



ASIA/INDOENSIA - Three churches attacked, a priest struck; for Bishop Pujasumarta it is "orchestrated violence"

Semarang (Agenzia Fides) – Three churches attacked, a Catholic priest struck, clashes between protesters and police. This is the balance sheet following a day of tensions in Temanggung, a city in the Archdiocese of Semarang, in central Java.

Sources in the local Church inform Fides that today, 8 February, more than 1,500 Islamic extremists unleashed violence in response to a ruling by a local court, judged "too mild", which sentenced 58 year old Christian Antonius Bawengan to five years in prison, accused of having distributed offensive leaflets against Islam. The protesters demanded the death penalty, but the court applied the maximum penalty for that crime.

The extremists - which according to Fides sources included militants from the Islamic Defenders Front - staged protests, shouting, "Death, death!" They burnt two Protestant churches (Bethel Church and Pantekosta Church) and attacked the Catholic Church of Sts Peter and Paul, trying to desecrate the tabernacle. Fr Saldanha, the parish priest, defended the Eucharist and was struck: he is now in a state of shock. More than 1,000 police officers intervened to quell the protests and, after clashes between officers and demonstrators, the situation normalised throughout the day.

Archbishop Johannes Pujasumarta of Semarang, who is also Secretary of the Episcopal Conference, told Fides: "We are shocked by this event. Violence is never a good solution. We call on everyone, Muslims and Christians, to address issues with a sense of civility and in a spirit of fraternity. I invite the Catholic faithful and all Christians not to react to the violence. We want to be a sign of peace to all." The Archbishop is drafting a message to the faithful, denouncing the violence, but also calling for peace and reconciliation.

On the roots of violence, Archbishop Pujasumarta said: "The town of Temanggung is normally a quiet place. The extremists have come from outside. This suggests that the violence was planned and orchestrated."

The view is shared by Fr Ignazio Smartono, a Jesuit, for years in charge of interreligious dialogue in the Episcopal Conference. The Jesuit priest told Fides: "The violence which has occurred in recent days against the Ahmadis, and now this anti-Christian violence: the rise of intolerance - in a context such as Indonesia, marked by peaceful co-existence - suggests that there are dark forces who want to fuel tensions in society. The violence in Temanggung was in preparation for days, but the police did nothing to prevent public disorder."

Another element to consider, notes Fr Smartono, is "that the blasphemy law is subject to restrictive interpretations and abuses. A committee headed by former Indonesian President Abdhrrahman Wahid, noted Muslim leader, and composed of many NGOs, had called for the law's abolition and revision, but last year the Constitutional Court confirmed the legitimacy of the blasphemy law. The risk is that it becomes a weapon to attack the minorities such as Ahmadis and Christians" (see Fides 21/4/2010).

According to a recent report by known independent research institute "Setara Institute for Peace and Democracy", in 2010 there were over 216 cases of flagrant violations of religious freedom in Indonesia. 43 Christian places of worship, the report said, were attacked. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 8/2/2011)