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ASIA/PAKISTAN - The Church: "Democracy strengthens: constructive dialogue with the new Premier"

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - After the general election, which saw the clear victory of Nawaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-N, "the hope is good, constructive dialogue has already started. Sharif has a good approach towards the non-Muslim Pakistanis. We hope to be able to deal with urgent issues for Christians. Let us pray for the future": is what Fr. Emmanuel Yousaf, Director of the Commission "Justice and Peace" in the Episcopal Conference of Pakistan says to Fides Agency. While we are still awaiting for the final results, about 130 seats have been confirmed to Sharif, out of 272 of the House of Representatives. Being a relative majority and not absolute, Sharif has started talks and informal contacts to form a coalition government.
Fr. Emmanuel expresses himself first of all on the election: "The test of democracy has been passed. The population was not afraid and won over the attempts of destabilization. The elections were fair and transparent. It is a good sign of democracy for Pakistan. The Electoral Commission did its best. The pre-election violence was a challenge to the whole nation - he explains - but the extremists did not win. Citizens voted with a 60% turnout, a success for Pakistan."
The outlook for the next government of Sharif also seems encouraging for religious minorities: "Before the vote we met Sharif with many other non-Muslim leaders, with Bishops, Hindus, Sikhs, and others. The approach towards minorities is good. In the first place it is time for all parties to recognize that we are all Pakistanis: we are not 'minorities', but full-fledged citizens and the neo-Premier agreed. We talked about discrimination in schools and in society, and Sharif is aware of it. Sharif was educated in a Catholic school, St Anthony College in Lahore, and education is a point he mentioned: he appreciates the effort of Christians in the field." Other delicate question: "We touched the issue of blasphemy: we ask the law not to be abused and that those who abuse it are to be punished. It is necessary to stop with a law those who instigate violence from the loudspeakers of the mosques."
The Director continues: "An important focus was on the economy", a theme that was constant throughout Sharif's campaign. "We talked about the energy crisis and industrial policies with the aim of creating better living conditions for the unemployed, the poor, the marginalized: we share the apprehensions especially for young people." Another point on the agenda in talks "was that concerning the Taliban and extremist groups, that disrupt the country. The next government will work for harmony and I am sure will confirm the existence of a specific department for Harmony," says Fr. Emmanuel.
The priest concludes: "I hope to start an era of collaboration and constructive dialogue between the Churches in Pakistan and the leadership, on all important issues. Sharif, among other things, has recognized our contribution to the country, even in the field of defense, recalling Cecil Chaudry, a Christian general and national hero, who Sharif knew very well. Our hope is good: we pray for the good of the country and for a future of peace and development." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 13/05/2013)

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