
**THE ROAD TO PARTITION: ELECTORAL POLITICS,
CONSTITUTIONAL NEGOTIATIONS, AND POWER STRUGGLES IN
LATE COLONIAL INDIA (1937-1947)**

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ABSTRACT

The decade between 1937 and 1947 marked the final, decisive phase of British colonial rule in India, culminating in the subcontinent's independence and its simultaneous vivisection along religious lines. This study examines the intertwined trajectories of electoral politics, constitutional negotiations, and intensifying power struggles that transformed the demand for Pakistan from a bargaining counter into an irreversible political reality. The Congress's impressive victory in the 1937 elections and the formation of ministries in eight provinces and the Muslim League's decisive defeat in these elections, followed by its exclusion from power-sharing in Congress-ruled provinces, catalyzed a profound organizational and ideological reorientation under Muhammad Ali Jinnah. By 1940, the League had articulated the Lahore Resolution, reframing Muslim political identity from minority safeguards to the demand for sovereign nationhood. The 1945-46 provincial and central elections, conducted on an expanded but still limited franchise, dramatically validated the League's claim to represent the majority of Indian Muslims, providing empirical legitimacy to the two-nation theory. The research argues that the collapse of the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946 represented the last viable opportunity for a united India. Subsequent communal violence, the Interim Government's paralysis, and the British decision to advance the transfer of power created a momentum toward Partition that proved impossible to arrest. By focusing on the interplay between electoral mandates, constitutional mechanics, and high-political maneuvering, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how democratic experiments under colonial constraints accelerated the subcontinent's division.

KEYWORDS: Muslim League, Cabinet Mission, Pakistan, Partition of India, Elections of 1937.

INTRODUCTION

The Government of India Act 1935 introduced provincial autonomy, expanded the electorate, and created a federal structure. The first major test of this new system came with the provincial elections of 1937. The Indian National Congress emerged as the dominant force, forming governments in eight out of eleven provinces. In contrast, the All-India Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, suffered a humiliating defeat, winning only a small fraction of Muslim-reserved seats. This electoral setback proved catalytic. The Muslim League skillfully rebuilt itself by culminating in the passage of the Lahore Resolution (1940), which demanded autonomous Muslim-majority states, Pakistan. The 1945-46 provincial and central elections became a virtual referendum on the Pakistan demand. The League secured an overwhelming majority of Muslim seats, while Congress dominated general seats. This electoral verdict made the political division of India almost inevitable. The failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946 marked the point of no return. As communal riots spiraled out of control in Bengal, Bihar, and Punjab, the British, exhausted by war and facing imperial decline, accelerated the transfer of power under Lord Mountbatten. The "Road to Partition" remains one of the most contested topics in modern South Asian history. Scholars have debated several key questions: Was Partition inevitable after the 1937 elections? To what extent was it the result of British "divide and rule" policies versus genuine ideological and cultural differences? What role did elite politics versus mass mobilization play?

Recent scholarship has moved beyond high politics to examine grassroots communalism, the role of provincial leaders, the experiences of minorities, gender dimensions, and the long-term social trauma of Partition. This research topic offers a rich canvas to examine how electoral mandates, constitutional designs, and political leadership interacted with identity politics and communal mobilization during a critical historical juncture. It remains highly relevant for understanding not only the origins of modern India and Pakistan but also contemporary issues of federalism, majoritarianism, and religious nationalism in South Asia.

Election of 1937 and Formation of Ministries in Indian States

According to the provisions of the Act of 1835, the provincial election was due in 1937. Almost all the political parties intended to fight the elections. The Muslim leaders either joined Congress or Muslim League to fight in the provincial elections. But it must be

remembered that at that time Muslim League had no separatist or communal tinge. During the elections they worked more for Congress than the Muslim League. The Congress also wholeheartedly fought elections and postponed the decision on office acceptance to the post-election results. Congress fought the elections on the issues of agrarian and national programmes.¹

The political leaders of Indian National Congress Jawahar Lal Nehru and others political leaders toured all over India for election campaign. The election campaign was full of national enthusiasm and almost all sections of the society actively took part. In other words, we can say that the election mania had caught all the people of each section or society or religion. More interestingly, the government servants were also involved in the election campaign of their political leaders.² But the involvement of the government servants was checked by district authorities and disciplinary action were taken against them.³

