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The 62-Acre Battle: Reclaiming Karachi's Green Space—A Case Study on the Complexities of Reclaiming Kidney Hill

Dr. Syed Saif Ur Rehman

PAS & TI, Director General, National Institute of Public Administration

saif445@yahoo.com

Dr. Muhammad Abdul Samad

Research Associate, Shaheen Research Group

drsamad99@gmail.com

Muhammad Ibrahim Ansari *

Additional Directing Staff, National Institute of Public Administration, Federal Govt. Govt of Pakistan

cadetcl@yahoo.com

*** Corresponding Author**

ABSTRACT

This case study examines the protracted struggle and systemic failures in converting Kidney Hill, a 62-acre amenity plot in Karachi, into a functional public park after a landmark Supreme Court order. Historically reserved for a park in 1966, the land was largely taken over by a land mafia, illegal housing, and various criminal and vested interests over decades. The Supreme Court's 2019 directive aimed to restore the land's original grandeur as part of a wider anti-encroachment drive. Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) was tasked with this ambitious project despite its institutional weakness and a critical lack of funds, forcing it to rely entirely on private philanthropy and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds. The initial success in clearing the land was quickly followed by an anticlimax, as KMC faced internal bureaucratic inertia, political rivalry between ruling parties, and a vigorous "Counter-Offensive" from the ousted elite and criminal elements. The project was further marred by questionable conduct from 'self-proclaimed' civil society organizations and severe operational challenges, including unsustainable water management, rampant vandalism, and the site's transformation into a crime hub. Ultimately, the attempt to create a "bona fide paradise" resulted in the park deteriorating from utopia to dystopia. The combination of donor fatigue, fiscal

mismanagement, and the failure to secure the site led to the project's failure, offering a cautionary tale about the systemic obstacles—including lack of political will, corruption, and administrative inefficiency—that plague public mega-projects in Karachi. The study concludes that crucial legal, institutional, and human resource reforms are necessary to prevent the repetition of these poor actions.

Keywords: Urban Land Reclamation, Kidney Hill, Encroachment, Judicial Activism, Administrative Inefficiency, Vested Interests, Park

INTRODUCTION

Karachi is Pakistan's largest metropolis, Sindh's largest provincial cosmopolitan city, and a major seaport, commercial, financial, and industrial center. Its multiethnic population, unique landscape, and business activity make it desirable. After predicting Karachi will be the glory of the East, Sir Charles Napier, the first British Governor of Sindh, could not see the city in "her grandeur."

The description seems promising and gorgeous, but the city's infrastructure is degraded by land encroachments and system inefficiency. Kidney Hill illustrates systemic obstacles to change and transformation. Despite judicial interventions and strong commitments, systematic inefficiencies, lack of political will, and "corrupt" people team up thus destined to fail. In 2023, the Economist Intelligence Unit named Karachi one of the five least habitable cities in the world. Years of administrative ungovernability and political neglect have destroyed Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC), which manages the megalopolis. Karachi's public infrastructure is in ruins (Dawn, 2019, December 22).

Karachi entered the legal spotlight in January 2019 when KMC was ordered to remove encroachments to restore its former grandeur as "Uroos ul Bilad" or Bride of Cities. After an anti-encroachment effort authorized by the Supreme Court led the municipal corporation to an expedition to Kidney Hill, KMC rebuilt Karachi's ferroniere, the Empress Market, to revitalize the city's colonial emblem. KMC's quick response in the Empress Market case impressed the Supreme Court Karachi Registry, and shortly after, the Supreme Court gave another verdict in a land grabbing case, ordering KMC to clear a sneaky society on Kidney Hill, a rocky plateau with Beverly Hill-style luxury houses in the city center (Dawn 2021, December 28). Due to a lack of funds and human capital, KMC was compelled to take back Kidney Hill and turn it into a paradise for the city's residents, who rarely boast about their green spaces (Qureshi et al., 2010; Uddin et al., 2025). After years of institutional stagnation and identity turmoil, KMC was weak to handle it.

