



ASIA/MALAYSIA - Compensation and intimidation: the government asks for damages to the civil society movement

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) - The Malaysian government of Prime Minister Najb Razak has sued 10 leaders of the civil society movement "Bersih" ("Cleaning"), consisting of over 60 NGOs that demand transparency in the elections. The government is asking compensation of 122 thousand Malaysian ringgit (about 38 thousand U.S. dollars) for damages to public buildings and police cars during the demonstration held last April 28 in Kuala Lumpur (see Fides 28/04/2012). At that juncture, a part of the 100 thousand demonstrators took to the streets, crossed the authorized area, pouring into central Independence Square. Riots and clashes with police followed. As reported to Fides, the lawyers of the movement, including many Christians, define "legally baseless" the initiative of the Government of the Barisan Nasional (BN). The lawsuit was filed on the basis of the new law "Peaceful Assembly Act", which regulates public gatherings, passed last year just after the birth of the movement "Berish," in the wake of the "Arab spring". According to lawyers, the gesture of the government plans to avoid future public protests. It also creates a "bad precedent", that of an executive that "sues against its own citizens," seeking to limit the constitutional rights of freedom of speech and association. The first hearing is scheduled for June 14, and is expected to mobilize civil society in support of the 10 leaders accused.

The lawsuit comes, moreover, after even the political opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim and Azmin Ali, were indicted for taking part in the protest on 28 April. And the intimidation towards the "Bersih" also increased at a social level: one after another, in fact, protests and threats of militants, organized in front of Ambiga Sreenevasan's house, a Hindu woman and a lawyer, one of 10 leaders sued.

The movement has found, since last year, the support of minority religious communities in Malaysia, a multiethnic and multireligious state, but with a large Muslim majority, where the government of "Barisan Nasional", in power for decades, has always favored the communities of ethnic "Malay" and the Muslim faith. "The religions uphold transparency and fairness in society. They want to help raise awareness, in a peaceful manner, bringing common values such as justice and the common good, which go beyond the parties," comments to Fides Rev. Thomas Philips, leader of the "Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism, "which supports the "Bersih". "The impact of such movement on politics is increasing. The campaign is also accepted by many Muslims in civil society" he remarks. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 25/5/2012)