

# Senegal's reformers call for science to fix Ramadan dates

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Senegal's only astronomical society is pushing for reform to inject some science into the process of determining the start of Ramadan, but faces opposition from traditionalists in the conservative west African nation

The Muslim holy month of Ramadan unites the Islamic world in a devotional act of fasting from sunrise to sunset—but in Senegal its approach brings divisive arguments over the moon.

The annual observance, when the faithful commemorate the original revelation of the Koran to Mohammed, begins with the appearance of the first slender crescent of the new moon.

Yet this event is determined—in strict accordance with the Koran—by observation with the naked eye, a practice many see as outdated.

The country's only astronomical society is pushing for reform to inject some science into the process, but faces opposition from traditionalists in the conservative west African nation.

The National Commission for the Observation of the Lunar Crescent (CONACOCC) has the task of determining the beginning of each lunar month and this week declared that Ramadan would start on Friday.

But many Senegalese Muslims began fasting on Thursday, emulating neighbouring Mauritania, Mali and the Gambia, as well as Saudi Arabia, home to the sacred pilgrimage sites of Medina and Mecca.

"The observation of the lunar crescent occupies a very important place in our activities because it is the subject that most interests the Senegalese," Maram Kaire, chairman of the Senegalese Association for the Promotion of Astronomy, told AFP.

"We have been trying for more than five years to make a statement at the approach of religious festivals to raise awareness about how the crescent moon works and how to observe it."

## **'For us to adapt'**

The scientist believes the method of simply staring up at the sky is becoming increasingly anachronistic, 400 years after the invention of the telescope.

"Visual observation is uncertain because it is at the mercy of weather factors, like an overcast sky, for example," says Kaire, whose members use modern methods to determine the [lunar cycle](#).

In north and west Africa, where Sunni Islam's Maliki school of religious law is dominant, this method of empirical observation is the norm.

But in Turkey, a Hanafite country with a more liberal, secular reputation, astronomical calculations are used to predict dates on the [lunar calendar](#) years in advance.

A public debate in Dakar this week on following countries like Turkey demonstrated that there is very little consensus on the issue.

"Using only calculations does not conform to sharia (Islamic law). The science has limits and sharia is the basis of everything," said Ismaila Ndiaye, an imam.

But fellow Muslim cleric Khadim Rassoul Gueye argued that it was time to "use science for better accuracy".

"Sharia will not change one iota. It is for us to adapt," said Gueye, who is responsible for calculating prayers times and the lunar calendar at the mosque in the capital's Point E neighbourhood.

## **'God is omniscient'**

An estimated 90-95 percent of Senegalese are believed to be Muslim, and Islamic practice takes the form of membership of one of four Sufi brotherhoods led by a "marabout", or Koranic teacher.

Each of these—the larger Tijaniyyah and Muridiyyah orders, the pan-Islamic Qadiriyyah and the smaller Layene—instruct their followers on

the start of Ramadan after studying the skies with the naked eye, adding to the background noise.

"In Senegal, it is the families that give the 'ndigel' to fast," said Ndiaye, using the word for "order" in the local Wolof language.

"Each family has its own committee to which its followers refer."

A CONACOCC member told AFP on condition of anonymity that Senegal's most senior marabouts were in agreement that this was the proper way to do things.

"This is what the Prophet did. This is the way we still do things," he said.

"In the days of the prophet Mohammed, such tools as the telescope and the mobile phone did not exist," he went on.

"But God is omniscient and knew all this and asked for observation to be performed with the naked eye. Astronomical calculations bring problems and Muslim scientists have rejected them."

But Ahmed Kante, chairman of the Forum of Knowledge and Values, a secular association, said differences have existed since the first generations of Muslims argued over the start of the lunar month, the use of technology and astronomical calculations.

"Resistance to change is not peculiar to Senegal. It is a problem of education, culture and even politics," he said.

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