

# Sighting the New Moon as the Methodology for Determining the Month of *Ramadhān*

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## ABSTRACT

Muslim communities are known to be united, but every year, towards the start of *Ramadhān*, some of them argue which started to be divided over the issue on the determination of the start of the blessed month. This study aimed to investigate the different options proposed for the determination of the month of *Ramadhān* including local and global sighting; Number of witnesses required; Size of *Matla'*; and *Saudi* Sighting Process and its implications. Data were gathered through an in-depth study using the descriptive method. The objectives were to determine the universally accepted legal opinion on sighting the New Moon in connection with the elimination of differences that frequently surface and for ensuring the celebration of *'Eid* on a single day in one lunar unit. Based on the findings, it is revealed that sighting the new moon must be conducted in each locality because there are Multiple Horizons (the time at which the moon rises, varies from place to place). *Muslims* must show unity during the month of *Ramadhān* and at the occasions of *'Eid* at least locally if not nationally or internationally. This would be of great value and importance to the whole *Muslim* nation by fostering the initial steps towards united observance of *Ramadhān*.

**Keywords** — New Moon, Local Sighting, Global Sighting, follow Saudi Sighting only, Legal Theories, Muslim Nations.

## INTRODUCTION

Every year, towards the start of *Ramadhān*, some *Muslim* communities are plunged into confusion and disarray over the issue on the determination of the start of the blessed month. In some cases, this further leads to argument and division within the community.

For instance, the Filipino *Muslims*, particularly Meranaos, is at present divided into three groups as regards to the theories on sighting the new moon at the beginning and end of *Ramadhān*. The first group is following the theory that wherever the new moon is sighted, the entire *Muslims* throughout the world must follow; the second group says that it is not necessary to fast from the appearance of *Ramadhān Hilāl*, nor to breakfast in *Shawwāl*, except for the one who saw the *Hilāl* or agreed on the sighting in the *Matālib* of *Hilāl*, because *Matālib* of *Hilāl* differs. So if there are any differences of *Matālib*, each country must follow their own sighting; and the third group goes with the scientific calculations in determining the *Islāmic* months without any need to resort to actual sighting (Al-Iraqi, “*Tarh at-Tabrib*” 4:113-114).

## FRAMEWORK

The *Islāmic* way of life is very dynamic and is based on the unchanging principles given explicitly in the Noble *Qur’ān* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet [r]. These principles have led to different methods and ways of *Islāmic* life during different times due to different levels of technological development, sociological conditions, and the ability of the deep-sighted scholars of *Islām*. (Farfur, “*The Characteristics of Islamic Thought*” p. 7)

The questions regarding the appearance of the new moon vexed the minds of the early *Ummah*. During the time of the Prophet [r], some curious individuals asked Prophet *Muhammad* concerning the new moon as in the following text of the *Qur’ān*:

“*They ask you (O Muhammad) about the new moons. Say: these are signs to mark fixed periods of time for mankind and the pilgrimage.*” (Holy *Qur’ān* 2:189)

The scholars of the past disagreed on the unity or disunity of the horizon, i.e., if the moon is seen in one locality, does the sighting become binding to all other localities if the information reaches on time for them to begin fasting? Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions: 1) What are the various opinions regarding the sighting of the new moon, particularly on the concepts “*Shahīda*” and “*Ra’ā*”? and 2) What constitutes a universally accepted legal theory regarding the sighting of the new moon in one particular region?

From the traditionists’ points of view, the months connected with *Islāmic* acts of worship, known as *‘ibādāt*, such as *Ramadhān*, *Shawwāl*, and *Dzul-Hijjah* can only be determined either by practical sighting or by completion of 30 days.

