



ASIA/MYANMAR - National Census: civil society say "No" to the obligation of declaring ethnicity and religion

Yangon (Agenzia Fides) - The Burmese government is preparing a new national census which is expected to be launched on March 30. The last census of the population dates back to 1980. As reported to Fides Agency, several civil society and ethnic and religious minority groups have raised serious concerns because the census could further inflame more violent nationalism and exacerbate the exclusion of minority groups.

In a report published a few days ago, the International Crisis Group (ICG) think-tank with offices around the world, exposes several sensitive issues related to the census: in the note sent to Fides, the ICG focuses in particular on the obligation, required by the census, regarding every Burmese citizen to specify religion and ethnicity. This is according to the ICG a risky operation, given the recent violence against the Muslim population of the country, and especially towards the Muslim minority Rohingya.

The problems, the ICG noted, are numerous and include all ethnic groups in the country: 135 recognized, and many others are not officially recognized. The census, in fact, should also affect the criterion of political representation, allowing only the groups that reach a certain numerical threshold of having representatives in local government or province. Ethnic minorities are afraid that if their community is misclassified, their political representation may be denied. In addition, there is no possibility to report a "mixed ethnicity" (for those born from parents of different ethnic groups). There is the question of whether the Rohingya will be allowed to define themselves as "Rohingya".

In addition, observers note, the census could feed the already existing anti-Muslim sentiment". Currently, it is widely believed that 4% of the population of Myanmar is Muslim, a figure recorded in 1983. However, there are strong indications that the real figure is now over 10%. The results of the census could then be exploited by nationalist groups to indicate the tripling of the Muslim population in the country over the last 30 years, forming the basis for a 'call to arms' of extremist movements", says the ICG report.

Some critical issues concerning Christians, in the Chin and Kachin states: As reported to Fides, some Christian Baptists were asked to convert to Buddhism in order to register their family. The census may be used as a "weapon of blackmail" to decide "who is or is not a true Burmese, on the basis of religion and ethnicity", note sources of Fides. For this reason, organizations and movements of civil society claim that the census should be suspended and that the government removes the question on ethnicity and religion, in order not to inflame an already tense situation. The groups claim that the census, carried out with the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), should be conducted "in accordance with international standards". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 18/02/2014)