

Citizens demand reversal of KE privatisation, shutdown of illegal hydrants

KARACHI: At a press conference held at the Karachi Press Club on Saturday, the Shehri Awami Mahaz, comprising citizens of Karachi, demanded that K-Electric's privatisation be cancelled and it be placed under democratic control of the citizens and more than 100 illegal hydrants in the city be shut down immediately.

The power and water mafias have taken 20 million citizens of Karachi hostage. Water scarcity and power outages have left the citizens suffering from mental and physical ailments, the activists pointed out.

Nasir Mansoor, secretary general of the National Trade Union Federation, said Karachi has been suffering from the inflicted punishment of two big mafias for long, and these mafias have the blessings of major political parties and powerful circles.

He said the privatisation of the KESC in 2005 was a 'fraudulent' deal. General Pervez Musharraf, Shaukat Aziz and Karachi's 'false' representatives were directly involved 'in this robbery'. The company, whose shares were valued at Rs9 per unit at the time of privatisation, was sold for Rs1.60 per share, causing a loss of more than Rs70 billion to the exchequer. This major power company was sold for only Rs15.8bn.

He said the privatisation of KESC (renamed K-Electric) is tantamount to recognising the IMF's dominance by handing over important public resources to foreign traders. On the occasion of privatisation of state-owned enterprises, it was said that state subsidies placed an undue burden on the exchequer, but despite handing over the KESC to a private party, the government was giving it an annual subsidy of Rs41bn. So far, the state has given more than Rs600bn in subsidies to K-Electric.

Despite the huge state subsidies, the people had been waiting for proper supply of electricity for 15 years.

Mr Mansoor added that the group that had taken over KESC in 2005 announced that it would invest \$1bn to improve the power transmission system, but even 15 years later it had not been done.

Currently the situation was that the country's largest city was intentionally plunged into darkness, unannounced loadshedding of 10 to 12 hours has become the fate of 22 million citizens in the sizzling heat and lockdown.

He said that despite the lack of electricity, overbilling was a tried and tested weapon of KE that had made citizens mentally ill.

Through the same 'criminal method', the KE had made a profit of more than Rs17bn this year, which was 40 per cent more than the previous year. Despite the protests of the

people, the present government had allowed KE to increase the tariffs of electricity in phases. KE had immediately increased the tariff of electricity by Rs2.8 per unit.

Comrade Gul Rahman, convener of the Workers Rights Movement, said KE had installed meters that were faulty and did not conform to international standards. The government, NAB and Nepra had given the KE a free hand of lawlessness and arbitrariness because its owner, Arif Naqvi, was considered the closest friend of the current ruling oligarchy. He had provided huge funds to the party in power to run the election campaign.

Khalig Zadran, chairperson of the Lyari Awami Mahaz, said that like the KE the water mafia had made the lives of the citizens of Karachi 'worse than hell'. Zehra Khan, general secretary of the Home-Based Women Workers Federation, said that more than 100 illegal hydrants were earning Rs90bn annually by selling people's share of water to the citizens.

Currently the water tanker mafia was making more money than the drug mafia. Nisha Rao, president of the Trans Gender Rights Society, deplored that the city, provincial and federal governments were constantly showing a lack of seriousness in resolving Karachi's problems.

Agib Hussain, president of the National Youth Committee, said that at a time when all parties had left citizens at the mercy of the mafia, it had become imperative for the people to organise themselves to achieve their basic rights. On behalf of the citizens of Karachi, the Sheri Awami Mahaz demanded that privatisation of the KE be cancelled and it be given under the democratic control of the citizens, the increase in electricity tariffs be withdrawn and overbilling be stopped.