The Messenger [r] established the tradition of visual moon watch on the 29<sup>th</sup> day. If it was not seen, *Muslim* have to complete the lunar month to 30 days. It was a fact that a moon would always be visible on 30<sup>th</sup> evening and, thus, if it was seen on 28<sup>th</sup> or not seen on the 30<sup>th</sup> evening, the start of the lunar month was wrong. But contemporarily, scholars differ remarkably over the question of using any method to sight the new moon and confirm the beginning and end of any lunar month, particularly *Ramadhān*.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives were to determine the universally accepted legal opinion on sighting the New Moon in connection with the elimination of differences that frequently surfaces and for ensuring the celebration of *‘Eid* on a single day in one lunar unit.

Hence, this study serves as a guideline of the *Muslims* particularly the Meranaos including *Islāmic* law students of the King Faisal Center for Islamic, Arabic and Asian Studies and for the *Ulama’* to be united in observing the start of the month of *Ramadhān* and the *‘Eid* at one the same time so that unity and development, which are symbols of strength and prosperity will be achieved.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The methodology deals on how and where the writer expects to find data and factual information about the study. It involves research design and data gathering procedure. The study used the descriptive and/or qualitative research design. Hence, an in-depth study and reading of the available literature of the published works of Muslim scholars.

Content analysis method was also used to determine which of the various views and theories on sighting the new moon is most in consonance with the primary sources of *Islāmic* law, such as the *Qurʻān* and the *Sunnah*.

### **Research Site**

This study was initiated and completed within the Mindanao State University – Main Campus located in Marawi City. Mindanao State University (MSU) was established on September 1, 1961 through RA 1387, as amended, was the brain child of the late Senator Domocao A. Alonto, as one of the government’s responses to the so-called “Mindanao Problem”. The original mission of the university was anchored on instruction, research, and extension. The 1954 Congressional Committee conceptualized it as a social laboratory for national integration.

The said site is very rich with a variety of reading materials for being a University. It has a college unit name King Faisal Center for Islamic, Arabic and Asian Studies which offers courses that are essentially relative to this study where the researcher mainly found its contextual sources. The King Faisal Center for Islamic, Arabic and Asian Studies was created as an academic unit of Mindanao State University to serve as a vehicle for promoting Arabic and Islamic Studies in the Muslim areas Southern Philippines. It was created as an academic unit of Mindanao State University with the primary mission of promoting Arabic and Islamic Studies in the Muslim areas of Southern Philippines and of helping to achieve the goal of national integration and peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians in the region.

### **Participants**

This study was mainly made to address the issue of apparently widening of the gap of the dates where the Holy month of Ramadhan for Muslims begins which is basically due to the rise of different Islamic sects having different and varying interpretations to the Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions regarding said topic.

Specifically, this issue is a heavy blow to the Muslims in the Philippines as most of the Muslims therein are merely followers or subscribers of certain Islamic scholarly view regarding the said matter. Henceforth, as the researcher is also a Filipino Muslim, he deemed it necessary that this study is focally addressed to Muslims in the Philippines. However, as this study is an issue carrying highly valuable importance equal to all Muslims in the world, it would not be right to say that this is limited to the Philippines only.

## Instrumentation

As this research is a descriptive and/or qualitative type, the main material used was almost all available reading materials related to this topic in the University's main library and that of the King Faisal Center's library. The researcher, for having finished his tertiary level studies in Saudi Arabia, has many books and other textual materials relative to this issue.

In addition, thereto, the researcher made interviews with the PAGASA Quezon City's representatives and with a Muslim Astronomer known as Abu Ammar. Their statements were used to further enrich the context of this study. Their statements also were mainly corroborative to that of the Islamic principles regarding the science of the heavenly bodies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It has been recognized that the Earth revolves around the Sun, and the Moon revolves around the Earth. The *Qur'ān* states in this regard:

*“And the moon, we have measured for her mansions (to traverse) till she returns like the old (and withered) lower part of a date-stalk”* (Holy Qur'ān 36:39)

As the moon revolves around the earth, the light of the sun reflected off the moon reaching the earth is seen as phases of the moon. When the earth, moon, and sun are roughly in a straight line, it is the Conjunction or the Astronomical New Moon which is completely Dark or invisible and is clearly not the *Hilāl*. When the moon moves further, the reflected sunlight appears as the crescent shape *Hilāl*. This crescent shape is referred to in the above-quoted verse as like “*al-Urjūn al-Qadīm*” meaning old dried curved date stalk – the curled form of the palm branch as it shrivels up appearing similar to the crescent moon's shape.

