country. I would also like to point out that this is a journey and a shared approach. What the Church is promoting is not just pure 'tolerance of others,' but a genuine dialogue that creates friendship, esteem, and a culture of respect - and even love - between believers of different communities.

What do you think of the corruption that observers describe as "pervasive"?

As Bishops, even recently, we have repeatedly described corruption as a cancer that destroys the entire nation, which affects all aspects of social life and is a phenomenon that is even openly accepted and tolerated. It is unacceptable. It is the enslavement of the common life to the 'god' of money. The Church promotes an ethic of

transparency, and seeks to educate consciences in the values of honesty, dignity, generosity, and service. Even within the Church's administration, it is necessary to promote honest and transparent administration, in order to be credible on the outside.

Have the bishops brought attention to the alarming poverty rate?

On this issue our focus is always high. According to data from the 2010 census, the population of Indonesia has reached 238 million. But, in our opinion, social development in recent years has mainly been for the rich. For example, schools and hospitals are beyond the reach of the poor and the rift in society deepens. With increasing population, the poor and the excluded are growing in number and this imbalance is of concern to the Christian community. The Church is called to be a 'Church of the Poor,' to show them the love of God and show a 'preferential love' for the poorest of the poor.

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