The nationalist Muslims were supporters as well as candidates of the major parties of Congress and Muslim League. However, most of the Muslim opinion and votes went for national candidates.⁴ After much campaigning and hard work, the elections were held and the result declared. In this election, the Congress won with absolute majority in Madras, Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces, United Provinces and a near majority in Bombay and formed the government accordingly. Muslim League faced very bad defeat in all the provinces except very few seats in Muslim majority provinces. Later on, the Congress ministries were also formed in North-West Frontier Province and Assam. Even in Sindh Congress backed ministry under Allah Baksh was installed. Only in Punjab and Bengal ministries were formed under Sikandar Hayat Khan of the Unionist Party and Fazlul Haq of Kirshak Praja Party respectively.⁵

Fazlul Haq earlier tried to form the government with the support of the Congress as it did not enjoy an absolute majority but having failed to do so he took the support of the Muslim league. He also gave due share to the Muslim League in the Bengal ministry. From this election results, it was clear that the Muslim League had its stronghold nowhere, not even in the Muslim majority provinces.⁶

It must be reminded that till that time Muslim league had no separatist and communal programme. The policies of Muslim league and Mr. Jinnah were national in character and secular in outlook. Mr. Jinnah at Lahore in March 1936 cleared his point by saying, "Whatever I have done, let me assure you there has been no change in me, not the slightest, since the day when I joined the Indian National Congress. It maybe I have been wrong on some occasions, but it is never been done in a partisan spirit. My sole and only object has

been the welfare of my country. I assure you that India's interest will be sacred to me and nothing will make me budge an inch from that position.”⁷

However, the poor election results of 1937 confused Mr. Jinnah and he had to renew his strategy to get the sympathy, at least, of the Muslims. The election results decided that he had no firm footing even among the Muslim masses and the Muslim political parties. Almost all Muslim parties like Jamiatul Ulama-i-Hind formed in 1920 by Deoband Ulama, and Aharar Party founded by ex-Khilafatist in Punjab, supported the Congress and denounced Jinnah as an “out of date politician making fetish of constitutionalism and the League as a ‘coterie of a few Knights, Khan Bahadurs and Nawabs.”⁸

In UP, Congress and Muslim League leaders like Nawab Mohammad Ismail Khan and Chaudhary Khaliquzzaman were having the gentlemen's agreement in the election of 1937 as the League had no firm footing in UP. They were assured by the Congress that both will be given the ministry if Congress assumed the power provided that they would support the Congress candidate where the Muslim League candidate was not in better position. According to the pre-poll agreement, the Muslim League leaders like Nawab Mohammad Ismail Khan and Chaudhary Khaliquzzaman worked hard for both Muslim League and the Congress in the election campaign. However, when the Congress came into power with absolute majority, they rejected the coalition appeal of the Muslim League. Nehru and Congress leftists like Narendra Dev and K.M. Ashraf feared that the coalition with Muslim League would render impossible any radical socio-economic reforms as the League was dominated by upper class and zamindars.⁹

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, on the other hand, was in favour of the coalition government in UP and persuaded other Congress leaders to accept two top rank Muslim League leaders Chaudhary Khaliquzzaman and Nawab Mohammad Ismail Khan. Unfortunately, his advice was not accepted by the Congress High Command. Maulana called it a blunder on the part of the Congress. If Congress had accepted the offer, it might have far-reaching results on the political condition of India.¹⁰

This political U turn of the Congress against the Muslim League provided strength to the Muslim League in diverting its policy into the communal fold. The Muslim League found it a fair chance to mobilize the Muslim community by quoting the selfish and opportunistic policies of the Congress. Undoubtedly, the Congress had firm footing in Muslim community but being denied from the coalition, the Muslim League gained a momentum in the Muslim majority areas. Subsequently, the Muslim League leaders got a fair chance to convert the mentality of Muslim masses and intelligentsia in favour of the Muslim League.

Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah found it a golden opportunity to encash the anti-League policies of the Congress and used the Muslim educational institutions as his platform to mobilize the Muslim masses. In order to get support of the Muslim students and other Muslim intelligentsia, Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah and other Muslim League leaders annually visited Aligarh Muslim University. Their annual visit proved fruitful as most of the students began to consider Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah as their only leader. Aligarh students had full faith in the Muslim League and in the leadership of Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Muslim League due to its day-night efforts became successful in making more popular image in United Provinces. It also began to gain strength in all over India, but it was from UP that the League was reorganized. The Punjab Premier and Unionist leader Sir Sikander Hayat Khan and Bengal Premier the Krishak Praja Party leader Fazlul Haq with their followers also became the members of the Muslim League.¹¹

The Muslim League, by posing the sole representative of the Muslim community of all over India, enquired about the Muslim's suffering and full details about communal riots, murder, loot and plunder of Muslims and their property, Hindi promoting scheme and ban on cow slaughter, etc. in the Congress ruled provinces, particularly in Bihar and UP. The League appointed a committee under the Presidentship of Raja Mohammad Mehendi of Pirpur for such purposes. The committee submitted its report and published in late 1938 and became known as the "Pirpur Report". Another committee was also appointed, and its report was published in 1939 known as the "Sherif Report". These were full of atrocities perpetrated by the Hindus in various parts of the provinces.¹²

The data of atrocities committed on the Muslims seemed to be clearly exaggerated. The doubt about the truth of the report was proved by the fact that the Muslim League had rejected the Congress offer of an enquiry by Chief Justice Maurice Gwyer over the charges of the Muslim League.¹³ The Muslim League declared that the government in Punjab and Bengal were quite peaceful. The Bengal Premier Fazlul Haq described, "In the Congress provinces riots had laid the country wide waste. Muslim life, limb and property have been lost and blood had freely flowed but here in Bengal not one head had been broken and not one drop of blood had been shed. Here I defy anyone to site a single instance where a Hindu officer had been unfairly treated by us."¹⁴

League Propaganda

Throughout the twenty-seven months rule of the Congress in the provinces, Muslim League kept up an intense propaganda. It made countrywide tour against Congress ministry and

mobilized the Muslim masses and particularly the Muslim intelligentsia. For that very purpose, the Muslim League blamed the Congress for its anti-Muslim policies. In 1938, Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah in his Presidential address of the Muslim League said, "The High Command of the Congress is absolutely determined to crush all other communities and cultures in this country and establish Hindu Raj in this country."¹⁵

In addition to the countrywide tour, Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah made the almost annual visit to the Muslim University and made the position of the Muslim League stronger. The AMU students also cherished him and regularly invited to attend the seminars and debates and preside over the functions of the University Union. The speeches of Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah left a deep impression on his listeners.¹⁶

In 1938, Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah delivered a very impressive speech in the Aligarh Muslim University. He addressed the students saying, "....To a very great extent Muslim League has freed the Musalmans from the clutches of the British Government. But now there is another power which claims to be the successor of the British Government, call it by whatever name but it is Hindu and Hindu Government....." He continued, "My appeal is to you come to the platform of the League. If Muslims are united, the settlement will come sooner than you think. You will have established your claim to achieve freedom. After a few months' work the League's name is known to every corner of India, lakhs of people are joining it. Even those who are against us will realize that they are under a serious delusion and their only course is to join the League and make Musalman with one voice." He further said, "I am convinced that you will agree with me that Congress policy is to divide the Muslims among themselves. It is the same old tactics of the British Government. They follow the policy of their masters. Do not fall into their tarp....." While inviting the youths to join the Muslim League, Mr. Jinnah said, "..... I find in front of me the finest recruiting ground. Lacs are ready to serve the platform and flag of the All India Muslim League.... The British Government is always thinking of what the Congress is doing, to be repercussions of the British policy in the Congress camp. But will the British Government think of you? No, because you are not an organized power and established your solidarity. The Muslim League is determined to win freedom but it will be a freedom not only for the strong and the dominant but also for the weak and suppressed."¹⁷

Mr. Jinnah also claimed from the Congress to recognize the League a sole representative body of the Indian Muslims. However, Congress rejected the claim. Chaudhary Khaliquzzaman admits with frankness, "Congress rejection of Jinnah's position was a piece

of good luck for us, for if Congress had accepted the position at the time when the demand was made by the League, I wonder what positive demands we could then have made.”¹⁸

On 3rd September 1939, when World War II started, British Government without consultation of Indian leaders thrown up India into the war. Congress felt humiliation and ultimately all the Congress ministries in the provinces resigned from the office in the protest in early November of 1939 and in pursuance of Section 93 of the Government of India Act 1935, Governors assumed control of the legislative and administrative powers within the provinces. Muslim League observed that day a ‘Day of Deliverance’ as a sign of relief on the resignation of the Congress ministries in the provinces.¹⁹