As the moon moves further, it appears to lag behind the apparent motion of the sun, thus causing the Moonset to be compared later to Sunset that is apparently referred in the next verse of *Sūrat Yāsīn*:

*“It is not permitted to the Sun to catch up the Moon, nor can the Night outstrip the Day: Each (just) swims along in (its) orbit (according to law)”*. (Holy Qur'ān 36:40)

The sun, being a source of light can be seen easily, while the moon, having no light of its own, can only be seen when the sun is in such a position that its light falling on the moon can come to the earth. Many times the moon may be above the horizon, but it cannot be seen because the sun is in such a position that its rays coming to the moon do not make a sufficient thickness of crescent to be seen from earth.

The earth revolves around the sun in an elliptical orbit while the moon similarly revolves around the earth. Hence, when the new moon occurs, the sun, moon, and earth come in line, and no light of the sun falling on the moon can come to the earth, so it is a dark or invisible moon. And in effect, we have to wait for a few minutes after local sunset so that the bright light of the twilight sky can diminish and the light of the *Hilāl* can be seen.

Completing 30 days in case of cloudy weather is the most agreed-upon position among the majority of classical scholars, but again, it is not the only categorical stance accepted by the *Ummah*. Leading authorities such as *Ibn 'Umar*, *Imām Ahmad et al.* were reported to have started *Ramadhān* and its fasting following the 29<sup>th</sup> of *Sha'bān* even if it was cloudy as most of the narrations report the Prophet [r] requiring completion by the phrase “*Fast with sighting it (the moon) and break the fast with sighting it. Complete thirty days of Sha'bān if it is cloudy.*” (Sahih Al-Bukhari)

He [r] also said, “*Fast with sighting it (the moon) and break the fast with sighting it. Count thirty days if the month is concealed from you (being cloudy).*” (Sahih Muslim)

In the above-quoted two *hadīths*, it is important to note that both *al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim* are narrating from *Abū Hurayrah* through *Muhammad ibn Ziyād*. The first part of the *hadīth* is the same in both narrations, but the ending parts are different. Therefore, the degree of variation in language shows that transmitters of the *Hadīth* are describing an idea freely in their own words rather than attempting to transmit the *Hadīth* with faithfulness to the original words.

The *jumhūr* has derived from the above-quoted clear and authentic Prophetic narrations that completing 30 days and counting 30 days (are the same). The explanatory phrase “*complete thirty days*” explains away the general phrase “*then count or estimate it.*” (An-Nawawī, “*Al-Majmu*” 6:276).

*An-Nawawī* himself reported that *Imām Ahmad* and a few others said that the meaning is not “*complete 30 days*” but “*restrict it or shorten the month by*

considering the moon under the clouds.” That is why *Imām Ahmad* contended that fasting should be observed the next day, the day after the 29th of *Sha’bān*, if the moon is not sighted on the evening of the 29th of *Sha’bān* due to obscurity. *Abū Dāwūd* also reported that such was the action and opinion of *Ibn ‘Umar*.

The report establishes the fact that the original narrator, *Ibn ‘Umar* himself, did not accept the explanatory note as “complete thirty days” but went against it and fasted after the 29<sup>th</sup> day of *Sha’bān* in case of obscurity. Actually, there existed no consensus even among the Companions or their successors that the phrase “complete thirty days” is explanatory for the Prophetic phrase “count or estimate for it.”

