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ASIA/MYANMAR - New law on religious freedom? The Church disagrees

Yangon (Agenzia Fides) - The President of Myanmar, Thein Sein, has asked Parliament to review the draft of a new law on religious freedom: the measure - which should serve to protect the Muslim minority, victims of violence - limits interfaith marriages and conversions from one faith to another, prohibits polygamy and promotes birth control. Parliament and the various ministers will assess the draft and will discuss it in May.
As Fides learns, Thein Sein's proposal arises from a petition filed by the Buddhist monks movement and signed by more than 1.3 million people with the aim of "protecting the race and religion of the majority Buddhist nation". The promoter group is the well-known "Movement 969", violent and intolerant, which has been organizing concrete demonstrations of hatred and violence against Burmese Muslims for months, accused of being a threat to the country.
The bill has found political and religious dissent. Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the "National League for Democracy", criticized the proposal, saying it discriminates against women and violates human rights and personal freedoms.
In a note sent to Fides, His Exc. Mgr. Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, disagreed with the proposal, asking the state "not to interfere with the individual right to choose one's own religion". The law, he says, "limits religious freedom in Myanmar at a time when citizens are gaining freedom in other areas. Conversion is a matter of conscience, that no one can coerce". The law, providing for restrictions on interfaith marriages, "would undermine the free decision of a woman to start a family". The Archbishop, recalling the prejudices and the hate campaign waged against Muslims Burmese, exhorts religious harmony. The constitution of Myanmar assigns a "special position" to Buddhism as the faith professed by the majority of the population, but also recognizes other religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and animism. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 11/04/2014)

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