Pakistan Movement

Actually, the beginning of the World War II changed the entire political scenario of all over India. While Congress had anti-war policy and protesting against exploitation of Indian resources for imperialistic ends and demanded that “India must be declared an independent nation.” The All India Muslim League started its Pakistan Movement during this World War crisis. As its Lahore session held in March 1940, the Muslim League enunciated the theory that the Muslims were not “a minority” but a “nation” and they must have their homeland, their territory and their state (Pakistan). “That is the area in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority, as in north-western and eastern zones of India, should be grouped to constitute independent states in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.”²⁰

In order to fulfill his goal of Pakistan, Mr. Jinnah tried his level best to mobilize the Muslim masses, intellectuals and students in his favour. In this process of mobilizing the Muslim students, Mr. Jinnah provoked them through his speeches in Aligarh. On 10th March 1941, Jinnah addressed the Aligarh students as follows:²¹

“..... In England instead of democracy a few influential sections are ruling. When this system (Democracy) is not successful to a country where only one community is living and there is no doubt of being one community for them, then in India not more but at least very different two communities are living, how this system can be successful. On the contrary promulgation of this system would mean rule of majority over minority community and would enslave the later one. You have accepted this fact that the position of the Muslim is of minority and declared that Muslims are a separate nation and their national position should be accepted. You have told that the Pakistan is only solution of communal problems of India. That means only that where Muslims or Hindus are in majority, they should rule there

independently.....You have said that Pakistan is not a new thing but it existed earlier and still exists and it will remain till resurrection. Of course, it was being seized from us and now we are trying to get it. To get it back is not so easy but we should have to continue our fight with full strength for it.....”

Mr. Jinnah arrived in Aligarh on 1st November 1941 and addressed as follows:²²

“We had realized that there was a great danger to India”, Mr. Jinnah continued “It was in our own interest that we should have a share and power to defend our homes and hearths, and therefore, within the framework of the present constitution we must be ready and willing to cooperate with the British Government with authority and power both at the center and the provinces. The August declaration of the Viceroy recognized that principle, but when that principle came to be translated into action, it was completely frustrated. The terms of the offer were such that no self-respecting party could agree to it. The Muslim League therefore rejected the offer also.” Referring to the independent and sovereign Muslim State, Mr. Jinnah said, “if the British Government, do not make it clear as to what their intentions are, regarding Muslim States and also that they have no design on their sovereignty and independence. It would be very difficult to control Muslim India any more. Some of the Hindu leaders have been suggesting that Pakistan is more a danger to the British Government than to the Hindus and therefore, the only way to fight this danger is to disrupt existing independent Muslim States. So that the Hindus could rule over the whole of India easily, I say that it is foolish.” Referring to Mahatma Gandhi’s statement hinting at civil war, Mr. Jinnah said that if it comes it would come as a result of Congress policy of repression and domination over Muslim India. Mr. Jinnah declared, “Muslim India is demanding only one fourth of India leaving the rest to the Hindus, while the Congress wants to have whole of this vast sub-continent for the Hindus. If, therefore, India is plunged into civil war it would only be on account of the Congress and nobody else.” Mr. Jinnah refuted the allegations of Mr. Munshi in his speech at Lahore that non-Muslims in Pakistan would be treated as untouchables, Mr. Jinnah said, “let me tell Mr. Munshi that untouchability is only known to his philosophy. Pakistan scheme is based on what Islam has taught us. Islam stands for equality of manhood. It stands for justice and fair play, pay generosity to non-Muslims who are like brothers to us and would be the citizens of the state.”

The Muslim intellectuals in support of the Muslim League demanded from the British Government that separate sovereign assemblies of Hindustan and Pakistan be immediately set up, and that they should transfer the power to these Constituent Assemblies, and they also should quit India with bag and baggage, leaving them to come to any agreement about the

formation of any All India Centre. They warned the representatives of the alien rule that any attempt to impose a constitution which was not duly approved by the Muslim League, would be resisted by all means.²³

No doubt the most of the Muslim supporters of Muslim League and its plan of Pakistan knew the fact that whenever the division would be materialized, they would remain in India and in India alone because of the geographical position of Aligarh. Then the question arose why they had supported Jinnah with so much curiosity? As a matter fact, it was clear from the Muslim League demands to the Cabinet Mission Plan for grouping of the provinces, and they did not have in their mind the complete separation of Pakistan from India. The speeches of Mr. Jinnah and his dialogues with the other political leaders and the Viceroy during 1946-1947 also proved this fact. It was also a hard sane fact that the Aligarh intelligentsia was never in favour of partition or complete separation of Pakistan from India.

