
Maryam conferred with Nawaz on buying PIA



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LAHORE:

After the government's botched attempt to privatise one of the highest loss-making entities – the Pakistan International Airlines – PML-N President Nawaz Sharif has added a new twist to the story by revealing that his daughter, Chief Minister of Punjab Maryam Nawaz, consulted him about acquiring the national flag carrier. He said they were considering this acquisition either to revive PIA or establish a new airline named 'Air Punjab'. On Thursday last, the much-anticipated

privatisation of PIA stalled as the sole bid was around Rs75 billion lower than the government's expectations. The Blue World City consortium submitted its bid of Rs10 billion against the minimum price of Rs85.03 billion, fixed by the Privatisation Commission. The government had pre-qualified six groups in June, but only the real estate development company participated in the final bidding process. Due to the huge difference between the expected and actual bids, the commission gave the consortium more time to reconsider its bid. Addressing an event held in his honour in the United States, Nawaz stated that Maryam had discussed the acquisition with him, outlining plans to add newer planes to the fleet and to position it as 'Air Punjab'. It remained unclear whether he intended for the new airline to be a rebranding of PIA as 'Air Punjab' or a completely new venture. He mentioned advising Maryam that she could either acquire PIA or build a new airline from the ground up, potentially offering direct flights to London, Hong Kong, Turkiye, New York, and other international destinations. He indicated that this plan was under consideration, adding that either PIA would be fixed or a new airline would be established. There was no immediate clarification on whether the acquisition would be private or involve the provincial government. However, his comments suggested he was referring to a provincial government acquisition. Nonetheless, it remains bewildering that an entity the federal government failed to manage properly could be effectively run by a provincial government.

Moreover, a more pressing question arises: will the IMF permit a debt-laden institution to change hands between governments? It is pertinent to mention that the K-P government had announced its willingness to acquire PIA just a day earlier. The K-P government officially informed the federal government of its intention to submit a bid for the national flag carrier, proposing an offer that exceeds the highest bid of Rs10 billion from the Blue World Consortium. In a letter to Federal Minister for Privatisation Aleem Khan, Hassan Masood Kunwar, vice chairman of the K-P Board of Investment and Trade (KP-BOIT), expressed their desire to engage in the bidding process for the sale of PIA. Later in the day, a party official clarified that Punjab was considering the acquisition of PIA, not the Sharif family. Nawaz Sharif was on the third leg of his tour of the USA, having left Pakistan on October 25 and spending a few days in the UAE before arriving at his secondary base in London. He is expected to return to London shortly before embarking on a trip to Europe.

Addressing the gathering, Nawaz Sharif criticised those responsible for PIA's decline, specifically blaming the airline's financial and managerial problems on PTI's former aviation minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan. He asserted that PIA was damaged by Sarwar's public accusation that pilots held a fake degree, which he claimed tarnished the airline's image and led to its ban from European airspace. Nawaz criticised Sarwar's assertion as a lie, adding that even if it had any basis in truth, it should not have been made public. Interestingly, the PML-N, under Nawaz Sharif's

leadership, has governed the country more frequently than any other party over the last four decades, coinciding with PIA's decline from a prosperous airline to one facing a crisis. Nawaz Sharif also referred to a doctored audio clip of former chief justice Saqib Nisar, stating that the clip remains accessible online and features Nisar asserting that Nawaz Sharif was to be imprisoned while Imran Khan was to be brought to power. He claimed that Nisar's son was later caught attempting to purchase a ticket from PTI. Reiterating his old grievances, Nawaz lamented that he was disqualified for failing to receive a salary from his son. The audio clip that Nawaz Sharif frequently refers to in his speeches has been established as doctored. However, given that his party was in power in Pakistan, supported by the establishment, he continues to invoke the clip without apparent fear of repercussions. The PML-N president once again likened PTI supporters to sheep and goats for following Imran Khan, stating that the country was now reaping what it has sown. He challenged the people of K-P to ask PTI what they had accomplished for them. "What have they developed in terms of dams, power projects, motorways, public educational institutions, or hospitals?" he questioned. He asserted that the PTI had failed to initiate any significant development, citing the example of the BRT project, which PTI previously derided as the Jangla Bus, only to later adopt a similar model. He wryly noted that PTI's only apparent achievement was vitiating cultural values and the element of mutual respect in society. Nawaz

further contended that it was the constitutional institutions in Pakistan that were causing devastation to the country and its constitution. He urged expatriates to invest in Pakistan, not only with their financial resources but also with their expertise.