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ASIA/PAKISTAN - The Minister for Minorities and Human Rights in Punjab is Catholic, but the budget is low

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - There is a Catholic minister in the government of Punjab province, the heart of Pakistan, at an economic, political and cultural level. His name is Khalil Tahir Sindhu, a lawyer elected from the lists of the "Pakistan Muslim League-N," the party that is in government at a federal level, with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who also governs the province of Punjab, with Provincial Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, Nawaz's brother. Sindhu has received two important tasks: he is the Provincial Minister for Human Rights and Minorities, and is also the Minister of Health care.
"His work has just begun, we are certain that he is a person of faith and good will. People know him and admire him, he has a long-term vision and will contribute to the development and well-being of minorities and of all the people of Punjab," notes to Fides Fr. Khalid Rashid, Vicar General of the diocese of Faisalabad, in Punjab. "Having the responsibility of two important tasks, he will work especially for the poor and the marginalized in society," says the Vicar.
Sindhu, 46, a native of Faisalabad, is a lawyer who is very committed to the defense of the rights of Christian minorities and has successfully defended numerous cases of blasphemy. In an interview with Fides, he recalls having counted in his career as a defender "37 acquittals of victims of blasphemy, all Christian." However, the accused, even if acquitted, will always carry the stigma of "blasphemous" and remain in serious danger of life. For this reason, Sindhu explains, "we are talking about 37 families destroyed, of innocent people who have spent years in prison, of people forced to uproot and change jobs and cities."
Today Sindhu is facing the first delicate issue, that of the budget: the budget allocated by the Government of Punjab for the Ministry of Human Rights and Minorities is 215 million rupees (about 1.6 million euro). "Development programs for minorities" and "education scholarships for minority students" are provided for in the budget. The figure was considered small by human rights organizations and civil society sectors in the province because "there is a desperate need to promote awareness on the rights of minorities," says a note sent to Fides by the NGO "Human Rights Commission of Pakistan". The NGO emphasizes the basic question of education and the urgent need for an awareness campaign to promote interfaith harmony and combat discrimination against religious minorities.
Peter Jacob, secretary of the "National Commission for Justice and Peace" of the Pakistani Bishops, tells Fides that "in the budget an entry for the compensation of the damage suffered by Christians" is missing. And emphasizes: "The government seems to believe that there is nothing wrong about the state of human rights and in particular the situation concerning non-Muslim minorities".
Provincial Minister Sindhu, on his behalf, argues that "the new budget is balanced," promising "commitment to the welfare of minorities, and to ensure all citizens of Punjab equal rights and opportunities, education and other measures of social support ". "I am convinced - he concludes - that these government policies will yield positive and far-reaching results, improving the condition of the citizens of Pakistan and the country's image." (PA)
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