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ASIA/PAKISTAN - 68 Muslim lawyers denounced for blasphemy: for the Church "it is a patent abuse"

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) – The police in the district of Jhang, the province of Punjab, has opened a blasphemy case against 68 Muslim lawyers, mostly Shiites, who on 7 May had staged a protest against a police officer. According to the complaint, filed at the instigation of an extremist Sunni Muslim leader, the lawyers had insulted Caliph Umar bin Khattab, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. The lawyers demanded the dismissal of the head of the local police, Umar Daraz, who had beaten and illegally detained one of their colleagues. Daraz shares the same name of the caliph and therefore lawyers, on pronouncing it, offended the prophet's companion. In response to the abuse, the Bar Association declared a-three-day strike, announcing that the protest will continue until the charges are withdrawn.
Father Yousaf Emmanuel, National Director of the "Justice and Peace" Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Pakistan, told Fides Agency: "The charges against the lawyers is formulated according to Article 295/a of the Criminal Code, This is another case of patent abuse. The question is always very delicate, you never know what can happen. But in this case, I believe that, within two or three days, thanks to the intervention of politics, the intra-Muslim dispute will be remedied without consequences. It is different when a Christian is involved: then there are murders or mass attacks, without even having the possibility or the right to defend oneself. In September, 2013, after the massacre of Christians in the church of Peshawr, the Head of the Supreme Court said that if a place of worship of any religion was desecrated, the perpetrators would be charged with blasphemy under Article 295 of the Penal Code. But in the case of the attack on Joseph Colony in Lahore (March 2013), when some churches were razed to the ground by Muslim extremists, no one has not yet been indicted for blasphemy.
Meanwhile, the Christian Sawan Masih was sentenced to death".
The district of Jhang is known for being the birthplace of the radical Islamic group "Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan", one of the most violent Sunni extremist groups in the country. Blasphemy has become a minefield for judges, journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, politicians, for whom a wrong step can have deadly consequences. Last week, a lawyer and human rights activist Rashid Rehman was killed in his office in Multan, in Punjab, because he defended a man accused of blasphemy.
The accusations of blasphemy have grown in the last decade: according to a recent report by the "Center for Research and Security Studies", think-tank based in Islamabad, in 2011 there were 80 complaints, compared to only one case in 2001.
The so-called "blasphemy law" consists of some articles of the Penal Code of Pakistan: the 295, which punishes the desecration of places of worship of all religions; 295/a, which punishes the offense of "religious sentiments". To these are added the 295/b on the desecration of the Koran (punishable by life imprisonment), the 295/c for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. These last two articles were promulgated by the pro- Islamist dictator Zia-ul-Haq (1978-1988) between 1984 and 1986. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 14/05/2014)

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