

The FIRST POST

March 14, 2009

How Turkish Airlines and its passengers became pawns in the nation's political struggle



After two crashes has Turkey's ruling AKP sacrificed the safety record of the national carrier Turk Hava Yollari for political gain?

By Claire Berlinski

FIRST POSTED MARCH 12, 2009

On the morning of February 25, Turkish Airlines Flight 1951 from Istanbul crashed short of the runway at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, killing nine passengers and crew.

On Wednesday, Dutch authorities released a preliminary report indicating that the crash was caused by mechanical failure, exacerbated by severe pilot error: The aircraft's altimeter - which had malfunctioned twice in the past eight landings - was faulty, and the pilots failed to note this or respond appropriately. It has further been reported that a trainee pilot with less than 25 hours' experience of flying this kind of plane was at the controls.

Spokesmen for Turkish Airlines, or THY (Turk Hava Yollari) as it is known locally, and European aviation experts have been quick to assure the public that the accident was an anomaly. Turkish Airlines' standards of maintenance and training, they insist, are the equal of any major European airline.

Immediately after the accident, European Commission Vice President and Commissioner for Transport Antonio Tajani, who is Italian, declared that Turkish Airlines had always had good safety and security inspection results.

The investigation is not yet complete, and it is premature categorically to assign blame for it. But confident assertions that there is no cause to be concerned about the safety standards at Turkish Airlines are equally premature.

The Islamic AKP has packed the airline with political and religious allies. There have over the last few years been numerous accounts in the Turkish press of serious discontent among Turkish

Airlines' employees with the company's new managerial cadre. Employees have come forward with claims that Turkey's governing AKP, a party associated with political Islam, has packed the airline's management and staff with unqualified political allies and co-religionists.

The AKP came to power in November 2002 and appointed the new THY management in 2003. The most serious charge - made by senior pilots, union officials, technicians and cabin crew, both on and off the record - is that new managerial policies have encouraged lax standards of aircraft maintenance and the hiring of unqualified staff.

Indeed, according to a story published last autumn in Turkish Forum, a serious and respected online publication, the Turkish Pilots' Association had warned the Civil Aviation Authority, and other relevant ministries and international bodies of their concerns.

On the one hand, these reports must be treated with some scepticism: they have appeared in the notoriously partisan Turkish media in the context of a bitter dispute between Turkish Airlines' management and the Turkish Air Workers Union, not to mention in the context of the exceptionally savage and frequently paranoid feuding between the AKP and its secularist rivals. On the other hand, it seems reckless simply to dismiss these claims out-of-hand.

Consider, for example, this interview with two veteran Turkish Airlines' pilots, published in the same Turkish Forum article.

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The pilots, fearing recrimination, asked for anonymity, but the head of the Turkish Air Workers union, Atalay Aycin, the then-president of the Turkish Pilots' Association, Tuna Gurel, and the president of the Turkish Cabin Crew Association, Berna Tanyolac, all went on record to corroborate the pilots' accounts. All emphatically agreed that Turkish Airlines' safety had been compromised.

In the article, the pilots claimed that under the new management, pilots were regularly asked to exceed safe numbers of flying hours. Demands to do so, they claimed, came directly from the new senior executives. They complained as well of personnel shortages: new pilots, they said, had been hired *en masse* but it was debatable whether their training was adequate.

The climate of cronyism and favouritism among the new management, they added, had so demoralised pilots and cabin crews from the old guard that they were "losing their work ethic".

Experienced crew had been forced into retirement, the pilots said, even as the number of aircraft, passengers and destinations was sharply increased; and although many

The claims may be unfounded, but following the Schiphol crash they should not be dismissed



new employees had been hired, their qualifications were allegedly inadequate.

They charged that many of the new cabin crew, for example, were graduates of religious Imam Hatip schools rather than of technical universities - Imam Hatip schools were, the pilots said, classified as 'trade schools' and the Imam Hatip alumni were therefore 'camouflaged' as trade school graduates. This is no trivial claim, if true: the main responsibility of cabin crew is not to serve meals, but to handle in-flight emergencies or evacuations.

Technicians were given maintenance tasks after two or three hours of training

The president of the Turkish Pilots' Association, Tuna Gurel, claimed that 400 experienced workers had been laid off in the previous year, with 355 of them being forced into retirement - even though the Turkish Airlines fleet had expanded by 25 per cent. In all, 1,500 had been laid off since the AKP-appointed management came to power in 2003 .

"If you ask Turkish Airlines management," said Gurel, "they will tell you that they let 1,500 employees go but hired 2,500 more. But when you look at quality, you know that the hiring does not match the firing." He claimed that technicians who should, in principle, have received two years of hands-on experience before assuming authority for maintenance tasks were now given the job after two or three hours of training.

As the head of the labour union, Gurel has reason to dramatise the putative consequences of layoffs. But disturbingly similar claims have surfaced previously in the Turkish press, also sourced to THY employees. For example, *Tempo Dergisi*, a serious news magazine belonging to a major media conglomerate, interviewed a technician who claimed to be responsible for engine maintenance: he admitted that he was not licensed to do this job.

Other maintenance workers complained that when they approached their supervisors with concerns about an aircraft, they were told: "Find a way to get this plane airborne. Stamp the documents."

These workers also claimed that manufacturers' guidelines on the

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replacement of parts were not being followed, that insufficient time and personnel were allocated for ground checks, that maintenance work that should take eight hours was being done in three or four.

In the same article, another source claimed that the number of people officially on staff was misleading: many were in fact on leave or in military service. This employee also complained that new hires were unqualified: "We have to teach them their jobs. Some of them are graduates of foreign universities, but they have no experience of airplanes - and they're above us in rank."

There have been claims that prayers may interfere with pre-flight inspections



He reiterated the claim that cronyism - and ostensible piety - seemed to govern hiring decisions. "During former managerial times we had Christmas parties. Now in that department they're praying with copies of the Koran. The management building now contains significantly more people who are praying, especially on Fridays.

"When they go for the noon prayer, they don't sign themselves out, even though you're supposed to do that even if you go to the bathroom."

Workers sacrificed a camel after getting rid of a troublesome batch of planes

He is not alone in making such claims. In the wake of the crash, a source at Turkish Airlines - someone who has nothing to gain by noting this publicly and, in fact, everything to lose - claimed that airplanes requiring pre-flight inspection go shortchanged if they are on the ground in the mornings at prayer time.

And in December, 2006, it was widely reported that Turkish Airlines workers had sacrificed a camel on an Istanbul airport ramp as a gesture of thanks for having at last got rid of a batch of

troublesome planes.

We do not yet know exactly what caused Flight 1951 to crash, though trade union leader Aycin has no doubts: "This is a work-related accident, work-related murder," he has said.

But the portrait of Turkish Airlines painted in the press is disturbing. Given the nature of Turkish politics and the Turkish media, it is perfectly plausible to imagine that these accounts are slanderous, planted, fictitious and designed to score political points. But also given the nature of Turkish politics, it is plausible to imagine that they are not. Taken together, they suggest that a considerably more aggressive investigation of the airline is warranted before confidently assuring passengers that there is no reason to be alarmed. ■

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<http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/46726,opinion,how-turkish-airlines-became-a-pawn-in-the-nations-power-struggle>