**Graceful protest**

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Democracies thrive on the value of public opinion and its empowerment by ensuring its inclusion and reflection government policies.

Posters in public squares/spaces, peaceful marches, placard shows, sit-ins, candlelight vigils, opeds in print, videos on social media – these are all our ways of showing disagreement and building pressure on the authorities to improve their actions or risk the loss of vote in the next election.

There is a certain beauty and grace associated with this practice and this practice has now for decades been used as an effective measure to pressurize relevant authorities.

They are however marked by discipline, intellect and consistency.

Pakistan sees another face of this. By and large, the understanding of a ‘march’ or protest is that of a gathering of a violent nature. More importantly, they are isolated events instead of being used as consistent pressure building through various platforms.

Various commercial bazaars of the country where integral business is conducted such as the Anarkali Bazaar, Lytton Road, Shahdara, Urdu Bazar, Kagazi Market, ShahAlam, and other enterprising areas conducted protests and sit-ins near Nila Gumbad recently. Heated protests led by angry mobs were seen, as protesters held bills, banners, and placards with slogans emblazoned against the government. They were also seen shouting slogans and rallying against state ministers and the incumbent government for not being proactive enough in curbing the increased tariffs. They criticized the government for crushing people under exorbitant power bills.

Several demonstrations across different areas of the city saw defiant protesters burning their bills, threatening not to pay their dues until the charges, surcharges, taxes, and tariffs were immediately withdrawn. They demanded the issuance of revised bills by the power distribution companies.

It is understandable that the inflated energy prices, particularly electricity, have left businessmen and traders disappointed with dwindling profits and stifled growth. As a result, countless traders have taken to the streets in protest. Small and medium enterprises as well as small-scale shopkeepers have urged the government to rescind the sales tax from electricity charges to avoid nationwide strikes. The stakeholders must realize that the imposition of tax is a government matter. It is only the government that can impose these charges and taxes on the utility companies and the latter cannot help but stay compliant with the regulations passed by the government.

While all of us are facing higher electricity prices due to the downward spiral of our Pakistani rupees against dollars and a hike in the cost of imported fuel, it is important to note that civil unrest is not the answer, especially violent and fierce ones that lead to an absolute disruption to everyday life. The country must realize that some of the most developed economies, including the UK, the US, and Europe are experiencing an increase in mass diseconomies of scale, with the risk of losing business owing to increased expenses. Costs are anticipated to rise, and we as a nation and our government need to have contingency plans in place. Mob-like shows may damage public property and set vehicles on fire but they will never solve the issue.

The issue began with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, disrupted supplies of oil, and a rise in prices, which is why the entire world had to re-calibrate. Energy prices automatically rose with oil importing countries like Pakistan finding themselves at the centre of the fallout. Businesses went spiraling downwards; they were still battling the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and instead of making recoveries, they had to go to square one to readjust, re-calculate and downsize in most of the cases. Added to all the woes, the rise in staple foods and inflation across the board fed into the social discontent spanning common citizens, businessmen, and SMEs alike.

But distribution companies have little choice in the matter. The impact is global, the agents global, the factors local shortfall of backup or a basic conservation-oriented lifestyle. The coming months will prompt a more aggressive spike and this time due to the internal impact of the floods if sensibility does not prevail, we may be looking at additional loss due to undisciplined and aggravated display of emotions on the streets.

The government and lawmakers are exploring a sweeping set of measures to save energy, from turning off streetlights to lowering building temperatures, and they are pleading with the public to cut consumption at home. Whether these endeavours spur a call to solidarity or a call to arms depends on us – the public must realize its national collective power.

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