The position of *Ibn ‘Umar* and *Ahmad* in fasting on the cloudy day after the 29<sup>th</sup> without actual sighting the moon categorically refutes the argument of the so-called majority that either actual sighting by the naked human eye or completing 30 days is the only prescribed method for confirming the month of *Ramadhān* as well as the other *Islāmic* months. *Ibn ‘Umar* or *Imām Ahmad* started the month of *Ramadhān* on counting 29 days of the month of *Sha’bān*. This method of confirming the month in case it is cloudy on the 29th of *Sha’bān* is neither by actual sighting nor by completion, but by mere “counting of the days.” (*Ibn Rushd*, “*Bidāyat al-Mujtahid*” 1:286)

On the other hand, there is a *hadīth* that the Prophet [r] himself started or ended the month without resorting to the actual sighting or completing 30 days: *Ummu Salamah* narrated that once the Prophet [r] took an oath upon not seeing his wives for a month. When the 29 days passed, he came to them. He was told that he took an oath not to enter the home for a month. He said, “*The month consists of twenty-nine days.*” (*Sahih Al-Bukhari*)

The Prophet [r] just counted the days and completed his month or started the new month without seeing the new moon. He did not say that he had seen the moon and none of his wives asked him whether or not he had seen the new moon. The *hadīth* does not say that it was cloudy that evening. It is also clear that the Prophet did not complete 30 days. (*Azeemabadi*, “*Awn al-Ma’bood*” 6:457)

Both interpretations of the so-called *jumbūr’s* opinion and *Ibn ‘Umar* and *Ahmad* contention could lead to some of the practical difficulties of ending up sometimes fasting 28 and sometimes 31 days of *Ramadhān* in reality. The actual method of estimation was left unspecified since that would depend on the available information and analytical tools, which can change from place to place and time to time. However, people tried to make the phrase more specific and establish a simple rule applicable in all situations. One simple way to do that

would be to give to the month a particular number of days in case of obscurity — 29 or 30.

As earlier mentioned, *'Ibādāt* are connected with the time, which in *Islāmic* understanding is connected with the moon and not with the sun, as the *Islāmic* calendar is not solar but lunar. The *Shari'ah* does not want us to start fasting when the month of *Ramadhān* has not even begun, nor to lose a day of *Ramadhān* by celebrating the *'Eid* on the last day of *Ramadhān*. That is why the Prophet [r] advised us not to start or finish the month of *Ramadhān* a day or two ahead of time. He wanted us to start and end *Ramadhān* with certainty that the new moon is there.

The actual sighting of the new moon was the only mechanism then at the *Muslims'* disposal to attain that certainty. That is why the Prophet [r] emphasized so much the sighting of the new moon; not because sighting is the objective of fasting or in any way a goal of the *'ibādāt*, but because it was a means to ascertain the presence of the new moon, thus the knowledge of its appearance is the objective of *'ibādāt*.

If the actual sighting were the objective or a prerequisite without which fasting could not be started, then it would have been required even on the 30th of *Sha'bān*. Nobody goes out to see the new moon on the 30th of *Sha'bān* or on the 30th of *Ramadhān*. No jurists have ever required such a sighting because the sighting was prescribed for the certainty of the beginning or end of the month, and not for the sake of sighting itself. Once that certainty is achieved by completing 30 days, sighting is not even required and the new month is started.

In other words, sighting is not a prerequisite for fasting, even on the 29<sup>th</sup> of *Sha'bān*. Had it been a precondition, then no *Muslim* would be allowed to start the month of *Ramadhān* except by sighting the new moon on the 29<sup>th</sup> of *Sha'bān*. *Ibn 'Umar*, along with *'Āishah* and *Asmā' bint Abī Bakr*, used to start fasting the next day if it was cloudy on the 29<sup>th</sup> of *Sha'bān* and the new moon was obscured. They would not fast that day as a supererogatory day of fasting but as a mandatory day of *Ramadhān*.

