



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Nawaz Sharif is Prime Minister, religious minorities are pessimistic with regards to the blasphemy issue

Islamabad (Agenzia Fides) - Nawaz Sharif, leader of the "Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz" (PML-N), is officially the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Sharif today received the vote of confidence in parliament with 244 votes in favor (out of 342 seats in the assembly) and takes an oath today in the hands of the country's president, Asif Ali Zardari. Sharif, who won the elections on May 8, is the first politician in the history of the country to be Prime Minister for the third time, after the mandates in the years 1990-93 and 1996-99. His party, the PML-N, thanks to the support of independent members of parliament, will be able to govern without having to form a coalition government, even if the "Muttahida Qaumi Movement" (MQM) has already offered Sharif "unconditional support." Among the religious minorities there is general skepticism: "Nawaz Sharif was a fundamentalist and a conservative. We cannot expect much from him. In the past he gave ample space to the Islamic religious parties," says to Fides Fr. Bonnie Mendes, a priest in Faisalabad.

A test case will be the "blasphemy law" that Sharif, in his previous government, confirmed by expanding the penalties up to life imprisonment and death penalty: "A change in the blasphemy law - says Fr. Mendes - is difficult for anyone. What one may ask is to punish those who make false accusations or incite violence from the speakers of the mosques. It would be for us a little relief," he explains.

In an interview with Fides, Dominican Fr. James Channan, Director of the "Peace Center" in Lahore says he is "moderately optimistic": "It is true - he says to Fides - that Sharif in the past was favored by religious parties and militants such as 'Laskar-e-Jhangwi'. And during his second term his policies, characterized by an Islamist agenda, did not favor religious minorities. But today the situation is different. The population suffered greatly under the government of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), especially on economic issues, such as lack of electricity, inflation, unemployment, corruption. The people have chosen a large majority, the PML-N, seeing in Nawaz Sharif a man who can help the economy."

"One can be surprised - continues Fr. Channan - to know that in many cities, Christians voted in favor of Nawaz Sharif, for example in Lahore, Faisalabad, Okara, Renala Khurd and Multan, all cities of Punjab. It seems and it is hoped that Nawaz changes his attitude towards Islamic militancy and focus on economic issues, to bring well-being to all."

The controversial blasphemy issue remains: "So far, none of the previous governments has touched this issue - recalls the Dominican - because of pressures and threats of militant Islamists who took to the streets. The last government lost the Governor Salam Taseer and our Catholic federal minister Shabaz Bhatti, who had exposed themselves against the law. I believe that no government will repeal these laws for fear of militants. However, something can be done to change measures regarding the accused. This is our request to the new government." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 05/06/2013)