



ASIA/SRI LANKA - Bishops to the government: "Yes to decentralization and a new Constitution"

Colombo (Agenzia Fides) - The Catholic Bishops of Sri Lanka have asked the government not to abolish the administrative decentralization system which gives recognition to the Tamil minority and to think about the draft of a new Constitution. A statement of the Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, sent to Fides Agency, asks not to amend or repeal the 13th Amendment of the Constitution. The Amendment, approved in 1987, provides for the establishment of Provincial Councils and makes "Tamil" the official language with the English language as a bridge between the two Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

The proposal to abolish the amendment is at the center of a lively political and social debate and even the Church gives its contribution. According to the Bishops, it is a good thing to "discuss with all those interested", on the basis of a comprehensive revision project of the Constitution, that is respectful of human rights and justice for all communities that make up the Sri Lankan society.

That provided by the 13th Amendment, notes the Church, "is a system that allows greater participation of people in terms of governance", and is therefore a fair principle for democratic life. To abolish it could lead to "greater centralization of authority" and draw criticism from the international community, "at a time when Sri Lanka is striving to make permanent strenuous achievements with peace" after a civil war that lasted thirty years and ended only in 2009.

The Bishops urge the government to consider "the question of the North" (the area where the Tamil minority lives) as a "national issue", and seek a solution through dialogue between the local and national leadership. For this reason the creation of a special "Parliamentary Committee" is suggested that can process the draft of a new Constitution that guarantees "justice, peace and prosperity for all citizens of the country, regardless of their ethnic, religious or social differences."

The proposal to abolish the 13th Amendment, to take away the powers of the Provinces, was launched by the Sinhalese nationalist party "Jathika Hela Urumaya" (JHU), part of the current government coalition. The most important Muslim party in Sri Lanka, the "Sri Lanka Muslim Congress" (SLMC) has declared its "total opposition". Even the "Tamil National Alliance" (TNA) stressed the urgency of a "full devolution of power to provincial autonomy." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 11/06/2013)