

Protestants Fall Below 50 Percent in Northern Ireland for First Time

The proportion of **Protestants** in Northern Ireland has fallen below 50 percent for the first time, census figures showed on Tuesday, raising the prospect that the growing numbers of **Catholics** could upset a fragile political balance.

A wave of street violence in Belfast over the past days has been fueled by the sense that nationalists, who are mainly Catholic and want Northern Ireland to be part of Ireland, are in the ascendance.

Nationalists share power with predominantly Protestant Unionists in the British-controlled province under a 1998 peace deal that ended three decades of sectarian violence that killed 3,600, with Unionists controlling the post of first minister thanks to their majority.

However, the proportion of Protestants fell to 48 percent from 53 percent 10 years ago, the results of the 2010 census showed, while the proportion of Catholics increased to 45 percent from 44.

Demographers have also predicted that Catholics, who are younger and have higher birth rates, could become a majority of voters within a generation.

A majority by nationalist parties would represent a setback to Unionists and could undermine the peace. Catholics already have a significant majority in the capital city Belfast, with 136,497 Catholics to 118,856 Protestant.

The loss of control of Belfast City Council by Unionist parties last year allowed nationalist parties this month to

secure passage of a motion to remove the British flag from the city hall for the first time in a century.

The vote has triggered the most widespread pro-British street violence for years, with at least 28 police officers injured.

© 2012 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.