



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Islamic radicals: a Christmas protest against Asia Bibi, for "the honour of the Prophet"

Islamabad (Agenzia Fides) - It promises to be a difficult Christmas for the Christian community in Pakistan. An alliance among radical Islamic groups - which includes religious parties, Islamic movements, organizations allied with terrorist groups - has called a large mass national demonstration entitled Namos-e-risalat, that is, defending the honour of the Prophet Muhammad on 24 December, after Friday prayers, to say "no" to the release of Asia Bibi and any changes to the blasphemy law. The alliance has called on the "ummah" (Islamic community) in all the world, demanding universal support in the defence of the Prophet. Moreover, the radical leaders say: "Asia Bibi is a blasphemous woman and should be repudiated by Christians. Anyone who defends her, an ordinary citizen, politician or Minister, is guilty of blasphemy along with her."

Local sources speaking to Fides referred to the fear that the initiative, obviously provocative, may degenerate into open violence and attacks against Christians. The Commission for Justice and Peace of the Bishops of Pakistan expressed to Fides "great concern at the increasing tension, at the possible outcomes of the protest and the situation in which religious minorities may be, especially Christians."

"It touches upon one of the most sensitive keys to the Islamic religion, a matter of great emotional impact: to interpret the desire for the revision of the blasphemy laws as an attempt to dishonour the Prophet means to foment hatred and religious conflict. Christians have repeatedly stressed the desire for harmony and peace, and the desire to avoid the abuses that this legislation permits" explain Fides sources.

Worrying religious minorities above all is the newfound unity of many political parties and Islamic movements, which have recalled their militants. Among the promoters are "Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam-F" (left out recently by the team of Government) with leader, Fazl-ur-Rehman, "Jaamat-e-Islami," "Jamat Ahle Sunnat", but also "Jamaat ul Dawa", the Islamic humanitarian organization, expression of the terrorist group "Lashkr-e tayyba" and many other smaller groups.

The event will also put pressure on the Federal Parliament, which in those days could examine the parliamentary motion presented by Sherry Rehman, who is proposing substantial changes to the blasphemy law (see Fides 26/11/2010). Following afterwards will be a general strike on 31 December - on which all workers of Islamic faith will be called to stop work - and a public meeting in Karachi on 9 January, 2011.

Fides sources explain that during the time of Christmas, the climate in the Islamic community is already tense, falling a few days after the "ashura", the holy day which commemorates the martyrdom of the imam, Hussein, grandson of the Prophet. The day - a celebration for the Sunnis, mourning for the Shiites - is often a harbinger of clashes between the two communities. It is likely now that the latent aggression may be directed toward Christians, who are waging a campaign for legality, human rights and religious freedom.

Meanwhile, the Christian Pastor, Samson Dilawar, who visited Asia Bibi in jail in recent days to bring her assistance and spiritual comfort, has received death threats and has confirmed to Fides that Asia "is in grave danger for her life in prison." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 16/12/2010)