That was the case with many of the *Tābi'īn* or the generation after the Prophet [r], and a whole school of *fiqh* is based upon this opinion. *Imām Ahmad*, following the actions of these Companions of the Prophet [r], adopted this position and the entire *Hanbali* school follows this position. It becomes important when we know that *Ibn 'Umar* is the original narrator of many of the *ahādīth* found in all the authentic sources of *ahādīth* that require sighting as a means of fasting.



It is sufficient to note that in spite of apparent claims of consensus that actual moon sighting is the only way to confirm the month before the 30<sup>th</sup> of *Sha' bān*, there is a tremendous difference among jurists in the details related to the same subject. Therefore, actual sighting cannot be called as the categorically absolute rule of *Islām* with no difference of opinion.

Moreover, there is no consensus among the majority (*al-jumbūr*) about the exact nature of moon sighting, whether it is established through sighting of one or more witnesses or a multitude of people. There also exists a host of opinions about the criteria and characteristics of these witnesses, whether they be male, female, slave, or free. There is no consensus about the number of witnesses needed for confirmation of the month of *Ramadhān* and for the month of *Shawwāl*.

For instance, the *Hanafi* jurists require witness of a large number of individuals in case the horizon is free from obscurities. They accept the witness of one trustworthy *Muslim* if it is cloudy, and that is only in the case of confirming the month of *Ramadhān*. (*Al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa Adillatuhū*, p. 1651)

The *Mālikī* jurists require a large number of witnesses in case the horizon is free from obscurities such as cloud, dust, or fog, etc., or at least two trustworthy *Muslims* or more in case it is cloudy. They, unlike *Hanafi* jurists, do not accept one witness in confirming *Ramadhān* or *Shawwāl*. The *Shāfi'ī* jurists accept one trustworthy *Muslim's* witness in either case of cloudy or clear weather. That is the case for both *Ramadhān* and *Shawwāl*. The *Hanbalī* jurists accept one trustworthy witness in confirming the month of *Ramadhān* but require two witnesses in the case of *Shawwāl*.

Regarding the Linguistic Argument, the original linguistic meanings of the word *hīlāl* are not intrinsically bound to the light or appearance. The word *hīlāl* is derived from the *Arabic* root *hallalah* which is the extreme pouring down of rain. The first pour of rain is called *hīlāl*. It is said that *hīlāl* is what you receive the first from that rain. Its plural is *ahillah*. When the rain comes down with drops full of noise, that rain is also called *hīlāl*. The root of the word *hīlāl* consists of the two original meanings: the beginning or starting part of something and the raising of voice". (Ibn Manzur, "*Lisan al-Arab*" 4:420)

When the sky rains with noise or when a person talks in a loud voice or when a baby cries with a loud voice, all these are referred to with the same root verb. These linguistic usages coincide with the use of the word in many *ahādīth*.

*Ibn Manzur* shows that the origin of the word *hīlāl* is from "raising of voice." The same verb is used to define a person who raises his voice. Everything that makes noise can be called *muhill*. After a lengthy discussion of the various us-

ages of the root word, *Ibn Manzūr* concludes that the origin of the root is from “raising the voice.” He concludes by saying that “*Abūl ‘Abbās* said that the *hilāl* is named *hilāl* because the people raise their voices to inform others about it (the new moon).” (Ibid.)

It should be clear by now that the original meanings of the word *hilāl* are connected with the first signs of something and with the raising of voices, not with glittering or shining of the new moon. The new moon was then called *hilāl* because it was the first sign of the new month and because when it appeared, people raised their voices to inform others about the arrival of the new month. There was no method available to the people of previous generations except seeing it with the naked eyes. That is why they defined it as something seen rather than known.

Moreover, the above-mentioned two meanings happen only at the time of the first few days of the new month; therefore, the new moon was called *hilāl*. Had the name *hilāl* been given to the new moon because of its light, then the full moon had more rights to be called *hilāl* than the crescent because it shines more and has more light than the crescent.