Muslim intelligentsia and Aligarh students also thought that there would be an independent Pakistan within India with the common centre of India and Pakistan. Even Mr. Jinnah himself was not sure to get the separate Pakistan in his lifetime. Being the power-hungry politician Mr. Jinnah wanted power share in the Indian Government, and he used the term Pakistan as mere a tool. However, the Congress leaders considered Mr. Jinnah as a thorn in the peaceful governance of India after independence. It was really shocking when the national leaders accepted not only the Pakistan but the partition proposal in the last moment.

Interim Government

In the World War II, England became victorious and in India the British Government also celebrated its victory. Meanwhile British Prime Minister Clement Attlee sent a Cabinet Mission to India on March 24, 1946. The Mission was consisting three members of the British Cabinet- Secretary of State Pathic Lawrence, Stafford Cripps and A.V. Alexander. The objective of this mission was to devise a machinery to draw up the constitution of Independent India and make arrangements for Interim Government. Thus, the mission was like a declaration of India's independence.

Mr. Jinnah on 12th May, sent to the Cabinet Mission a memorandum containing Muslim League's minimum demands in which he termed the group of six provinces i. e. Punjab, NWFP, Baluchistan, Sindh, Bengal, and Assam as Pakistan group, which was to be autonomous in all matters except Foreign Affairs, Defense and Communication. Responding to the Jinnah's demands, the Cabinet Mission grouped the provinces into three categories ABC of which B&C were claimed as Pakistan.²⁴

After the full conversation of the Indian leaders and representatives of the different communities, the Cabinet Mission announced its own recommendations on May 16, 1946. The Cabinet Mission said that there shall be a Union of India which was to be empowered to deal with the defense, foreign affairs and communications. The Cabinet Mission recommended an undivided India but assured that the minority's autonomy must somehow be safeguarded within the framework of a united India. It also provided for formation of the constituent assembly on the democratic principle of population. The Constituent assembly had to comprise 389 members out of which 292 members were elected by the Provincial Legislature, 4 members represent Chief Commissioner's Provinces from the British Provinces and 93 members from the Princely States. The representation of the Provincial legislatures was to be break up into 3 sections. Section A- Madras, UP, Central provinces, Bombay, Bihar & Orissa, Section B- Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, Baluchistan and Section C- Assam and Bengal, which meet separately to decide on group constitutions. The Cabinet Mission also decided that there would be a common centre controlling defense, foreign affairs and communications.²⁵

Mr. Jinnah wanted that any agreement either for the formation of Interim Government or partition in the Constituent Assembly should be based on Hindu and Muslim parity. However, his proposal of parity was rejected by the Congress. The rejection of the Hindu-Muslim parity in political agreements by the Congress frustrated the Muslim League and finally it strengthened its demand for Pakistan. Even many Muslim organizations which were considered sister organizations of the Congress also felt malign by the Congress policy. It was this time when Muslim League demanded separate and independent homeland for the Muslims, having no connection with India.

Maulana Mazhar Ali Azhar, Secretary All India Ahrar Committee, said, "Congress has rejected the Congress-Muslim League parity or parity between Hindus and Muslims and has thus torpedoed the hopes of framing on Interim Government or placing the country on the road of freedom. Before the nationalist Muslim groups met the Cabinet Mission, the nationalist formulae containing the Hindu-Muslim parity in the Interim Government as well as in the future Central Government was known to and approved by responsible Congress leaders. But after getting Pakistan rejected by the Cabinet Mission, they have now decided to oppose Hindu-Muslim parity tooth and nail. They thus compelled the all nationalist Muslims to revise their stand in respect of the future constitution of India and thus marred the chances of success of any negotiations."²⁶

Muslim League's idea of parity was the deciding factor that whether India will remain united with one common centre or there will be two independent states of India and Pakistan. But unfortunately, rejection of the idea by Indian National Congress provided further impetus to the separatist movement of the Muslim League. Even then the Muslim intelligentsia was hopeful to negotiate with the political parties. Because they never wanted the complete partition and complete evacuation of their home and hearths. Aligarh Muslims also advocated the idea of parity in the formation of Interim Government and other political agreements. Sir Ziauddin Ahmad, the Vice-Chancellor of AMU suggested that the portfolios for the Interim Government should be grouped together, and one from each group should go to the Muslim League and the other to the Congress and other minorities. He suggested the following panel groups:²⁷

Finance and Planning;

Food and Defense;

Commerce and Supply;

Home and Communications;

Food and Agriculture;

Labour and Education;

Miscellaneous and Health;

Industry and PWD.

