**Choosing Darkness over Electricity**

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The nation is on the edge of turmoil. Unlike those who were part of the disgraceful events on May 9th and come from wealthy backgrounds, the current protestors taking to the streets nationwide belong to a segment that has little to lose. Even if they face punishment or imprisonment, their circumstances are such that they have already depleted their savings to cover hefty electricity bills, school fees, and necessities. Now, all they have left is their diminishing sense of self, with children crying due to lack of food, clothing, shelter, and a haven. These individuals are burdened with sorrowful and anguished spouses who struggle to provide food and drink for their crying, underdressed children. Meanwhile, the husbands return home weary and dishevelled, without anything to bring back.

A significant number among them are choosing to embrace the darkness within their homes, reminiscent of an era long past, where concerns about shelter, clothing, education, electricity, gas, water, computers, cell phones, and other such essentials of modern life fade into insignificance.

Their protest is not solely directed at the issue of exorbitant electricity bills; rather, it stems from the collective sense that our society has deprived them of the basic right to exist. For them, life is not a source of joy but an enduring state of anguish and suffering, devoid of any promising future or relief.

Only a small number of nations worldwide have faced the extraordinary circumstance where their entire leadership had to seek assistance from the IMF for bailout funds amounting to a mere billion dollars. Unfortunately, these financial resources were quickly appropriated by the privileged upper class, all the while shifting the responsibility of repayment onto the shoulders of the most economically disadvantaged individuals within the community. Through this course of action, their fundamental right to survival was heartlessly stripped away.

Pakistan could fulfil its existing electricity demands by installing around 24,000 MW of solar PV capacity.

The interim prime minister, operating under a limited mandate and constrained by time, displayed visible empathy and distress in response to the cries of the impoverished echoing throughout the nation. In response, he convened a meeting involving all relevant departments to explore potential solutions.

However, during this meeting, the well-to-do elite with substantial incomes, dressed in expensive, immaculate suits, and conversing fluently in English, arrived in chauffeur-driven luxury vehicles. Instead of offering practical resolutions, would have inundated the caretaker prime minister with meticulously prepared presentations, accompanied by a barrage of persuasive statistics and data, much of which was likely fabricated. They skillfully diverted the attention of the prime minister from the issue at hand.

These individuals would have contended that the rising prices were a result of the populace’s actions, asserting that electricity theft, nonpayment of bills, meter tampering, and similar practices were responsible for the escalating costs. They must have urged stern measures against these practices, effectively deflecting blame away from systemic factors and placing it onto the struggling populace.

They would have conveyed to the prime minister that addressing the issue of line losses necessitates a comprehensive overhaul of our antiquated, outdated, and malfunctioning transmission infrastructure. They will stress the urgency of adopting modern technology and upgrading transmission lines, grid stations, and switches. However, this transformation demands a substantial financial commitment, amounting to billions of dollars, a resource we currently lack.

They must have advised the prime minister to amass the essential funds for this ambitious endeavour of completely revamping our nation’s transmission system; their proposition would have involved a heightened imposition of taxes. Their rationale for this tax surge rests on the premise that such an increase would yield the necessary financial resources to address the costs linked to the comprehensive infrastructure upgrade. Additionally, it would facilitate the recruitment of extra workforce members vital for the successful execution of the new system.

Charged with this vital mission, the prime minister has entrusted them with the responsibility of formulating a comprehensive array of solutions-ranging from short-term remedies to long-term strategies-to alleviate the burdensome weight of electricity bills. However, the reality stands stark: no amount of remedies can bring about a substantial change if we persist within the confines of the current electricity system.

The call to action extends beyond mere reforms; it necessitates the creation of an entirely novel para system for electricity generation. This paradigm shift is imperative to sidestep the inertia and inefficiency of our nation’s prevailing, outdated, and unresponsive infrastructure. Through this audacious initiative, individuals will be granted the empowerment to govern their electricity consumption, steering towards a future of responsiveness and compassion.

Numerous nations have already embarked on this path, establishing systems that safeguard their citizens from the financial burdens that often accompany traditional energy models. The transformation we seek requires us to envision a responsive, humane, and citizen-centric energy infrastructure-one that places the reins of control directly in the hands of the people. By embracing this forward-looking vision, we not only pave the way for financial relief but also lay the foundation for a more equitable and progressive society.

Across the globe, nations are increasingly transitioning away from electricity generated by fossil fuels and even nuclear energy. The recent remarkable advancements in the development of cost-effective and efficient solar cells have brought about a transformative shift in power production. Responsible and responsive governments have introduced a variety of initiatives aimed at reducing the electricity expenses for household consumers.

