

Living Ramadan

By Zafar Bangash

Ramadan must mean more than merely abstaining from food and drinks for a specified number of hours even if this would be arduous in the summer months. Ramadan is the month of the Qur'an and Muslims must engage the noble Book for true guidance.

At the end of June, Muslims will begin the month-long fasting of Ramadan. The month has become so familiar that even non-Muslims know about it. There is also familiarity with the fact that Muslims abstain from eating, drinking or other intakes from dawn until after sunset. Many non-Muslims consider this to be an arduous undertaking even for a single day much less an entire month.

Committed Muslims, however, feel no such problems. It is one of the obligations ordained by God for His faithful servants. The noble Qur'an says, "O You who have committed to God! Fasting has been ordained for you as it was ordained for those before you so that you might remain consciously precautious [of God's corrective power]" (2:183).

There is exemption for those who might be sick or on an arduous journey. They can postpone fasting but the missed days have to be made up later. For those who cannot fast because of ill health or old age, God has allowed them the "fall-back" option of feeding the needy people. In several verses (2:183-185; 187), God has laid down the rules of fasting as well as exemptions.

In this column we would like to emphasize another aspect: fasting is much more than abstinence from food and drink, difficult as it may be especially in the long summer months for those living in the northern hemisphere (those in the southern hemisphere — South Africa, Australia and New Zealand — have winter and, therefore, shorter daylight hours). Since the Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle, people in all zones and hemispheres get equal opportunity to experience fasting in summer as well as winter months in their lives. God treats all His servants equitably.

Fasting is ordained so that we may achieve Taqwa — consciousness of God's power presence thereby enabling us to conform to His commands. There are numerous other aspects of Islamic life as well linked with the month of Ramadan: revelation of the noble Qur'an, the Battle of Badr, liberation of Makkah and the martyrdom of Imam Ali (RA).

During his life in Makkah, Muhammad (pbuh) used to go to the Cave of Hira' for contemplation and reflection. When he was 40 years old, he had a dramatic encounter with the archangel, Gabriel (a). The first few verses (96:1-5) of the Qur'an were revealed to him in the solitude of the cave. Thereafter, the entire Qur'an was sent down to him over a period of 23 years to transform humanity by "bringing it out of darkness and into light" (65:11).

That dramatic encounter in the Cave of Hira' set humanity on a trajectory bringing it into conformity with God's divine guidance. The Qur'an is our guide from the womb to the tomb; whenever Muslims have committed themselves to its teachings as exemplified by the noble Messenger (pbuh), God has granted them victory. Of course, a priori requirement is the understanding of the noble Book. There was a time when Arabic was the dominant language of the world. People from all over the world, including Europe, learned Arabic to study at Islamic institutions. This is not the case today. English has replaced Arabic as the universal language.

How did this dramatic reversal in the fortune of Muslims occur? We have the entire Qur'an in our hands, the Seerah (history of the Prophet Muhammad) and the Sunnah (the ways, teachings and activities) of the noble Messenger (pbuh), and we recite the Qur'an in our homes as well as during Ramadan in Taraweeh (the evening optional) prayers. **So why does recitation of the noble Book not bring about the same transformational change in our lives that it did in the early days of Islam?** The simple answer is that most Muslims read the Qur'an for its undoubted blessings but make little or no effort to seek guidance.

Every Ramadan, Muslims listen to the melodious recital of the Qur'an but few understand it and therefore fail to implement its teachings in their lives.

Understanding the Qur'an requires first and foremost a willingness to conform to God's divine commands. Short of learning Arabic, Muslims are left with seeking understanding through translations in other languages. Even while multiple translations are available, most Muslims have not moved beyond Qur'an recital. Unless this changes and Muslims begin to engage the noble Book to understand and then implement it in their lives, our condition will not change.

Another Ramadan has approached and Muslims have an opportunity to begin to address this issue in earnest. Once the Qur'anic discourse becomes a part of our lives, there is no reason why Muslims will not experience a dramatic change. What is required is a commitment to embark on the process of implementation.

