



## **ASIA/MALAYSIA - "Civil society takes to the streets to demand legality and less corruption: the movement is inter-religious", says the Director of Herald**

Kuala Lumpur (Fides Service) - "What is shaking the nation is a transversal and inter-religious movement, and is born from civil society without political labels. It brings legitimate requests, asks for a change, transparency and a determined fight against corruption at the highest levels of government. I believe that the movement represents a very positive impetus to Malaysian society": says Fr. Andrew Lawrence, a priest and Director of Herald, the weekly of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur in an interview with Fides. Herald weekly was at the center of the chronicles last year for the issue concerning the use of the word "Allah" for non-Muslims (still open), which sees a dialectic, even on a legal level, between the Church and the Malaysian government.

Fides has asked Fr. Andrew to comment on the wide public event that has now crossed the capital (see Fides 08/07/2011), organized by the "Bersih 2.0" forum. The police blocked the access to roads to the city, arrested more than 600 activists and forcibly dispersed at least 20 thousand demonstrators.

Fr. Andrew says: "It is a movement that originates from a low level, from NGOs that defend human rights, women's rights, freedom, honesty in politics. There are no political parties to operate it, even though some opposition party leaders said they support it. It is a sign of a major change that society, and especially the young, wish, for more democracy, transparency and legality. It started off with the request of cleaning required in the electoral process in the upcoming general elections, to broaden the vision of a global reform".

Fr. Andrew confirms to Fides the involvement of the Malaysian Christian community, along with believers of other religions, though not certain - as attested by insinuations- regarding "hidden financing" of Christian associations from abroad: "The Christian community is heavily involved: it shares these instances, along with Hindus, Muslims and other religions. One of the prominent personalities of Bersih is the young Christian lawyer Edmund Bon. But overall leadership is entrusted to a woman, the Hindu lawyer Ambiga Sreenevasan, known for her commitment to the defense of rights and freedom".

On a political level, continues the analysis of Fr. Andrew "The government of UMNO (United Malays National Organization), seems allergic to any evidence of dialectics and to all opposition: for decades it has ruled with two-thirds of the majority in the country, and only since 2008 the majority has dwindled to more than 50%. Today, the government seems determined to use the strong-arm tactics, but this is a sign of weakness, as it fails to respond to the challenges that arise in society. Even the Prime Minister Najib Razak is weaker: there is a struggle within the party to assume leadership. In any case, I do not think that this government will be able to establish a dialogue, open a negotiating table and carry out the requests of the Bersih movement".

Is it a movement that can be compared to those that have affected the Arab world? According to the priest "it is similar, as it requires a change of mentality, a new political culture, a new relationship between civil society and political world, a new conception of power as a service to society and the common good. The rights of all citizens are emphasized, to any ethnic or religious group they belong to. It is a sign of maturity on behalf of the Malaysian civil society and that in itself is a hope for the future of the country". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/07/2011)