Historically, in November 1966, Karachi Development Authority declared Scheme 32 as Falak Numa, reserving 62 acres for a park, which became Kidney Hill. The flat-topped hill, Karachi's highest point at 219 feet, resembles a kidney from above (Zameen 2019, May 21). Kidney Hill was supposed to be an open space that would later become a public leisure area. Ink on paper made the plan permanent, but overwrites and underwrites defaced it over the next few decades. Karachi's greedy land mafia targeted Kidney Hill, taking any chance to grab profitable land (Hasan,

2013). Kidney Hill had a long judicial history, beginning with Constitutional Petition No. 1314, "The Overseas Cooperative Housing Society versus The Government of Pakistan and Others," filed in January 1990. This lawsuit took nearly 30 years to resolve (Dawn 2021, December 28).

Investigative Scope

This case study examines the difficulties in completing the Kidney Hill project after the Supreme Court's order launching an anti-land encroachment drive to revitalize the city, where China Cutting and land grabbing were causing much unrest. The self-proclaimed stakeholders, who shared only their entrenched interests, would be upset by the time-constrained endeavor. The case study shows how this project's phases led to a disaster. What was learned? Why and how to avoid repeating poor actions? Individual and institutional lessons learned and how to build on them to ensure professional development in contributing to mega projects of public importance, as well as ways to streamline and revamp organizational structure and procedures in the instant case and as a benchmark for other cases.

The Battle for the Hill: A Chronicle of Conflict and Conservation

The Tipping Point: When Conservation Won

Kidney Hill Justice Delayed but Not Denied

Karachi was in the national press from the start of 2018 for bad reasons. Years of land grabs and illicit development caught the Supreme Court's attention. The Honorable Chief Justice heard weekly Karachi encroachment cases. Later in 2018, a series of significant Supreme Court rulings saved the city from opportunistic land grabbers. Judicial activism should focus on Karachi's urban catastrophe. Karachi's infrastructure was exposed by climate change (Batool, Sarwar, & Javid, 2019). All civic bodies were tarnished by Karachi's constant rains. The city's marooned residents were the perfect opportunity for Karachi's political parties to target the provincial government. Illegal construction blocked nullahs, rainfall drains, and sewerage pipes, prompting fierce criticism (Dawn 2020, December 30). The biblical-sized rains have immobilized the city's economy, costing daily wagers, businesses, and the government billions of rupees in earnings, profits, and revenues. This climate catastrophe threatened Karachi's economic survival, prompting the Supreme Court to order KMC to raze illegal structures, make space for stormwater and sewerage drains, and allow vehicular traffic by conducting zero-tolerance anti-encroachment drives. As Supreme Court Karachi Registry eagerly pursued public interest litigation matters, judicial activism was in the focus. In pursuit of Supreme Court orders, civil society actively participated with legal developments supported by the city administration (Shehri-CBE, 2020). Another court ruling was expected in the Kidney Hill case. The Kidney Hill Master plan is demonstrated as Figure 1.



Figure 1: Kidney Hill Master Plan

Against the Odds: KMC's Ambitious Assignment

By refurbishing Saddar's Empress Market, which evokes nostalgia for over 20 million Karachi residents, the KMC administration fulfilled a SC order. Since then, has pursued land grabbers and space encroachers who broke the law via greed. KMC was on a fast-depleting financial oxygen tank, receiving little or no financial support from the Sindh Government, but the Supreme Court's orders sent a clear message to the Sindh Government to help KMC (Dawn, 2019, December 22). Political parties on opposite sides of the aisle led provincial and local entities, which had natural rivalries (Gulf News, 2022, December 9). After 50 years of legal rounds, administrative abuse, and private lust, Kidney Hill was finally settled and streamlined. Any development is expensive, especially a modernized public park (Dawn, 2021, December 28). No money was in the metropolitan exchequer for Kidney Hill (Dawn, 2020, June 30). As per court decision, no budget was set aside for expenditures.

