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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Religious freedom under the shadow of blasphemy

Rome (Agenzia Fides) - The year 2011 was a horrible year for religious freedom in Pakistan: So says the XI edition of the "Report on Religious Freedom in the World", published today by the Papal Foundation "Aid to the Church in Need" (ACS), which monitors the religious freedom in 196 countries. "The year 2011 - says the text sent to Fides - will go down in history as one of the most violent, bloody and tragic of the history of Pakistan. Forever marked by two murders: that of the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer and the Federal Minister for Minorities, the Catholic Shahbaz Bhatti." The two murders are related to religious freedom: in fact, both leaders (one Muslim, the other Christian) were victims of Islamic extremists as they were in favor of abolishing, or at least modifying, the blasphemy law. The law (two articles of the Criminal Code of Pakistan, 295b and 295c) punishes with life imprisonment or death penalty those who insult the Koran or the Prophet Mohammed. Since its entry into force (1986), it is exploited to resolve private disputes and also used as a means of oppression of religious minorities. The specific case that cost the lives of two Pakistani leaders - recalls the ACS Report - is that of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death on false charges of blasphemy.
Religious freedom in Pakistan remains therefore "conditioned by the dark shadows of Islamic extremism, but also growing intolerance, lawlessness and impunity in the country," notes the ACS Report, explaining: "In legal terms, therefore, in Pakistan the crucial point in 2011 was not the adoption of new measures that restrict religious freedom, but the failure to remove laws that have strong influence on the freedoms and rights of believers, exacerbating the system of discrimination and, in some cases, persecution of religious minorities. "The possible revision or abolition of the blasphemy law was at the heart of the debate. A bill presented in Parliament provided for, among other things: five years in prison instead of the death penalty for the alleged blasphemers; severe penalties for those making false accusations of blasphemy and for those who incite religious hatred; the passage of judicial prosecutions for blasphemy to the jurisdiction of the High Court; the need for evidence and guarantees before the arrest of an accused person.
The proposal generated the uprising of extremist religious groups and parties: the bill was withdrawn, and the debate was finally put to rest just after Taseer and Bhatti’s assassination: violent extremism, in this case, was right on the rule of law and religious freedom. A hope today, note sources of Fides in Pakistan, is the new public awareness generated by Rimsha Masih’s case, a Christian girl falsely accused of blasphemy by an imam, unmasked by Muslim witnesses. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 16/10/2012)

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