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ASIA/BANGLADESH - Islam, state religion and laity: the contradictions and the "back off" of the government

Dhaka (Fides Service) -In recent days the Government of Bangladesh has "backed off", on the theme of the laity of the state, as reported by the Christian human rights activists who work on site to Fides. The Special Parliamentary Committee, appointed by the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to examine amendments to the Constitution, has recommended to maintain Islam as state religion, to preserve the religious debut in the preamble of the Constitution ("In the name of Allah, forgiving and merciful ") and to allow the presence of religious parties within the Constitution. According to religious Christian minority, Hindus and Buddhists, it is a "shift" due to pressure from Islamic fundamentalist groups. The government, in fact, had announced in the program the desire to want to restore laity to the state, and also to fight religious extremism in politics.

The move has generated controversy and disappointment in civil society. A Catholic activist in Dhaka tells Fides: "The proposed text to be modified by the Constitution literally states that 'Islam is the state religion in the Republic, which guarantees equal rights to other religions': it is a blatant contradiction and creates confusion. Meanwhile, as Christians (0.03% of the 160 million inhabitants, the vast majority are Muslims) we find ourselves living several problems in this so-called lay government of the Awami League". "The religious minorities, intellectuals, civil society activists - today ask the return to the Constitution of 1972, which was lay style. The government, which initially said was available, now is afraid of the reactions of Islamic radicals, and has stepped back". Even the government of Hasina, remarks, " is making an instrumental use of Islam to ensure legitimacy and political consensus".

Bangladesh was declared a lay state in 1972, but a series of constitutional amendments in subsequent years and two military dictatorships abandoned that principle to the point to declare Islam the state religion in 1988. Since taking power two years ago, Sheikh Hasina has publicly announced an agenda to restore the lay state and reintroduce the original "four principles" underlying the nation: democracy, nationalism, secularism and socialism. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 22/06/2011)

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