Fundraising from Good Samaritans

Considering the significance, it was quite anticipated that the funds for the development of Kidney Hill would be released, but unfortunately, it never occurred. However, to the rescue of this project institutions like local banks, multinational companies and individual philanthropists chipped in with their generous contributions through Corporate Social Responsibility funds and private donations (APP, 2021, August 15). It was the goodwill gesture by these persons and organizations who were well aware of the importance of modernized public park in the centre of the city (The Express Tribune, 2021, November 1).

Countervailing the Land Mafia's Resistance

KMC was both a demolition squad and a renovation crew for Empress Market, which was renovated after an anti-encroachment drive. The restoration of Saddar's Empress Market was a KMC triumph. The Supreme Court heard the Constitutional Petition of 09/2010, a Kidney Hill amenity plot dispute. The Supreme Court restored Kidney Hill in 2019 by dismissing illegal occupants and removing illegal buildings (Dawn 2019, November 26). After KMC's rapid delivery in the Empress Market case, the Supreme Court ordered the corporation to remove illegal high-end property on

Kidney Hill and turn it into a legitimate international park for inhabitants (Dawn 2019, December 22).

It was a different steaming hot cup of tea for KMC. The Empress Market was a commercial area with tiny retailers, but the Supreme Court disapproved of the city's elite, who were unlawfully clinging to a hill with a luxurious and famous lifestyle (Dawn 2019, December 22; Ashraf et al., 2025). The Supreme Court's wakeup call caused KMC and its land grabbers to lose sleep. Supreme Court orders affected unlicensed Overseas Cooperative Housing Society occupants (Dawn, 2021, December 28; Akhtar & Khan, 2021), who resisted fiercely. In a metropolis with too many ethnographic fault lines, malafide followers and few political party office bearers established a nexus to stymie the civic machinery that was ready to steamroll the elite's property and dignity (Dawn, 2020, December 30; Firdos et al., 2024). Both private and public entities wanted territory on Kidney Hill, regardless of race, religion, or faith. Callous businessmen, dishonest religious leaders, and crafty city bureaucracy encroached on the site. A shrine, ritzy residences, and a partially completed school were there.

Momentum for Land Regain

After a 60-day operation, KMC freed Kidney Hill from the land mafia, evacuating unauthorized colonies, illegal companies, religious strangleholds, and criminal groups. The Kidney Hill became desolate after the anti-encroachment campaign. The only thing visible were heaps of wreckage to be disposed of by 5000 garbage trucks, packs of stray dogs to be seized by the Edhi Welfare Foundation, and drug addicts' temporary dens to be purified by the police. In 30 days, the Kidney Hill transformed from a poor stony plain to a shrub-and-tree-studded forest where plants were taking root to see the springs (MITI Students, 2019, November 7; Ali et al., 2024). It was a growing park with all the signs of a peaceful urban paradise.

At first glance, the park site featured only desert vegetation, cactuses, shrubs, and keekar trees. The herbal world appropriately associates the “Keekar” with resistance (APP 2021, August 15; Irshad et al., 2024). Since cactus, keekar, and other xerophytes were the park's oldest residents, their environmental rights were protected. Overseas Cooperative Housing Society, juxtaposed with Kidney Hill, greeted the KMC team with generous refreshments and splendid teacups and even connected their household power to light up KMC officials' tent offices. They eagerly awaited a miracle—a full-fledged park that would meet their hopes. The approach aligned with Qureshi et al. (2010).



