



ASIA/MALAYSIA - Conversion of children, religious education, use of the term "Allah": the Christians new challenges

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) - Christians in Malaysia are all interested in three issues that currently involve the political and social life, all related to religious freedom: the change of children's religion; Islamic education in private schools; the use of the word "Allah" in Christian publications. "On addressing these issues, our reference point is always the Constitution of Malaysia, which guarantees freedom of religion to all citizens", says to Fides Agency Tan Kong Beng, a theologian and university professor, Executive Secretary of the "Christian Federation of Malaysia", which unites all the Christian denominations in Malaysia, a country where about 2.8 million faithful live out of about 27 million inhabitants.

The issue of religious conversion of minors jumped to the headlines for the case of two Hindu boys, who converted to Islam without the mother's permission. It is an illegal step in Malaysia, since the law provides that the religious conversion of a child can only take place with the consent of both parents. Following the case in June the government had submitted an amendment to the existing law, which would have allowed a person under the age of 18 to convert to Islam even by one consenting parent. "The bill was eventually canceled, given the contrary opinion of many sectors of civil society, of the Council of Lawyers, of non-Muslim religious communities", says to Fides Tan Kong Beng, expressing satisfaction for religious minorities. "However - he adds - in many states of the Malaysian Federation it is still normal practice for children, especially in mixed marriages to convert to Islam without the permission of both parents. We ask the government to respect the provisions in force in this regard". A second focus of Christians is an order of the Ministry of Education which provides Islamic studies as "compulsory subject" for students in private institutions of higher education. The provision, which shall enter into force on 1 September 2013, found the opposition of the "Malaysian Chinese Association" (MCA), which represents the Chinese part of the Malaysian people, and all non-Islamic components. "Such studies may be laid down as a voluntary choice", in a pluralistic society like Malaysia, made up of distinct ethnic and religious components, the MCA said in a statement sent to Fides. "Imposing non-Muslim students to study and take exams on a distinct religious civilization from theirs is an unfair practice and contrary to Article 12 of the Constitution", reiterates the note.

The third point is very important, it concerns the dispute related to the use of the term "Allah" in the Bible and Christian publications. Part of the Muslim community in Malaysia, in fact, claims the exclusive use of the word "Allah" for God. The dispute was the subject of an action brought by the Catholic Church in 2008 against a provision of the Malaysian government that banned the use of "Allah" to Christians. In 2009, a court ruled in favor of the Catholic Church, and the government appealed to the High Court against the decision, pending mediation. In 2011 the government issued a statement on 10 points, that was never applied, which should have put the word "end" with regards to the issue. In recent days, the Catholic Church has asked the court to cancel the government's appeal.

"Using the name 'Allah' for God is our right that touches 60% of Malaysian Christians who worship in Bahasa Malaysia language", says to Fides Tan Kong Beng. "If the Court accepts the Christians' request, the government may file a final appeal to the Supreme Court, the federal one", he informs. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 13/07/2013)