We are like this only

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Grounded: Mismanagement and corruption is killing the PIA

*The fall and fall of Pakistan International Airlines has lessons for the rest of South Asia.*

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), once a “great people to fly with,” is today ground. For the South Asian society based on emotions and honour, from flags another issue. It is always about national pride and honour.

While Lufthansa and Singapore Airlines are a matter of pride for their respective countries, Lankan Airlines (and to an extent the small Druk Air of Bhutan), the South Asian airlines are a subject of jokes and ridicule.

While the Air India, the largest of South Asian national carrier and the Biman of Bangladesh, seems to be flying further into rough weathers.

While some of PIA’s problems are common with the other national carriers in South Asia (with some political patronage), others are unique to Pakistan and makes the bailout difficult.

**Losing the edge**

When compared to some of the other regional airlines, the PIA did/does have financial problems.
problems are not insurmountable. For example the domestic competition from India. Jet Airways and IndiGo are a serious competition to Air India – both at 
For PIA, the domestic competition is not as tough, despite Shaheen and Air Blu
the international level is also not specific to PIA.

The primary question here is — if other national carriers could manage those is PIA? Is the PIA beyond redemption? Are there regional lessons to other nation
With the entry of airlines from the Gulf — from the Emirates to the Qatar Airways, there are numerou
Pakistanis travelling to the Gulf countries and those flying to UK, Europe, US a
destinations) prefer the Dubai/Doha transfer.

The PIA not only has to compete with these regional hubs for long haul direct fl
continent, but also with leading European carriers such as the British Airways.
eroding.

And there is more
But the above is only one part of the story. An important problem dogging PIA it’s Endgame. A series of announcements, discussions and resolutions within a confusing signals. Consider the following during the last two years with the Shar
The same Prime Minister who made a lofty promise a year earlier on restoring instrumental in introducing and passing a resolution on PIA’s privatisation.

When the workers resorted to strike few weeks earlier in 2016, he evoked Esser
it (with the killing of couple of workers).

PIA’s third major problem is within — related to management and professional huge debt and continuing losses. According to reports, it is around 300 billion around 20 to 30 billion rupees.

The debt and continuing losses is only a symptom of a larger problem. Today, t level management of the PIA is run by those who are “appointed” by the ruling been used as dumping ground for the parties in pushing their own men and ex
As a result, the PIA has a staggering ratio of more than 375 workers to each air responsible for making PIA’s top management unprofessional.

Corruption within and outside also is killing the PIA. If “world class management inject money in the airline” are required as reported, is the political establishm overhaul? Or, is it a rhetoric, to make more money for the few in the name of pi
Fourth problem is related to PIA’s staff. Passengers complain of the unprofessional attitude from the pilots to ground staff. From the late arrival of pilots and crew members, clearance by the workforce at the ground, attitude of those who deal with the passengers – numerous problems trouble the day to day functioning.

Worse, from trafficking in goods to people through the aircrafts, there have been numerous criminal cases involving some staff members.

So it is just not political interference, but arrogance and falling standard in work culture. A Pakistani wrote recently: “Somehow, PIA’s 18,000 employees feel it’s their God-given right to hold the 180 million hostage.”

**Lacks transparency**

With this work culture and attitude from top to bottom, even if there is a “strategic investor” willing “to support” in reviving the PIA, what will he demand? Is he bound to cut size, reduce the non-performing workers.

Finally, the State is bulldozing towards what it wants, with less transparency. Will make the venture profitable in few sectors, what is important is a transparent process and a clear way forward.

The State in Pakistan seem to be playing its cards close, and worse, using a heavy hand in dealing with the opposition. There is no level playing field for the workers vis-à-vis the state.

The weak labour unions and the disappearance of the Left from Pakistan’s political scene places an extra burden on the workers. For them it is a losing game, unless they resort to violence, ups the ante creating a vicious cycle.

Will the PIA return to become a “great people to fly with” depends not just on debt, competition and prices. There are structural, governance and attitude problems. Rest of South Asia can learn from the PIA.

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