Figure 2: Board Displaying Trees at Kidney Hill

Slow but Steady Development

For Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC), it was time to create a paradise through self-styled Natural Selection from scratch. Park plantation wishes were too long. The KMC planned to produce about 25 indigenous plant species in six forests: wood, fruit, creeper, medicinal, bushy and shrubs, jungle-like (APP 2021, August 15; Zafar et al., 2023). KMC nurseries supplied banana, mango, dates, lemon sapodilla, malta, papaya, coconut, blackberry, guava, fig, banyan, tamarind, moringa, and wood-apple seeds and saplings to meet the plan's high floral standards (Figure 2). The park planned 12 pathways named after Pakistani tourist destinations such Saiful Maluk, Karakoram, Rakaposhi, and Dhoraji (The Nation 2020, May 4; Khan et al., 2023). An aviary, open cage, and manmade lake were KMC bucket list items. There were four massive gates to check miscreants, and city wardens were on guard (Dawn, 2019, December 22; Yasmeen et al., 2024).

The D-Day moment had come to actualize a 62-acre park, envisioned in 1966, when a plaque honoring Ahmed Ali, former Karachi Development Authority director, was put to honor his services and spirit (Zameen, 2019, May 21; Nadeem et al., 2024). A national flag was hoisted at the 219-foot summit, visible across the city as demonstrated in Figure 3 (Dawn, 2019, November 26; Fatima et al., 2024). KMC's twin-track approach worked when it addressed the festering encroachment in Saddar's bustling commercial center, hurting the so-called poor daily bread earners, and the powerful rich elite in a sleepy gentrified neighborhood. KMC was scoring goals, and the scoreboard was about to show a well-deserved victory, slowly but surely.



Figure 3: The Kidney Hill Signage with Pakistani Flag

The Sobering Reality: Barriers to the Dream Mafia Outwitted State Writ

Kidney Hill was a rare situation where official legal writ and administrative apparatus clashed with the powerful interests of Pakistan's largest city. It was clear that the urban mafia on retreat could backfire, and it did because it kept its cards close. The Kidney Hill squatter settlement had a microcosmic black economy or

criminal underbelly destined to lash back soon (Hasan, 2013; Hsu et al., 2025b). The greedy KMC employees began to undermine park construction. Many retired and current corporation leaders personally cooperated with the aggrieved quarters to oppose the paradise in progress. In three months, the Supreme Court was informed that KMC had retrieved 62 acres of Kidney Hill land. The court was also informed that 57 acres of land had been secured, but some stubborn encroachments, such as School's gray structure, persisted (Dawn, 2021, December 28; Khan et al., 2022).

Starting a Plan with Empty Pockets

KMC rushed to draft an approximate PC-1, worth PKR 950 million, to turn the property into a modern park to fulfill the Supreme Court deadline (Dawn, 2021, April 9; Gurganari et al., 2022). The park's contour lines were drawn after topographic mapping. Before starting the park, with all its great features, the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) was consulted to protect local residents from health dangers and environmental restrictions. SEPA delayed the assessment because Kidney Hill was in a residential neighborhood and heavy gear would be used for development.

Urban underworld occupants populated Kidney Hill. A paradise was just on paper when the Supreme Court approved Kidney Hill, led by KMC. It was easy to write ideas but difficult to perform them. The idea was to redesign a modern urban forest to international standards without money. To fund Kidney Hill without government support, KMC turned to private contributors. External funds were to fund 100% of development. Donors' overwhelming generosity was inspiring. KMC was receiving cash for the projected park, but its financial literacy was insufficient. Private capital requires the most accountability, unlike public money (Substack, 2023, January 5; Yazidi & Rana, 2025).

The Vengeful Retaliation by Wicked Forces

Months later, KMC engaged Shehri-CBE, an NGO involved in litigation against land mafia threats, to manage the park project. They discovered various problematic sites, including temporary motels and livestock farms, where adjacent hospitals improperly disposed of waste (Shehri-CBE, 2020; Masih et al., 2025). At the construction site, significant issues surfaced, with the mafia exacerbating project delays. While encroached structures were dealt with, substantial waste remained, driven by ongoing criminal, social, religious, official, and financial motivations for territory reclamation.

