

Measures Toward Reducing The Schismatic Feelings Of The Muslims On Official Announcement Of Sighting The Crescent In Nigeria

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Abstract: Some years back, there was little or no difference as far as accepting the official announcement of sighting the crescent by the Sultan for the beginning and ending of the fast of Ramadan is concerned. But as time goes by, some Muslims are becoming schismatic about the instruction of the Sultan to start or stop fasting after sighting the crescent. The problem has escalated to the level that Muslims are now divided in starting and stopping the fast of Ramadan. The salat of Id-al-fitr is now performed on different days sometimes, even three days after the announcement. The paper intends to look into the reasons that might be the genesis of the problem and suggest possible ways of tackling the problem with the aim of limiting it or bringing it to an end in - sha - Allah. In the olden days there was little or no difference among the Muslims of Nigeria as far as accepting the official announcement of sighting the crescent is concerned. Most of the Muslims warmly accept the announcement and they adhere to the instruction.

I. INTRODUCTION

The dispute on the official announcement of sighting the crescent for the month of Ramadan and Shawwal by the Sultan is increasing every year. Muslims in Nigeria nowadays start and stop fasting on different days unlike in the past where all Muslims welcome the announcement with all enthusiasm. During the life of the Prophet the Muslims were united and all acts of worship were performed together.

But with the spread of Islam to distant places differences started showing. In the like manner, the Muslims of Nigeria were united on starting and stopping the fast of Ramadan. But in the past few years, the divisions have gone to an alarming rate. Muslims should sit down together and think over the problem and try to have a lasting solution so that there will be unity amongst them.

II. THE FAST OF RAMADAN

The fast of Ramadan, one of the pillars of Islam was made compulsory the second year after hijra. The Holy Qur'an

states: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you. That you may learn self restraint." (2:183). This verse indicates that fasting as an act of worship was prescribed to the people of the past scriptures and as well is made compulsory upon the Muslims. As other forms of worship it has specific time which is the month of Ramadan as revealed in the following verse:

Ramadan is the month in which the Qur'an was sent down as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgement (between right and wrong). So every one of you Who is present (at his home) during the month should spend it in fasting... (2:185)

This verse informs all Muslims the right time to fast that is the month of Ramadan after sighting the crescent and one is alive, healthy and not on a journey that could allow him to eat in the day time as explained by (Qurtubi 2004:236, Ibn Kathir 2006:210) Ibn Hajar further explains that the verse does not mean that every Muslim should see the crescent but if some of you see it that is enough. In the hadith, Abdullahi bin Umar reported that the Prophet (SAW) said:

Do not fast unless you see the crescent (of Ramadan) and do not give up fasting till you see the crescent (of shawwal)

but if the sky is over cast(if you cannot see it)then act on estimation (count sha'ban as 30 days) (Bukhari 1987:72) Hadith no. 130.

In another narration Ibn Majah (2005:9) in hadith no. 1654 says: "Fast for seeing the crescent and stop for seeing it." This confirms that before Muslims should embark on fasting, the crescent must be sighted.

III. HOW MANY DAYS HAS LUNAR CALENDAR?

One of the problems that boggle some of the Muslims is that every year the fasting lasts for only twenty-nine days. Why not thirty days? According to the teaching of Islam lunar month can either be thirty or twenty-nine days. Scholars support their argument with some ahadith from the Prophet (SAW) pertaining to the number of days. Muslim (2007:73) hadith no. 2390 said that Ibn Umar narrated that the Prophet (SAW) said: "The month is like this and this. (at the same time he showed the fingers of both his hands thrice) and left out one thumb on the third time." In another hadith the Prophet (SAW) as reported by Ibn Umar said: "If you see the crescent you fast and if you see it you stop fasting. But if the sky is cloudy then estimate it to be thirty." To some scholars usually the lunar months are twenty-nine days. It is only when the sky is cloudy and the crescent cannot be seen then the counting should be completed to thirty. More so the Prophet (SAW) Fasted twenty-nine days. Some may argue that the Prophet (SAW) narrated a hadith reported in Bukhari (ibid) and Muslim (ibid) thus:

The son of Abu Bakra reported it on the authority of his father that the Apostle of Allah (May peace be upon him) had said: The two months of Id Ramadan and Dhul Hijja (are not incomplete) while in the words of Bukhari (1987) he said "the two month of Id i.e. Ramadan and Dhul Hijjra do not decrease (in superiority).

