



## ASIA/PAKISTAN - Qadri's lawyer is the former judge who denied Asia Bibi forgiveness

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - The story that binds the lives of Asia Bibi, Salman Taseer and Mumtaz Qadri, is shaking the country, generating a heated debate and protests, while Qadri's appeal is in progress, the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer's self-confessed criminal.

The famous lawyer, today head of Mumtaz Qadri's college of defenders is Khawaja Muhammad Sharif, former Chief Judge of Lahore High Court, now retired. As verified by Fides, Sharif is the judge who, in November 2010, denied the possibility of presidential forgiveness to Asia Bibi, when President Ali Zardari - after receiving a report from Salman Taseer and by the then Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti - was about to grant free pardon. Sharif - a lawyer known for his affiliation with Islamic religious parties –issued an order that stopped the President, stating that, since the case was the subject of a judicial trial, the President had no power to intervene. Today the movement "Sunni Ittehad Council" has launched a wave of protests in major cities across the country, relaunching the appeal to release Mumtaz Qadri and asking Zardari for an intervention in his favor. Also the network "Tehrik-e-Tahafuz-e-Namoos-e-Risalat" (Alliance to defend the honor of the Prophet), which consists of more than 40 Islamic religious parties and movements, of different schools of thought, as Deobandi, Barelvi, Wahabi, has announced that it will continue this public campaign pro Qadri. In Lahore there are courageous voices against the network: the International Council of Ulemas "Minhajul Quran" (MQI) has publicly disagreed, stating that, "Salman Taseer is not a blasphemer".

Naeem Shakir, a Catholic lawyer who pleads in the High Court of Lahore – defender in several cases of blasphemy – explains to Fides: "The street movement pro Qadri is against the law, against the Constitution and out of the democratic institutions. It is based on Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. Puts pressure on the judiciary system. Even Qadri's lawyers are extremists, they are the so-called "Aunt generation" lawyers (ie grown in the era of the dictator who Islamized the country), underwent brainwashing and promote religious hatred". Shakir notes that "there is a movement in society which seeks to counter these ideas: there are many newspaper articles condemning this approach, a sign that there is a movement of opinion which promotes a pluralistic society, even in the Islamic world".

But, in this phase, "the government acts as a spectator, because of its weakness and political instability. It should be said that extremist parties - and thus their voters - are a leg in the coalition government, so we try to contain them in some way, without disqualifying them entirely. Because of these constraints, the government fails to protect the rule of law". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 14/10/2011)