About the matter of parity in the formation of the Interim Government Mr. Arthur Moore, former editor of the *Statesman*, expressed his feelings over Congress and said, "The Congress has been thinking too much about its own prestige and too little about India, over and over again it has said it would accept any Indian Government for the sake of freedom. Now it has the chance of not only of freedom but of unity, because the Muslim League, realising that in the atomic age the sovereign state is a dead conception, has wisely dropped its claim for sovereign state and wants a Pakistan within a Federal India."²⁸

Mr. Arthur Moore further said, "the natural ultimate guarantee for a race or a religion, namely to have somewhere a cultural homeland of its own. The Congress should rejoice in this acceptance of federation and offer to serve. They have brilliant men whom the country needs..... Let Mr. Jinnah be asked to form a purely Indian Government and to choose his own colleagues. His first thought will be to get as many Congress men as he can to cooperate with him. Indian rancour is sometimes fierce but rarely deep. Jinnah and Jawaharlal teamed together would soon recognize each other's qualities and bless each other's work. Youth of India are today disappointed. The hungry sheep look and it is high time that they were led."²⁹

Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah wanted to hold the political power and was ready to cooperate the Congress on his own terms. He was a self-styled arrogant who considered him equal to none. He never considered the Congress leaders as good politicians. He denoted Jawahar Lal Nehru as a “literary figure” who should have been an English Professor, not a politician. To Mr. Gandhi, Jinnah said “a cunning fox” “a Hindu revivalist.”³⁰

It was due to his superiority complex Mr. Jinnah was not ready to cooperate on forming the Interim Government under Nehru or any other Congressman. Undoubtedly, he should have been agreed to drop the idea of Pakistan if he had been given the offer of forming the Interim Government. However, the Congressmen were not prepared for that. They were not even ready to get cooperation of Muslim League on equal terms.

The Cabinet Mission had rejected the Pakistan move, but Mr. Jinnah thought it a green signal for grouping of Indian states on the communal basis by the Mission. Following the Cabinet Mission proposal, the elections of Constituent Assembly were held in July 1946, and the following result appeared:³¹

Section A: Madras, Bombay, Orissa, U.P., Bihar, Coorg, Delhi, Ajmer, and Marwar

Congress: 164 seats

Muslim League: 19 seats

Independent: 7 seats

Section B: Punjab, NWFP, Sind, Baluchistan

Congress: 9 seats

Muslim League: 19 seats

Unionist: 3 seats

Independent: 1 seat

Sikh: 4 seats (vacant)

(Sikh seats were vacant due to their anti-Cabinet Mission Movement)

Section C: Bengal, Assam

Congress: 32 seats

Muslim League: 35 seats

Communist: 1 seat

Scheduled Caste Federation: 1 seat

Krishak Praja Party: 1 seat

However, after the election results Mr. Jinnah and Muslim League changed their stand and rejected the plan due to the intransigence of the Congress, on the one hand, and the breach of faith with the Muslims by the British Government on the other.³² The Council of the Muslim

League by rejecting the Cabinet Mission proposal called the Muslim community to join for Direct Action from 16th August 1946 to achieve Pakistan.³³

Whatever Muslim League had given the pretext, but its changed stand was only due to poor results of Muslim League in the elections and no hope in forming the Interim Government. The Congress under Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru decided to form the Interim Government. The Congress could not understand the grave consequences of the Direct Action Plan of the Muslim League. The Congress tried its level best to include Muslim League members in their cabinet. However, they were not ready to surrender the power to Muslim League. Surely, it was not the matter of Pakistan or division of India but the matter of power, which the Congress was not ready to surrender for Mr. Jinnah even at the cost of partition of India.

