



ASIA/MYANMAR - The proposed anti-conversion bill poses a threat to religious freedom

Yangon (Agenzia Fides) - More than 80 civil society organizations from around the world are asking the government of Myanmar to set aside the bill in question in the country, which could limit the right to freely choose one's own faith. "If adopted, this law would violate fundamental human rights and could lead to further violence against Muslims and other religious minorities in the country", said the NGO forum, which includes several Christian-based organizations, in a statement sent to Fides Agency.

As Fides learns, the draft "Law on religious conversion", officially announced on May 27, 2014, provides an out-and-out "process" to get official permission to convert from one religion to another. The officials of government departments have the power to decide whether or not an applicant has exercised free will in choosing to change their faith. Those calling for the conversion "with the intent to insult or destroy another religion" can be punished with up to two years imprisonment. This "raises the prospect of arbitrary arrest and detention for those who wish to convert from Theravada Buddhism - the main faith in Myanmar - to a minority religion", says the note sent to Fides. Even to persuade an individual with "undue pressure" leads to a year in prison.

The forum of more than 80 organizations, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said: "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly states that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes freedom to change one's faith or religious convictions. The new draft legislation - the text continues - appears to legitimize the views of those who promote hatred and incite violence against Muslims and other minorities, and if adopted, institutionalizes discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. We urge the Government and Parliament to archive it and to discard it altogether".

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has drafted the law as part of a package of measures related to marriage, religion, polygamy, family planning, on the basis of proposals from a Buddhist organization called "Association for the Protection of race and religion". The NGOs also invite to abolish the "Ministry of Religious Affairs" and replace it with an independent and impartial commission with a mandate to eliminate all forms of religious discrimination in the country. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 13/06/2014)