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Wasting Ramadan



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For many years I have been concerned with the idea of "wealth generation" as the chief means for overcoming many of the ills that plague our society, which is struggling to break free from the cycle of general poverty and underdevelopment. I have often stressed the enormous resources we can draw on if only someone could convert them from their latent state into a driving force in our economic life. We need to turn our "dead capital" into the type of "live capital" that stimulates markets, creates job opportunities and improves standards of living for millions of our people.

However, my optimism on this has always been dampened by a grim side to the problem. Poor societies tend to be wasteful societies. Or they drive wealth away. We encumber the development of our vast tracts of land with various financial laws, and we encumber other forms of wealth with a host of rules and regulations that keep it from the market place, as was the case with Egyptian real estate for many years. Housing units were places to live in and that was that. They were never to be put into circulation on the market, rated for mortgages, or developed to enhance their value. We also waste wealth through excessive or inappropriate spending, as is generally our habit in Ramadan. The way we celebrate this holy month has become akin to a folk custom, as opposed to a religious rite.

Take, for example, increased food consumption during this month. Egyptians' food purchases during Ramadan soar beyond all other monthly consumer averages, straining the efforts of ministers concerned with supply and domestic trade to keep up with demand. According to a recent study by the National Center for Social and Criminal Research (NCSCR), 83 per cent of Egyptian families alter their food consumption habits during Ramadan in a way that augments their food bill for this month by 50 to 100 per cent. If total annual consumer spending in Egypt comes to around LE200 billion, LE30 billion of this is spent in Ramadan, which is to say at a rate of LE1 billion a day, the bulk of which goes to food in this month of "fasting."

The NCSCR study observes that during this month Egyptians spend 66.5 per cent more on meat and poultry, 63 per cent more on sweets, and 25 per cent more on nuts and nibbles, and they host 23 per cent more banquets and dinner parties. The study further notes that at least 60 per cent of food on an

average Egyptian family table, and more than 75 per cent of food in a banquet, goes to waste, which is to say tossed into the rubbish bin, during this month.

According to statistics from the National Census Center, in the first week of Ramadan Egyptians consume 2.3 billion loaves of bread, 10,000 tonnes of fuul, 40 million chickens, 200 per cent more yoghurt and ghee, and some LE9 million worth of dried fruits, which accounts for 35 per cent of the annual trade in this festive staple. Across Egypt's 28 governorates, the National Natural Gas Authority has to pump out 20 per cent more natural gas, and the same applies to water. In addition, the peak hours for electricity consumption rise to between four and five hours, up from two to three hours per night the rest of the year. Much of this can be chalked up to Ramadan lighting decorations and, specifically, illegal taps into the grid in order to feed the decorations hoisted up in alleyways or even large squares.

Then there are the medical studies that indicate that the general state of public health declines during this month. In spite of the fact that there are only two meals a night during Ramadan, the Iftar at sunset and the Sohour before sunrise, medical authorities report higher rates of diabetes and cardiovascular illnesses due to overindulgence in fats and sweets. Some medical statistics also point to an increased consumption of over-the-counter medications related to digestive disorders, from stomach ulcers to colitis.

If the above facts and figures tell us anything it is that over-consumption during Ramadan drains the family budget, strains the national economy (due to the rise in food imports, particularly of dried fruits and nuts from Turkey, Syria and India), depletes Egyptians' savings and ruins their health. To compound matters, Ramadan, this year, coincides with the beginning of school, putting an additional strain on the Egyptian family budget, especially that of limited income families. Many of these are certain to find themselves encumbered by debt after the month draws to a close, largely due to careless spending.

The media offers a second type of testimony to the way we have come to celebrate Ramadan. One only has to open the several pages of TV guides in one's daily newspaper to appreciate the vast numbers of made-for-Ramadan TV serials, comedy programs, celebrity talk shows, not to mention the phone-in contests and games that are aired throughout this month.

The Egyptian television audience has a choice between more than 40 Egyptian or Arab serials broadcast over satellite networks. There are enough serials, alone, to take the viewer twice around the clock within a single day; enough to indicate beyond a doubt that Ramadan has become a month dedicated solely to entertainment and amusement. Evidently some quarters have begun to plead for a reduction in the numbers of programs especially produced for television and the radio for this month because such is the glut that some producers have found it extremely difficult to find scheduling for their products during prime time. This applies in particular to the production sector of the National Radio and Television Broadcasting Company, the Cairo Company for Audio-Visual Production, and other such public companies that do not work jointly with private sector firms. From a practical and economic standpoint, all that time spent in front of the television until the early morning hours obviously diminishes one's competence and productivity at work during the daytime in Ramadan.

Which brings us to the third feature of the way we celebrate this month. So little value is given to work during this month, at least in the various government departments and agencies, that one might think that a whole class of civil servants, regardless of rank, regard Ramadan as the month of licensed indolence. Employees report to work late and/or sign out early on the grounds of their weariness due to fasting, and whoever dares object is treated to the growl, "Don't ruin my fast!" The labourer, engineer or physician who is diligent and conscientious at work is many times better than the man who prays, fasts and recites his Quran without putting their meanings into practice. This is precisely what the mufti of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, meant when he cautioned government employees against using fasting, prayer or reading the Quran as a pretext for not doing their jobs and hampering the welfare

of the people.

A fourth phenomenon is the proliferation of mawaed al-rahman -- the banquet tables for the poor that are sponsored by MPs, business magnates, cinema celebrities and sports stars. The global economic downturn has not hampered the spread of these tables, which feed some three million people but which, at an estimated cost of around LE3 billion, have turned into something that blends ostentatious piety with status exhibitionism and politicking, as opposed to morally inspired charity. Recently the governor of Alexandria called for the abolishment of the mawaed al-rahman so that the money spent on them could actually be channelled to help the poor and the needy. Equally perturbed by the phenomenon, former mufti Nasr Farid Wasil said, "There is nothing wrong with the mawaed al-rahman per se, from the point of view of Sharia law. What is wrong is the extravagance that is lavished on them. We hear now of 'five-star' tables, when all that a Muslim should need to break his fast is some dates or a glass of juice and a little food."

In other words, instead of serving as a means to strengthen social cohesion the banquet tables have become an excuse for conspicuous spending.

There has been a rise in the numbers of omra -- the minor pilgrimage performed outside of the pilgrimage season -- in general and in Ramadan in particular. It is as though this rite has turned into a kind of religious tourism and a way for some to make a quick and easy profit. This year the societies and agencies that organise omra excursions are currently contending with a fall in demand and other complications arising from the threat of swine flu.

However, this does not refute the general trend that has turned the holy month of Ramadan from a time to draw closer to God through fasting and contemplation, wherever one might happen to be in this world, into a season for drawing closer to God through supplementary annual pilgrimages to Mecca.

There are many reasons behind the religious duty of fasting. It hones self-discipline and control over our instincts. It teaches compassion, tolerance and mutual support. But fasting also has greater collective ends, for it should also compel societies to regulate the use of their wealth so as to avoid waste and optimise the potential it offers. This raises the long unanswered question as to why we still behave as we do during Ramadan.

Year after year we have taken note of this and remarked on the extravagance that has become so much a part of our Ramadan rites and rituals. In fact, in spite of our society's trend towards more rigid conservatism, if not fanaticism, the phenomenon is becoming more pronounced and widespread.

It is a curious and perplexing irony that merits considerable thought. Could it be that it ultimately boils down to the fact that we do not know the value of wealth to begin with?

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