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ONE would have thought that having 20:20 vision would have been a prerequisite for the Central Ruet-i-Hilal Committee. It is responsible for the sighting of the moon that signals both the beginning and the end of the holy month of Ramazan. The committee has become instead a symbol of institutionalised myopia.

By tradition, only a sliver of the new moon needs to be seen by the naked eye. In recent times, the committee, however, has depended on 150 observatories of the Pakistan Meteorological Department spread across the country, and on verifiable sighting by members of the public. The committee also uses powerful telescopes as aids.

Despite this network of watchful trained observers and artificial devices, the Ramazan moon has remained elusive, leading to controversies on the commencement of the first fast or the celebration of Eid. This became particularly contentious during the 1960s, when Ayub Khan’s government ordered Eid to be celebrated while others (especially in the then NWFP) defied its diktat.

On one such Eid, an imam was ordered by the military authorities to lead the prayers in Karachi’s polo ground. To ensure his presence, two officers were posted beside him. The imam proved more ingenious than they were attentive. During the prayers, the imam crept away, leaving the congregation in an uncomfortably long sajdah.

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The present Central Ruet-i-Hilal Committee was constituted by the National Assembly in 1974. Even though it is almost 50 years old, it still has no rules or regulations. It is nominally under the control of the Federal Ministry of Religious Affairs and Inter-faith Harmony.

Its present chairman is Maulana Abdul Khabeer Azad who, like his father, had served as the khateeb of the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore. He was appointed as chairman of the Ruet-i-Hilal Committee on Dec 30, 2020, succeeding Mufti Muneebur Rehman, whose tenure lasted for 22 long years, from 1998 until 2020.

Many suspected the ability of Mufti Muneeb to discern anything at all. He often found it difficult to negotiate stairs and, especially in his later years, needed assistance to read documents. One expected his successor to have better sight.

Maulana Azad, as khateeb of the historic Badshahi mosque, had the opportunity of escorting innumerable VIPs on tours around it. Two such occasions he will certainly choose to remember were the visit by the winsome Diana, Princess of Wales in 1991, and the subsequent visit by her son, Prince William, and his wife, Catherine, in 2019. During the latter, he endeared himself to the prince by showing him a photo of his late mother with himself.

A royal visit he may not wish to recall will be that of Prince Charles (now King Charles III) and his second wife, Camilla (now Queen Consort), in 2006. Persons in attendance remember the occasion vividly. The prince and his wife had made the obligatory stop to pay their respects at the tomb of Allama Iqbal. While the royal couple were signing the visitor’s book, the khateeb took his position at the footsteps of the mosque to await the royal couple.

Suddenly, an official from the protocol department appeared. He assailed him with: “How many times have I told you to clear the prayer in advance with us?” One of those present tried to deflect the attack. The official would have none of it. “Do you know what he said? He recited a prayer — and that too in English — thanking God for bringing Prin­ce Charles and his beautiful mother to Lahore.”

Maulana Azad has since been entrusted by the government to spot the Ram­azan moon.

This year, the Saudi government, to avoid confusion, ann­ounced the date of the first fast well in time to enable the public to make preparations. We in Pakistan had to wait until almost 10pm for the maulana and his committee members to make up their minds either way.

Most Pakistanis take their religion as seriously as the minority of zealots do. They wonder with reason why, when we are part of the Muslim ummah, when we read the Holy Quran in the original language of its revelation, when we acknowledge the Saudi king as the trusted Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, do we still choose to observe common religious festivals on days different to the Saudis and other Muslim brethren?

It has taken the Christian Church more than 500 years for its various churches — all followers of the same Jesus Christ — to recognise the need for unity. Perhaps, by the time this holy month of Ramazan is over, and fasting should have improved everyone’s eyesight, Muslims will be able to observe the new moon at the same time and celebrate Eidul Fitr on the same day.

Such a miracle is overdue.

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