Administrative inertia and political animosity

Criminals and political party officials and affiliates in Karachi have undermined the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) by supporting discontented factions that were ousted. The two prominent political parties of Sindh; one having the elected Mayor of Karachi and other having the elected Chief Minister have conflicting objectives. Their inability to develop a cohesive vision for the Kidney Hill project has resulted in tension among city officials and frequent meetings to discuss court orders related to its paralysis (Gulf News 2022, December 9; Masih, 2022). However, these gatherings have focused more on the orders than on

their implementation, causing administrative inefficiency and stalling the project. The coordination failure instilled failure in service delivery (Dawn 2024, August 18; Hsu et al., 2025a).

A Quick Fix for a Sectarian Issue

As sectarian religious groups vied for dominance over a designated land, the court refrained from demolishing Al-Fateh Mosque due to the influence of powerful fundamentalist organizations (Dawn 2021, December 28; Uddin, 2017). This incapacity to transform the area into a paradise was hindered by competing religious claims. An ineffective compromise allowed both a Deobandi mosque and a Bareilvi saint's shrine to coexist, ultimately transforming the park into a religious complex rather than maintaining its tranquility (Dawn 2021, December 29; Rana & Ahmed, 2022).

Vested Interests Behind the Veil of Civil Society

Some less known Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) vied for their share in the booty. Many self-proclaimed local welfare organizations were seen urging that human rights of the displaced residents in the neighborhood were being violated. It was so awful that civil society organizations that should be facilitating a public project were so aloof from reality. Civic virtue is a lost or stolen cause (Shehri-CBE, 2020; Al Lawati et al., 2024).

A Hub for Crime

Kidney Hill transformed from a barren wasteland into a crime-ridden area populated by convicts, drug addicts, and corrupt police. Following the establishment of encroached settlements, crime rates surged, with the site frequently used for disposing of bodies linked to gang violence or police actions. The area, once serene, gained a notorious reputation (Dawn, 2022, January 23; Aurangzeb & Uddin, 2025). Individuals attempted to exploit the lawlessness by entering the deserted land at night, while local police allegedly participated in extortion and staged fake encounters to further their own interests.

Unsustainable Water Management

Karachi is reported to have low annual rainfall and no aquatic freshwater resources (Baqa et al., 2021; Ambreen et al, 2025). An entire Karachi Water and Sewerage Board unlicensed residential community was located and evicted while Kidney Hill remained dehydrated (APP, 2021, August 15; Aurangzeb et al., 2025). Too much money was spent on water tankers for nurturing saplings. No KMC water management experts were found to replace the hose pipe technique with sprinklers or drip irrigation. Insufficient water caused plants to wilt and lush gardens stymied.

Plunder and Vandalism went Hand in Hand

KMC wardens' misconduct caused benches with donor names, trail directions on wooden boards, and paved trails to dust off or disappear. The Kidney Hill's massive green and red external signage included search lights for nighttime illumination. The absence of incandescent lamps made it faint. The largest Pakistani flag and a white flag honoring the doctors and paramedics who died during the COVID-19 pandemic were specially designed and displayed on the park's highest

hill to symbolize the victory for the rule of law and healthcare professionalism and to show the human spirit. Unfortunately, both flags vanished quickly (Dawn 2020, May 5; Naseer et al., 2024).

Imminent donor fatigue

Donors were skeptical of KMC's ability to manage Karachi's green belts, leading them to seek alternative outsourcing options for the project. Despite the Mayor's confidence in KMC's administration of the park, poor management and fiscal mismanagement within KMC resulted in the withdrawal of financial support from altruistic groups. After years of legal battles, donor fatigue set in as they witnessed misappropriation of funds, ultimately leading to the conclusion that the park was constructed solely for appearances (Substack 2023, January 5; Shah et al., 2025). This realization prompted the cessation of funding, leaving investors disillusioned and without the intended benefits for their public cause.

