



ASIA/INDONESIA - Christians are increasing in Aceh, but no permission is given to build churches

Banda Aceh (Agenzia Fides) - The small Christian community in the Indonesian province of Aceh, in North Sumatra, is not getting permission to build churches, the local Churches tell Fides. In the province, known because it approved part of the sharia (Islamic law) in the civil law, Christians, according to data from the 2010 census, are 1,2 % of the population, in total about 4.5 million inhabitants. There are only three churches in the provincial capital Banda Aceh (one Catholic and two Protestant), and even though the Christian population in Aceh is increasing, the requirements to obtain permits and the pressures of radical Islamic groups on the civilian authorities have made it extremely difficult for non-Muslims to build new places of worship. Moreover, the current governor of the province, Zaini Abdullah, who was elected in 2012, promotes a declared program of islamization of society.

The rules for granting building permits vary from province to province, in Indonesia. According to Zulfikar Muhammad, coordinator of the "Aceh Human Rights Coalition", which includes about 30 organizations, "these rules in fact limit the freedom of minorities to practice their faith and are not coherent with the Indonesian Constitution".

An ordinance of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Indonesia established in 2006, as necessary requirements, the request signed by at least 90 members of a community and, in addition, a letter of support signed by at least 60 local residents, not belonging to the community. In Aceh, in 2007, the law was amended in a restrictive sense by the local governor: for the province at least the signatures of 150 faithful are required and, in addition, the supporting signatures of 120 residents. With these requirements, not only Christians fail to get new permits but some existing prayer halls were closed: in October 2012, the administration of Banda Aceh ordered the closure of nine places of worship belonging to Christians and Buddhists. Six months before, in the southern province of Aceh, the authorities ordered the closure of another 17 Christian places of worship. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 10/01/2014)