According to Ibn Hajar, the most common interpretation is that all good deeds done in these two months are rewarded fully even if the days are not complete -30 days. According to a scholar, the main reason why the lunar calendar reduces by 10 days is because many of the months have 29 days.

IV. THE SIGHTING OF THE CRESCENT BY AN INDIVIDUAL

The Islamic injunction on the issue of sighting the crescent by an individual can be classified thus:

✓ If it happens that an individual sighted the crescent for Ramadan alone, according to the views of Abu Hanifa and Shafi', the Muslim Ummah will start fasting. They support their argument with the following hadith:

Ibn Abbas said "A Bedouin came to the Holy Prophet (SAW) and said: I have seen the new moon tonight ". He (the Holy prophet (SAW) said "Do you bear witness that there is no deity but Allah and that Muhammad is Allah's Messenger?" He said: "yes (I bear this witness)" "He said stand up Bilal and announce amongst the people that they should keep fast tomorrow".(Ibn Majah) hadith no.1652.

From this hadith some Muslims accept the testimony of an individual for starting the fast of Ramadan even though some scholars doubt the authenticity of the hadith as stated by San'ani (2004). But to Imam Malik, the testimony of only one person is not enough for fasting. There must be at least two witnesses, or the completion of Shawwal to 30 days, or the new moon should be sighted by a large number of people. (Abdus-Sami': nd). But on sighting Shawwal by only one person the majority of the Jurists are of the view that he should not break his fast (Qurtubi: 232) Because if people come to understands that he is not fasting, his integrity will be questioned.

✓ Others are of the view that an individual even if he saw the crescent, he should not fast alone. He should start fasting together with the general ummah.

V. SIGHTING THE CRESCENT BY TWO PEOPLE

Generally the attestation of two or more people is accepted. This is because two persons are the minimum required for witness. They support their stand with the following hadith:

"... That people disputed on the last day of Ramadan, then two Bedouins came and swear by Allah, that they (both) saw the crescent last night. The Prophet ordered people to break their fast and should go out for Id the next day" (Abu Dauda: 442 hadith 2339)

The only area where the scholars differ is when the information given by the two people turned to be a lie, Ibn Hajar (1989:26-27) is of the view that for those who comply to that information, their act of worship is alright. But others opine that there will be compensation. That is those who started fasting earlier will not stop even if they will fast for 31 days. The Maliki School says that if the sky is clear no clouds, those two witnesses will be regarded as liars and the Muslims will fast thirty-one days. But if there is cloud persistently their claim will be accepted even if the new moon is not sighted. (Abdus-Sami' ibid)

VI. SIGHTING THE CRESCENT IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

The issue of sighting the crescent in another country, there are various views which could be summarised as follows:

✓ If the information of the new moon reaches another country, all the schools of thought agree that the next country should also fast with the exception of some followers of Shafi'ites. They support their stand with the hadith which the Prophet (SAW) ordered the Muslims to fast for sighting the crescent. They argue that the Prophet's statement is a general statement covering all Muslims, their geographical location notwithstanding. (Sayid Salim ibid)

✓ The second view is, all counties that are within the same geographical location, with similar timing of sun rise and sun set should accept the vision of another country. All the four schools of thought agree to that.

- ✓ The last view is every country should stand on its own in terms sighting the crescent. That is, they should not use information from other countries. This is the view of Ibn Al-A rabi (nd: 82). They support their position with the hadith of Fadl which is as follows :(Muslim: ibid : 306-7)

Kuraib reported that Umm Fadl, daughter of Harith sent him (Fadl i e her son) to Mu'awiyya in Syria, and deed the needful for her. It was there in Syria that the month of Ramadan commenced. I saw the new moon (of Ramadan) on Friday. I then came back to Madina. Abdullahi b Abbas (RA) asked me (about the new moon of Ramadan) and said: When did you see it? I said: We saw it on the night of Friday. He said: (Did) you see it yourself? I said: Yes and the people also saw it and they observe fast and Mu'awiyya also observe fast, whereupon he said: But we saw it on Saturday night. So we would continue to observe fast until we complete thirty (last) or we see it (the new moon of Shawwal). I said: Is the sighting of the moon by Mu'awiyya not valid for you? He said: No; this is how the Messenger of Allah (SAW) has command us.