There are as many as four different opinions among the scholars concerning the issue of moon sighting. With regards to the *Qur’ān*, *Allāh* [I] says: “*The month of Ramadhān in which was revealed the Qur’ān, a guidance for mankind and clear proofs for the guidance and the criterion (between right and wrong). So whoever witnesses the month should fast it...*” (Holy Qur’an 2:185)

With regards to the *Sunnah*, the Prophet [r] said: “*If you sight it (the new moon of Ramadhān), then fast and if you sight it (the new moon of Shawwāl), then end the fast* (Al-Bukhar, Muslim).

The famous *Kurayb* showed that *Madīnah* and Damascus observe different sightings, although the two places are only 1,050 kilometers apart and almost of the same longitude with the distance from Marawi to Manila by road which is 1,350 km. Furthermore, there is also no evidence that the Prophet [r] ever tried to adopt the dates in *Makkah* for use in *Madīnah*.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded that sighting the new moon must be conducted in each place because there are Multiple Horizons (the time at which the moon rises, varies from place to place). Moreover, the *Ittihād al-Matāli’* (Single Horizon or Universal Sighting) would be valid if the earth were flat. Because of the spherical

shape of the Earth, this is impossible to implement. *Ikhṭilāf al-Maṭāliḥ* (Multiple Horizons or Local Sighting) is supported by Astronomy and by Scholars worldwide including *Saudi Arabia* and is as natural as using local time for daily prayers. And, to follow *Saudi* announcement for the worldwide date is neither *Ikhṭilāf al-Maṭāliḥ* (local sighting) nor *Ittihād al-Maṭāliḥ* (Universal Sighting, that is following first sighting no matter where without restriction to *Saudi Arabia*). Hence, it is not a valid *Sharī'ah* position since it is based on conjecture. Conjecture in some cases is a sin, according to a verse of the *Qur'ān*: “*O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion; indeed some suspicions are sins.*” (Holy Qur’ān, 49:12)

Actual sighting is not the objective, but a means to establish the objective. The objective is to start the month of *Ramadhān* with certainty. That is why *Muslims* used to sight the new moon on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of *Ramadhān* and not on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of *Ramadhān* because the certainty is already achieved that the new moon is there on the 30<sup>th</sup> of the month.

In other words, Sighting and Calculations are complementary, and both are needed. Calculations to negate false sighting is used, but not to completely replace sighting. Thus, if the calculations say with certainty that *Hilāl* cannot be visible, then we should reject or negate the false sighting and reduce errors. The *Islāmic* law does not make the impossible a requirement.

*Ikhṭilāf al-Maṭāliḥ* is the predominant method from the time of the Prophet *Muhammad* [r], down to his companions, and a great number of jurists (up to present) believe that sighting of the new moon must be conducted in each place and that there are Multiple Horizons.

## TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

This research is already on the process of making its debut as a book. This would be combined with another topic to form as a single manuscript regarding the Sighting as a procedural requisite in determining the beginning of the Holy month of Ramadhan among Muslims. This would be of great value and importance to the whole Muslim nation by fostering the initial steps towards united observance of Ramadhan.

## IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following are recommended:

1. A central committee on sighting the moon should be formed under whose aegis the state moon committees should operate.

2. *Muslims* should attempt on sighting the moon. If they see it in accordance with the *Shari'ah*, they should act accordingly. If a sighting is not possible, the assistance of astronomers should be taken into consideration in sighting the new moon. *Shari'ah* approves of such measure as the Holy *Qur'an*, and *Hadith* does testify this effect.

3. Do not cause *fitnah* in the community by loud-mouthing around the incorrectness of this or that opinion. *'Eid* prayer is an emphasized *Sunnah*, but the unity of *Muslim* communities is an obligation. *Muslims* must show unity during the month of *Ramadhān* and at the occasions of *'Eid*, at least, locally if not nationally or internationally.

*Allāh* [I] Almighty knows best!

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