



## **ASIA/TURKEY-Legal recognition of religious communities: a challenge for the new Turkey**

Aachen (Agenzia Fides) - A crucial step in modern Turkey is the legal recognition of religious communities; it is an essential right, which is also the prerequisite for the full exercise of religious freedom: this is what Otmar Oehring says, on the eve of political elections on June 12, he is responsible in the field of human rights "Missio Aachen", the Pontifical Mission Societies office in Germany.

In an interview with Fides, Oehring highlights the shortcomings in the system of guaranteed rights to religious communities in Turkey: which do not officially exist in Turkish law, there is no regulation that assigns the "legal status" to churches and other communities, with all the following consequences (inability to hold property, make contracts, to have employees to manage schools, start projects, get publications, etc).

The Islamic Sunni community (which is the majority in the country), although does not have an independent legal status - explains Oehring - at least has its life and activities protected by the "Diyanet", the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which reports directly to the Prime Minister. Other communities, however, are "ghost community" because they are a living contradiction, "they exist, but it is as if they do not exist".

"The AKP government (Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan) has not demonstrated a commitment based on the idea that religious freedom is for everyone, not just for one group" emphasizes Oehring. "This unique situation also raises the question of whether Turkey can be defined as a secular state. Legal status is one aspect of the problem: we need change in the attitude of the state, society, mentality. Changes are required by the Constitution and Civil Code. Otherwise Turkey will fail in achieving the obligations and aspirations in the respect for human rights", he says.

The legal recognition - he explains - is fundamental in the framework of relations between state and religion "because it denies", in fact, members of religious communities the full exercise and enjoyment of freedom of worship and religion". A positive example in this sense is the history of Buyukada orphanage, confiscated by the state in 1964 and returned to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople at the end of 2010. "The story is an implicit admission by the state, that the legitimized owners exist, but, nevertheless, are not legally recognized". To overcome these problems, said Oehring, changes to legislation that churches and religious communities are asking the new minority government are needed: first the abolition of Article. 101 (paragraph 4) of the Civil Code, which prohibits religious communities to have legal status as "foundations". "Until religious communities have no legal status they are unable to carry out their activities responsibly and independently", notes Oehring. "All this - he concludes - is a violation to the respect for human rights, to ensure people and communities" and is at the root of many social and religious problems of modern Turkey. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 11/06/2011)