* They provide incentives for upgrading to energy-efficient appliances, promoting LED lighting, and offering home energy audits to identify areas of improvement.
* They educate the public about energy-saving habits that can lead to behavioral changes that reduce electricity consumption like turning off lights when not needed, unplugging devices, and using programmable thermostats.
* They Enforce stringent energy efficiency standards for appliances and electronics to ensure that only energy-efficient products are available in the market which reduces energy consumption without requiring any changes in consumer behavior.
* They provide financial incentives, such as subsidies or rebates, for purchasing energy-efficient appliances, solar panels, and insulation materials to encourage households to make energy-saving upgrades.
* They implement time-of-use pricing for electricity to encourage households to shift energy-intensive tasks to off-peak hours when electricity rates are lower to help in better load distribution and reduce strain on the power grid during peak times.
* They Invest in smart grid technology that enables better management of energy distribution and consumption and allows real-time monitoring and control, which can help balance demand and supply efficiently.
* They encourage the adoption of renewable energy sources like solar panels and wind turbines to reduce dependence on traditional electricity sources and lower bills over the long term.
* They provide targeted energy subsidies or credits to low-income households to help alleviate their energy burden, making electricity more affordable for those who need it most.
* They promote community-based energy initiatives, such as shared solar projects or community wind farms, which can help lower costs by leveraging economies of scale.
* They Implement demand response programs that reward households for reducing electricity usage during peak demand periods to help stabilize the grid and lower electricity costs.
* They provide households with tools to monitor their energy consumption in real time, allowing them to identify areas where they can cut back on usage.

The Caretaker Prime Minister holds the prerogative to select a combination of these measures, whether it be all or just a few, to extend relief to the populace. The beauty lies in the fact that many of these solutions are inherently cost-effective and can be swiftly put into practice.

Leveraging the Benazir Income Support Program presents a direct and immediate route for granting electricity subsidies to registered households, thereby offering urgent relief to the impoverished and lower-middle class segments. Meanwhile, the affluent strata of society have already taken initiatives to tackle the issue, as evident in the widespread adoption of solar systems. For instance, in locales like Bahria Enclave, and Islamabad, solar installations have become commonplace, with even those who haven’t yet adopted solar energy contemplating its adoption.

Notably, a World Bank study underscores that Pakistan could achieve staggering savings of up to $10 billion annually by transitioning to 100% solar energy. Furthermore, another World Bank report heralds Pakistan as a potential solar energy powerhouse, given its exceptional average solar radiation of 5.3 kWh/m2/day-among the world’s highest. This report goes on to assert that Pakistan could fulfil its existing electricity demands by installing around 24,000 MW of solar PV capacity, utilizing a mere 0.071% of its total land area. These findings underscore the substantial potential of solar energy to address the nation’s energy needs efficiently and sustainably.

A 2019 report from the Alternative Energy Development Board (AEDB) underscores the immense potential of Pakistan’s solar energy sector, indicating the possibility of attracting investments amounting to $40 billion. This influx of capital could lead to the installation of a remarkable 30,000 MW of solar power capacity by 2030.

Drawing inspiration from our neighboring country India, where the target of achieving 50% renewable energy generation by 2030 is a prime objective. India’s Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission, initiated in 2010, aimed to attain 20 GW by 2022. Remarkably, India’s progress has exceeded expectations, with the nation having already achieved an installed solar capacity of 64 GW by early 2023. On a global scale, renewables are set to comprise a staggering 84% of all new power plant additions by 2022.

To harness these transformative possibilities, Pakistan must initiate a grassroots movement to popularize solar energy. Launching innovative strategies that engage households across all economic strata, rich and poor alike, is paramount.

The Shakti program stands as a shining example of successful intervention, having subsidized the adoption of solar energy systems for households and businesses since 1996. This initiative employs a unique approach, wherein borrowers are organized into groups of five to ten individuals. The journey commences with modest monthly payments, allowing participants to gradually transition into the program. The Grameen Shakti model has been emulated in multiple nations, extending financial support to households and enterprises to facilitate their switch to solar energy.

In the pursuit of easing the plight of underprivileged households grappling with surging utility bills, immediate attention becomes paramount. The weight of exorbitant electricity expenses disproportionately burdens those who are least equipped to cope. To combat this pressing concern, it is incumbent upon governments to implement potent measures aimed at alleviating the fiscal stress endured by vulnerable families. This multifaceted approach might encompass targeted subsidies, enhancements in energy-efficient infrastructure, and the launch of public awareness campaigns fostering responsible energy consumption.

However, to bring about lasting change, it is essential to contemplate a fundamental shift in the way we generate and distribute electricity. The prevailing electricity production and distribution system often suffers from inefficiencies and sluggish response, leaving households at the mercy of unstable service and skyrocketing bills. The establishment of a comprehensive parallel system for electricity generation, one that harnesses cutting-edge technologies like solar, wind, and microgrids, can circumvent these limitations.

This new approach promises greater reliability, reduced costs, and a sustainable energy future for all. By boldly embracing innovation and sustainability, we have the opportunity to liberate households from the shackles of escalating utility bills and pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous society.

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