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ASIA/MALAYSIA - Christmas carols in homes only "if authorized by the police" Christians protest

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) - Two churches in Klang, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, have received a note on behalf of the police asking for names and details of people singing Christmas carols because, according to officials, authorization of the police is required to be able to sing carols in churches and homes. As local sources of Fides in the Christian community note, believers define such claims as "absurd and unacceptable". Jesuit Father Lawrence Andrew, Director of the diocesan weekly "Herald" explains to Fides: "It is a strict interpretation regarding existing rules on the exercise of activities of worship and freedom of religion. The police are in total confusion. After protests carried out by Christians, government representatives have denied the need for such authorizations".
In a note sent to Fides His Exc. Mgr. Paul Tan Chee Ing, Bishop of Melaka-Johor and President of the Episcopal Conference, said that such restrictions would make the country "almost a police state", if the police continue to claim "these bureaucratic requirements".
Fides sources see political and electoral reasons behind episodes of this kind. Prime Minister Najib Razak had raised the hopes of civil society on the launch of a new era of reform, with its decision to repeal a series of laws much hated, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) introduced by Malaysia after independence from Britain in 1957. The law allows detention without trial and imposes limits to the press and rights of assembly. The document, as promised by the government, should have been replaced by a new law in 2011, designed to align Malaysia with international standards. The government, note sources of Fides in Malaysia, spoke out in order to reassure the population, after the demonstrations of the movement "Bersih 2.0" (which means "cleansing"), which took place in Kuala Lumpur last July, which called for "transparency and rights".
A new bill called "Peaceful Assemblies Bill," which regulates the exercise of the right of assembly and demonstration, already approved in recent weeks by the lower house of Parliament, attributes, however, more power and preventive control to the executive authorities and to Police authorities and led to protests in the civil society and even among the religious minorities, gathered in the "Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism". The measure, in fact, expressly specifies that "the places where they cannot keep gatherings are also places of worship". According to Teresa Mok, national secretary of the Party of Democratic Action, the new rules are "an abuse of power by the authorities" and "an attempt to violate religious freedom". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 15/12/2011)

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