**[Burning bills](https://www.dawn.com/news/1773941/burning-bills)**

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*“Riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices...”*

E.P. Thompson’s influential 1971 piece on food price and scarcity riots documented a deeper sense of norms and obligations found within 18th-century English society. It laid out what ordinary people thought the responsibility of different actors, including the sovereign (or the state), is supposed to be. The argument was that protest and rioting is not just because of hunger and deprivation, but also because there is a violation of a moral responsibility on the part of higher powers. He called this the “moral economy of the poor”.

Recent protests against exorbitantly high electricity bills in Pakistan can be understood from the same perspective. They are a function of the mass impoverishment being caused by relentless food inflation, rising electricity tariffs, and stagnant incomes; and a product of total frustration at the state for violating its basic obligations towards citizens.

The deprivation story is straightforward: in Pakistan, nearly everyone, except for a select few, has to pay for electricity. Which is why, as data from the 2018-19 Household Integrated Economic Survey shows, electricity bills are usually the third biggest expense for the average Pakistani household, after food and transport/fuel.

Four years ago, when average electricity tariffs were less than Rs20 per kWh, households were spending between 15 to 20 per cent of their monthly expenses on electricity. Today, the average price of a unit of electricity is around Rs50 per kWh. Incomes have not gone up by anywhere close to that amount, and so most households are now spending close to 50pc of their monthly expenditure merely to keep a light and a fan on.

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The consequences of this spike, as one would ex­­pect, are catastrophic. Inflationary pressure of the past four years had already forced many people into all types of vicious trade-offs. One would hear stories about families being compelled to withdraw children out of fee-paying schools that had become unaffordable; and salaried, middle-class households relying on periodic assistance from relatives and extended kin to make ends meet.

Belt-tightening was already the norm for everyone, except the extremely privileged top 1pc. The impact of a fresh wave of electricity price increase on top of this already bleak situation leaves many with no choice but to skip bill payments, risk disconnection, or come out on the streets.

If part of this wave of protest is because of material deprivation, a significant part of it is also the steady build-up of frustration at a state that expects its citizens to repeatedly sacrifice themselves for nothing in return.

The Pakistani public is not alone in feeling this frustration. In their careful documentation, researchers Naomi Hossain, Neil McCulloch and others found that between 2005 and 2018, more than 40 countries — rich and poor — witnessed large-scale protests around energy. One key reason why energy protests have been recurrent and significant political events in the 21st century is that citizens (rightly) believe that it is the government’s responsibility to provide them with an affordable and consistent supply of fuel and electricity. This is largely because survival and participation in modern life is simply inconceivable without the two.

The Pakistani state frequently violates this basic responsibility. Poor governance, perpetual rent-seeking, and a prioritisation of economic interests of those who have captured the state have produced a situation where a component of modern life (and biological survival in this climate) as basic as electricity is increasingly out of reach for a majority of citizens.

The key question going forward is whether this fresh wave of anger will make any difference. More recent protests show that the price rise is now hurting a much wider segment, beyond the working classes. Local businessmen (traders, shopkeepers etc) are now busy organising bill-burning protests across the country. We are witnessing a concerted effort on their part to chase away meter-readers, harass Disco staff, and skip bill payments altogether.

There is considerable irony in the fact that tax evasion by bazaar-based businessmen is a major reason why electricity bills are burdened with extra taxes in the first place. However, if past political economy patterns are anything to go by, mobilisation by these actors could finally put electricity affordability on the agenda.

The last time the country saw concerted protests around electricity was between 2007 and 2015. During this period, newspapers recorded over 400 protests, with several of these transforming into full-scale, multi-day episodes with considerable rioting. The headline issue at the time was load-shedding, which impacted pretty much everyone, but particularly the business community.

Data from that period shows that traders and other businessmen, especially in Punjab, were at the forefront of organising protests against load-shedding as well. So, when the PML-N stepped into power, they had to address a pressing concern of this influential constituency, which is why supply — their main demand — was prioritised effectively and urgently, to the long-term detriment of affordability.

In contrast, electricity has been expensive for the average Pakistani for a very long time. The working classes complained about both load-shedding and expensive bills even 10 years ago. But given their lack of political voice in this country, these complaints were ignored.

Today, the ambit of crippling electricity bills is wide enough to include the middle classes, and, in particular, the more influential petty bourgeoisie. Their anger is compelling even an unrepresentative caretaker government to spring into some sort of action, even if it’s just for the sake of appearances. This anger provides sizable pressure to rectify the problems that were left unresolved (and worsened) by the 2007-2015 crisis of electricity supply. Whether it translates into meaningful action on part of the state remains to be seen.

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