From Eco-Friendly to Commercially Savvy

Thus, an ecological park planned as an urban heat sink for Karachi, where concrete high-rise buildings, road networks, and traffic and industrial pollution degrade the environment, survives but does not thrive (Dawn 2024, August 18; Ngo et al., 2026). The policy regulates park commercial operations with rigorous guidelines. However, too many players had covert agendas. After the park opened to Karachi residents, unregulated businesses popped up.

Institutional and Policy Lessons

There were several institutional and policy lessons learned as described below.

Legal Minds were Missing: The Supreme Court order should be reassessed about Kidney Hill by bringing the KMC legal team on board and an outsourced law firm consultancy, if the organization's budget allows for a pitched legal battle for intra court appeal on a review petition, challenging the idea of a paradise in the park.

Land was Used but Not Utilized: The Shehri-CBE, the case's NGO, should urge the Supreme Court bench, through their counsels, to identify an alternative. Let's propose a simpler, more thrifty and fecund land use plan for Karachi residents within the Supreme Court of Pakistan's order.

Surveillance Grossly Overlooked: Due to a lack of funds, CCTV cameras were not installed to remotely monitor park activities, deteriorating Kidney Hill. No surveillance prevented KMC wardens and petty thieves from vandalizing the park. Camera installation must have been prioritized to prevent public property theft. However, such a system may have warned tourists and park staff that they were being watched.

Communication and Coordination Failure: Without a clear focal point, different levels of government were either avoiding a serious debate during Kidney Hill development or misrepresenting the facts to higher authorities.

Poor Project Integration Management: The huge Kidney Hill project has no coherent team. After project completion, a transition checklist is needed. The transition strategy may have envisioned clear park management goals and a well-

planned future resources and revenues. Appointing a transition team to build a well-integrated park management system requires consultation with all stakeholders.

Consultancy Firms were not Engaged: No local or foreign consultants were hired to understand needs, create plans, and evaluate project progress. Since the Supreme Court order was urgent, not consulting experts was a mistake. Karachi Metropolitan Corporation was misunderstood as a Swiss Army Knife that could solve everything.

Project Long-Term Value Neglected: Declaring Kidney Hill an urban national park, where no one could abuse its pristine environment for personal or commercial gain, may have been the greatest answer at a modest cost.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the lessons learned, following are the recommendations for future.

Administrative

Kidney Hill was supposed to be an international park, but KMC didn't have the local solution to build it. Instead of using in-house counsel, working with acclaimed landscape architects and urban planners would turn this land into a paradise.

Legal

The eviction of Kidney Hill occupants highlights the need for responsible institutions to ensure the protection of displaced families' rights, especially as these families had previously been allowed to buy property. To prevent bureaucratic and financial crises for KMC, it is crucial to engage local government and propose declaring Kidney Hill an urban sanctuary. Without a legal framework, operational costs remain high. Professional urban planning bodies should be consulted, and the project could be better managed by a capable private entity through a transparent process, rather than by KMC, which lacks resources for effective management.

Human Resource

To revamp the KMC, it is crucial to enhance its human resource capacity in administrative, financial, and technical services. Establishing a modern training academy for municipal staff is necessary, supported by a concept paper and feasibility report to secure budget approval for the next financial year. Furthermore, public servants should be educated on the indigenous cultural heritage of the Indus Valley Civilization, particularly the values of modesty, order, and cleanliness exemplified by ancient urban planners (APP 2021, August 15; Kayani et al., 2023). This education aims to remind them of their responsibilities in providing basic amenities, despite the challenges they face in delivering clean water, breathable air, and effective sanitation.

CONCLUSION

Attempts to transform 62 acres of land into a paradise for Karachi's citizens have failed, resulting in the deterioration of Kidney Hill from utopia to dystopia. Water shortages, security issues, and mismanagement of maintenance funds have led

to plant struggles and vandalism, prompting donors to withdraw support as the park regresses into neglect and a cautionary tale.

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