



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN – Minorities rights: a challenge for the new government**

London (Agenzia Fides) - The rights of religious minorities are a challenge for the future action of the new government, elected in Pakistan in May and could prove to be a crucial point in the development of democracy and the rule of law in the country. This is what is said in a note sent to Fides Agency by the non-governmental organization "Minority Rights" (MR), based in London, which publishes an annual report on the condition of ethnic, religious, cultural minorities in the world. In the note sent to Fides it is hoped that, after "the first democratic transition of power in the history of the country", the new government of Nawaz Sharif gives importance and special attention "to the treatment of minorities and religious freedom in general", in order to govern a "real change in Pakistan".

A first question is that of political representation. "Non-Muslims - clarifies the statement - can currently obtain seats in the general election, but there are only 10 seats reserved for minorities in the National Assembly, assigned on the basis of a selection rather than an election". The result, it says, "is far from satisfactory". The presence of Christians and Hindus in the National Assembly "has historically been minimal". However, the NGO continues, "the situation of other minority groups is even worse": not only about four million Ahmadis are excluded from voting in the elections, but the Muslim voters must sign a declaration on the back of the ballot paper, rejecting the founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community as a false prophet. Nawaz Sharif has already talked about the importance of the rights of minorities in Pakistan, noting that "the term 'minority' should not be used as it gives a negative impression". However, continues "Minority Rights", the debate on the use of the terminology is purely formal, but significant issues relating to such groups across the country remain.

Another sensitive chapter is the "blasphemy law", which, continues the text sent to Fides, in recent years "has registered an increase in sectarian violence against religious minorities". "The most controversial" – it explains - is Article 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which imposes life imprisonment or the death penalty for anyone who profanes the name of the Prophet Muhammad. The note recalls the abuse on the law, given that the majority of the cases result from false accusations of blasphemy, for matters related to property or for other personal vendettas. MR recalls that "when Sharif was Prime Minister in 1991, he refused to appeal against the decision of the 'Federal Court of the Sharia', which had established death penalty as a punishment for blasphemy".

Another area of discrimination in recent years has been the worrying practice of forced marriages and forced religious conversions of people from religious minorities. MR, after careful research to understand the causes of the phenomenon, said that such conversions occur mainly in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, and may be related to "gender violence".

A very important point to be submitted to the government, the statement said, is that of intolerance towards religious minorities promoted in school textbooks. Some of these schools teach children that non-Muslims are the enemies of Islam or are inferior. "Little was done by the previous government to tackle this issue" and now the new government has to deal with the problem. The "institutionalized intolerance," taught in schools - concludes the analysis of MR - is reflected in the difficult climate that one lives in the current Pakistani society. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 24/07/2013)