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**A moon for two Eids**

Overseas Pakistanis are denied the excitement of sighting the Eid moon on the 29th of Ramazan. Even when there is no suspense about the outcome, the entire spectacle is dutifully staged. The evening belongs to a select group of religious scholars who gather on a rooftop to peer into a telescope, looking for the new moon that should technically be visible to the naked eye.

But we have a history of how this supposedly easy and straightforward exercise can become controversial. After all, a new moon makes a fleeting appearance. Or a phantom moon may rise in the rugged hills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the vision is promptly conveyed to Mufti Popalzai in Peshawar, our practised bringer of the first Eid when we have two.

The point here is that there are so many stories to tell. One twist is that a Friday Eid can be a hot potato because of the superstition that two ‘khutbas’ on the same day would be portentous for the ruler. We have an almost fabled reference of such a coincidence during the waning phase of President Ayub Khan’s rule. That there can be an action replay of that episode in the month of May 2021 is a measure of the maturity of our political mandarins.

How Ayub Khan succumbed to that superstition would make an engrossing segment in a movie based on his somewhat modernistic rule, underlining some aspects of Ayub’s adversarial relationship with, say, the Mufti Muneebs of his time. However, the delayed announcement of the sighting of the moon and the official decision to observe Eid on Thursday was made much later than this week’s 11:30 pm announcement.

What is different this time is the role that Fawad Chaudhry has played. It would appear that his character in this story had providentially been developed to be effective at this point. As federal minister for science and technology, he had strongly argued for the adoption of a scientifically devised lunar calendar to ward off the uncertainties of Eid moon sightings.

In fact, this had led to a sort of confrontation between him and the formidable former head of the Federal Ruet-e-Hilal Committee, Mufti Muneeb – and this may have been one reason why Mufti Muneeb is no longer in that position.

Fawad Chaudhry is now the federal minister for information and broadcasting, formally the spokesperson of Imran Khan’s government. But he seems to have spoken out of turn when he tweeted that, astronomically, it was simply not possible to sight the new moon in Pakistan on Wednesday evening. He argued that observing eEd on the same day as Saudi Arabia was an option but ending a holy month with a lie (by announcing that the moon had been sighted on Wednesday) made no sense.

What makes sense and what does not make sense is not always easy to decipher in our country. Our decision-makers, including religious scholars, can find their way around reason or logic or even a scientific fact. Finally, they brooded over it for an inordinately long time and announced the new moon just thirty minutes before midnight. So, in addition to this ‘achanak’ Eid, we also had the option of celebrating a second Eid on Friday.

As a disclaimer, I must say that I am not able to report any personal experience of this Eid charade because I happen to be in southern California and the appearance of the moon was not an issue for Muslims residing in this country. Besides, Eid here is largely a private or exclusive celebration for a scattered community. My daughter had announced a ‘chand raat’ party for Wednesday a couple of weeks in advance.

Incidentally, talking about dates and days is a bit confusing for me because of the 12 hours’ time difference. This should also explain why the new moon would play hide and seek to not make one Eid for all corners of the world. Things become more complex when Muslims living in foreign climes follow their motherland’s calendar to observe Eid.

We are familiar with two Eids but it can be even worse. When studying in London, my younger daughter had two other Muslim girls on the same floor in her dorm – one Palestinian and the other from Malaysia. They had their Eids on three days and it was hard for them to explain this variance to their friends.

As an aside, it does seem odd that the clerics have this affair with the new moon a few times in a year. Otherwise, the moon belongs in the realm of poets, artists – and lovers. So much magic and mystery resides in how the moon rises and wanes and influences our emotions. Serious scientific studies have been conducted, for instance, on the impact of the full moon on our physiological and psychological systems.

Sadly, the romance that is associated also with the Eid moon is dimmed by the controversies that it has generated. What’s more, this Eid – Thursday or Friday’s – is jinxed, like last year’s. The pandemic is still breathing down our necks. Considering the disaster that India has suffered, Pakistan has relatively been lucky. But the threat is real and great caution is required to wade across this nightmarish third wave of Covid-19.

I referred to the time difference. Different countries live in different times in many other respects, too. I am a witness of how the United States is stepping out of the gloom of the pandemic. Actually, our Eid day – Thursday – was celebrated in America with the announcement that fully vaccinated citizens no longer need to wear a mask in most indoor and outdoor settings. President Biden called it “a great milestone”.

I had a personal experience, also on Thursday, of what this means. A day after vaccination was approved for 12-15 years, I was with my 15-year-old granddaughter when we went to the drive-in facility at the Long Beach Convention Centre. But this is a foreign country and they do things differently in this place.

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