**[The gathering storm](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772979/the-gathering-storm)**

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INFLATED electricity bills in the country have [triggered an eruption of public indignation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772327) that had been simmering for long. Discontent over the escalating cost of living has now exploded into mass protests. The unbearable hike in electricity rates seems to be the proverbial last straw.

Angry protesters are now out on the streets, threatening to bring down the edifice of the state. It is now left to a hybridised interim administration to face the public’s wrath. Stuck between the [IMF deal](https://www.dawn.com/news/1764298) and growing unrest in the country, the options for the caretaker set-up are limited. The crisis over excessively priced electricity indicates a structural problem that has been aggravated by flawed policies pursued by successive governments over the past several decades.

A patch-up job will not help resolve a chronic problem that requires massive systemic reforms. And that is beyond the capacity of a short-term interim arrangement led by a novice who has apparently been imposed by the security establishment. The multiple taxes and surcharges included in the electricity bills are nothing less than extortion by a state unable to collect taxes from the politically powerful landed and business classes. The burden has shifted to the already overtaxed middle and lower middle classes.

What has made the situation extremely combustible is the prevailing political uncertainty. The spontaneous outburst of public anger has all the potential of turning into a mass movement against the existing system. You just have to listen to the chants of protesters against the privileged power elite. Events like this could easily ignite a prairie fire engulfing the entire system.

The public outrage over inflated electricity bills is just a symptom of a much deeper problem.

The ongoing public protests have brought to the surface contradictions embedded in the existing power structure. They have also deepened the predicament of political parties that were part of the former ruling coalition. The alliance bears much blame for the worsening economic crisis. The disastrous policies of the Dar period may not have been solely responsible for the economic downslide but they are just as much to blame as the approach of previous dispensations. The situation has posed a huge dilemma for the PML-N, with elections approaching.

It will be hard for the party to go to the polls with such a liability. The optics of the former prime minister and his finance minister arriving in London for consultations with the supreme leader were hardly comforting for party supporters and voters. The party is at a loss as to how to react to the public protests, particularly in its former stronghold of Punjab, just two weeks after its [government ended](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769321).

It is apparent that the decision to include excessive taxes in the electricity bill was taken by the PML-N-led government and certainly not by the caretaker administration. While exempting the retailers and thriving real estate businesses, the former finance minister conveniently shifted the burden to the common people. It is a lame excuse that it was necessary to meet IMF conditionalities. The fiscal gap could have been bridged by removing those exemptions as per the requirement of the IMF rather than fleecing the public.

With little to show for its performance during its 16-month rule, and now with street protests breaking out, it is hardly surprising that the PML-N favours an [extension in the election date](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772153), as suggested by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in order to complete the delimitation process required under the recently concluded population census. Given this uncertainty and the prevailing confusion in party ranks, it is hardly surprising that Nawaz Sharif has yet again delayed his return to the country. He is now [expected](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772303) to come back in mid-October.

Meanwhile, differences within the former ruling alliance over the election timeframe have become sharper, with the PPP [taking an obvious U-turn](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768449) and demanding that elections be held within 90 days as stipulated in the Constitution. It seems that the PPP’s changed position on the election timeframe is for reasons of expediency, as the party doesn’t want any delimitation of constituencies in Sindh that could result in an increase in National Assembly seats in Karachi at the expense of the rural areas. The issue has become more contentious with the MQM now [siding](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772384) with the PML-N over the delay.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Bar Council, too, has demanded that polls be held within 90 days. However, it seems highly improbable that the ECP will change its plan and agree to hold elections on the basis of the old population count. It may lead to yet another court battle, deepening the political turmoil. Growing public unrest over inflation has simply added to the multiple challenges the state confronts.

The public outrage over inflated electricity bills is just a symptom of a much deeper problem. The escalating cost of living has pushed millions of more people below the poverty line and massively increased the ranks of the unemployed. The worsening state of the economy and growing political instability have also put our national security at risk. It is perhaps one of the most serious situations the country has faced in recent times. The prospect of a nuclear-armed nation collapsing under its own contradictions is frightening.

But the powers that be seem completely oblivious of the gathering storm. They remain occupied with their own agenda. While the country is imploding, the security agencies have apparently intensified the crackdown against the opposition, further destabilising the political situation. Recent draconian laws are now being used with impunity against everyone who dares to speak out.

It is perhaps unprecedented in Pakistan’s history that so many women are being kept in detention, most of them without any charge. The vindictiveness of the security establishment has been further amplified by the [arrest](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771196) of Imaan Hazir Mazari, a young civil right lawyer, under antiterrorism laws. She was rearrested after being released on bail. Similarly, the fate of Khadija Shah and several other PTI women prisoners hangs in the balance. This is the last thing the country needs while facing an existentialist threat. The rumbling of the coming storm is loud and clear, if the ruling elite are prepared to heed the warning.

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