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## POWERLESS UNDER A CRIPPLING POWER POLICY

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Shaila Zain, a widow, lives in a small house just 60 sq yards in area, with two small rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. She pays Rs20,000 in rent for the accommodation in New Karachi where she lives with her children. Three years ago when the family moved here, she also paid Rs800-Rs1,500 in electricity bills, varying from winters to summers. Since the past year, the electricity bill has shot up to Rs3,500-Rs6,000 depending on the season. “We don’t even have a refrigerator, only two lights and one fan. Still I was unable to pay the bills due to the increase in charges,” said the 40-year-old. So she sold the gold earrings her mother had given her in order to run one fan to bear the sweltering Karachi summer and remain in the house with her three children. “I sometimes feel like committing suicide but then I fear Allah and pray for myself,” said Shaila. “I

don't know how we manage to bring food to our table when we have to pay almost half of the income in electricity bills," she lamented. Her children, the eldest being only 14, also work in factories. She still resorts to selling her jewelry and even household items routinely in order to pay the bills. Sabir Ahmed, who has been working as an electrician for 30 years, has seen how frustrated people are with the always-soaring electricity prices. He has been getting calls from his customers to help them find solutions to lessen their electricity bills. "A few days ago, a customer of mine from a middle-class family called me to ask if their load can be divided or if there was any way they could get charged less." Ahmed told The Express Tribune. "I was stunned that he was actually looking for a trick to steal electricity. When I inquired, he told me that every month his bill runs up to 18,000 to 25,000 rupees despite not having an air conditioner," Ahmed shared.

Although a normal middle-class household has a washing machine, microwave oven, juicer blender, iron, refrigerator and few more daily usage items that add up to high charges of electricity, the additional charges that electric companies slap on are horrifying. "I earn around 50,000 to 60,000 rupees a month, half of which goes in bills that too only electricity and gas. Even then we face six to nine hours of load shedding daily," Ahmed said. Pakistan is entering a dark age where basic amenities and utilities like electricity are not accessible to all citizens. As summer approaches, people have started feeling the heat of load shedding as usual. In fact, electricity has

become a rare commodity for consumers, especially those living in remote areas of the country.

The energy sector is said to be the backbone of the country's economy, but the power sector in Pakistan has currently collapsed the economy, with electricity prices crossing Rs60 per unit. Such high rates have halted the wheels of the economy rather than pushing it forward. The electricity prices are so high that they are beyond affordability for consumers. The power distribution companies, it seems, prefer to provide electricity to the elite who pay the bills. Till now solar net metering has been the immediate solution for those seeking emancipation from the government's soul-crushing energy policies, but the energy ministry has launched a campaign to end this alternate solution to ensure the monopoly of power distribution companies. The problem has reached a level where there seems to be no remedy. Former Managing Director of Pepco Tahir Basharat Cheema said that generation has become very expensive, beyond the affordability of consumers. He also cited NTDC transmission issues, incompetence, higher taxes and duties, low bill recovery, and staff shortages as other issues resulting in the poor performance of the power sector in Pakistan. With consumers still suffering daily load-shedding even though the installed capacity of the country has reached its highest level of 43,000MW, the real issue seems to be one of bad governance. Politically motivated appointments of the heads of power sector companies and the boards of directors have crippled the entire energy sector. Such appointments result in bad

governance in state-owned entities, causing high losses, power theft, and low recovery of electricity bills. Consequently, the circular debt continues to balloon due to these inefficiencies and leakages, now having reached 2.5 trillion rupees.