On a general note, the acceptance of information on sighting the new moon is determined by the location of the country. If the place is located in the east and they happen to see the new moon, it is binding on those located in the west as long as they got the information for either starting or stopping fasting. For example if Saudi Arabia should see the new moon and the information comes down to Nigeria, its binding on us to fast with their vision. This is in line with the view of Nasif (1980:57). If in any case the leader of the Muslims is satisfied with the information brought to him every Muslim must comply.

VII. WHAT COULD BE THE CAUSES OF SCHISM ON ANNOUNCEMENT OF SIGHTING THE CRESCENT BY THE SULTAN?

From my discussion with some of those who hold the view that they must see the new moon before they start or stop fasting, and the questionnaire I administered, I would want to sum up the reason for the attitude of rejecting the official announcement of sighting the new moon as follows:

- ✓ Ideological inclination: It is realised that some people follow blindly their leaders without giving regard to what the religion provides. Truth should only come from their leaders even if what they say is not in line with the teaching of the religion. These include those who do not accept any source apart from the Qur'an (Qur'aniyun). So by implication, if the information is from the people of their ideology, they don't accept it.
- ✓ Wrong Interpretation of texts: Some scholars give wrong interpretations to the Arabic texts. Example, one of such people interpreted "Shahida", the word in verse 185 of suratul-Baqara to mean seeing. To him the verse means who ever among you see the new moon should fast. But prominent Qur'anic exegesis interpreted the word as "whoever among you reaches the time when the crescent is sighted convinced should fast". With such wrong interpretation, they misguide their followers, and they can

hardly be persuaded with any other explanation that does not come from their leaders.

- ✓ Ignorance: A number of the Muslims are ignorant in one way or the other. Some have very little or no knowledge of the religion. Others do not bother to count any month of the lunar calendar. They only wait for the instruction of their leaders. I administered a questionnaire to 160 students to determine whether they are up to date in counting the days of the months and their names of the months. Out of the total, only 52 gave the correct option which represents 32.5% while 108 representing 67.5% gave either wrong answer or were not decided. These are a population who are attending higher institution and more so students of Islamic studies, what more of the general population of Muslims who have never been to school? This is a clear indication that the majority of those who refuse to accept the official announcement are ignoramuses.

In the Nigerian context, the process of collating information on sighting the crescent is, all those happen to see the new moon pass the information through their leaders, Emirs or any holder of traditional title. Then all the collected information will be passed on to the Sultan, the Chairman Supreme council of Ulama of Nigeria who makes an announcement to the entire Muslims of Nigeria on behalf of the council. To my understanding there is no harm in doing so. In fact it is in line with the teachings of Islam. Qurtubi (2005:233) is of the opinion that if the Leader of the Muslims accepts information and makes an announcement of sighting the crescent, it becomes compulsory on the general ummah to comply.

VIII. MEASURES ON HOW TO REDUCE THE SCHISMATIC BEHAVIOURS OF MUSLIMS ON THE SIGHTING OF THE CRESCENT FOR RAMADAN AND SHAWWAL IN NIGERIA

- ✓ There should be avenues for dialogue that will comprise all groups at Federal, state and local levels. This will give a chance for active participation and contribution towards resolving the problem for all.
- ✓ Awareness campaigns should be organised by the Ulama council involving all Islamic organisations and sections on crescent sighting throughout the country.
- ✓ Committees should be constituted at all levels for sighting the new moon all over the country
- ✓ The Ulama council should screen all calendars that have lunar dates to ascertain their correctness. This is because some calendars carry wrong dates and that could be used by the mischievous fellows to continue campaigning against the unity of the Muslims.
- ✓ The government or authorities concerned should take drastic measures on any person that deviates without concrete reasons accepted by the Shari'ah.

IX. SUMMARY

The paper discussed the position of fasting for the month of Ramadan from the primary and secondary sources. The juristic views on sighting the crescent by an individual, two persons and the position of scholars on receiving information on sighting the new moon by the people of another country was discussed. The factors which are assumed to be the reasons for the differences were state and ways to curtail the reoccurrences of fasting and performance of Id prayers on different days are suggested. If those are achieved, the Muslims of Nigeria will be united.

X. CONCLUSION

The unity of the Muslims is of paramount importance. That is why almost all the rituals are made to take place in congregation. There are Muslims all over the world but the situation of Nigeria seem to be unique and deteriorating every year. And the organisers have selected a good time when Ramadan is fast approaching. It is our hope that the suggestion made here will fully be implemented for the betterment of the Muslim Ummah.

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