The day of Direct Action on 16th August 1946 may be marked as the 'Black Day' in the history of united India. It followed a series of communal riots on an unprecedented scale, starting with Calcutta, touching Bombay, spreading Noakhali in east Bengal, Bihar, Garhmukteshwar in UP and Punjab. Murder was the primary objective in the riots, not as often earlier communal outbreaks, demolition of temples or mosques, rape, or attacks on the property of relatively privileged groups belonging to the opposite community. In these communal riots, the loss of the Muslims was much more than the Hindus. This fact was not only hinted by Mr. Wavell but also Sardar Patel.³⁴

Amid of series of communal riots and hatred between the two major communities, the Congress tried its best to reach an agreement with the Muslim League in the formation of the cabinet. After failing to reach on any agreement the Congress formed the cabinet of its own on 2nd September 1946. The following members were included in the cabinet: Jawahar Lal Nehru, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Asaf Ali, C. Rajgopalachari, Sarat Chandra Bose, John Mathai, Baldeo Singh, Shafaat Ahmad Khan, Jagjivan Ram, Ali Zaheer and C.H. Bhabha.³⁵

The Muslim League declared 2nd September 1946 as the day of mourning and Mr. Jinnah advised to display black flags. However, with the mediation of prominent leaders and the Viceroy, Jinnah agreed to nominate five persons to the Interim Government. These were Liaquat Ali Khan, I.I. Chundrigar, Abdur Rab Nishtar, Ghazanfar Ali Khan and Jogindra Nath Mandal. By this agreement, the Muslim League entered the Interim Government, but it was without commitment to join the Constituent Assembly.³⁶

After joining the Muslim League, the portfolio of the Interim Government were as follows:³⁷
Jawahar Lal Nehru: Vice President of Viceroy's Executive Council (de facto Prime Minister),
External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations

Sardar Vallabh Bahi Patel: Home, Information & Broadcasting

Baldeo Singh: Defense

John Mathai: Industries and Supplies

C. Rajgopalachari: Education

C.H. Bhabha: Works, Mines and power

Rajendra Prasad: Food and Agriculture

M. Asaf Ali: Railway

Jagjivan Ram: Labour

Liaquat Ali: Finance

I.I. Chundrigar: Commerce

Abdur Rab Nishtar: Communications

Ghazanfar Ali Khan: Health

Jogindra Nath Mandal: Law

On joining the Interim Government by Muslim League, the Indian Muslims felt relief and congratulated the working committee of the All India Muslim League on their decision. The happiness of the Muslims over joining the government by Muslim League shows the fact that the Muslim as a whole were never in favour of partition of India and creation of Pakistan totally separate from India. Perhaps they were aware that the Muslim League and its agenda was only to advocate for providing proper share to Muslim community within India. They were fully aware that after the partition of India, most of them will remain with India due to its geographical position. They perhaps thought that Pakistan was only a tool to get share in the government by Indian Muslims. Even Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah was not sure of getting Pakistan in his lifetime.

Although the Muslim League joined the government under pressure but his dream of heading the government was never fulfilled. So, except Liaquat Ali Khan Mr. Jinnah nominated all the League nominees the second-rate politician. League members frequently questioned the actions taken by the Congress members and generally refused to attend the informal meetings. After joining the Interim Government, the Muslim League further boosted their demand of Pakistan. It had entered the cabinet with the prime object of preventing the Congress from consolidating its position to the detriment of League's interest. According to Mr. Jinnah the Interim Government was a continuation of civil war by other means.³⁸ Mr. Jinnah further said that Muslim League could not take orders either from Jinnah or from the Congress as long as the policy of the Congress was to torpedo the demand of Pakistan.³⁹

Liaquat Ali said that he was in the Interim Government to get a foot hold to fight for his long-cherished goal of Pakistan.⁴⁰

It also must be added that after the defeat of the Muslim League a communal atmosphere was developed in all over India. Thousands of people were killed, and their property was looted and burnt. Aligarh was also set ablaze on communal frenzy. Chaudhary Khaliquzzaman complained about the dubious and suspicious behavior of the government machinery. By attacking the Congress Chaudhary Khaliquzzaman said that this time the congress minister came into power with more murderous intentions than in 1937.⁴¹

CONCLUSIONS

The road to Partition illustrates how democratic politics in a deeply plural society, without sufficient trust or statesmanship, can lead to territorial division. The events of 1937–1947 show that when two major nationalist movements claim the same territory with incompatible visions of sovereignty and identity, and when the departing empire lacks the power or will to enforce a compromise, separation often becomes the least bad option. From 1937's marginalization to 1947's success, Jinnah brilliantly used the hostage theory, two-nation theory, and constitutional rigidity to achieve Pakistan, despite Muslims being a dispersed minority. The party's commitment to secular, majoritarian democracy clashed with the reality of India's deep religious divisions. Its centralizing tendency pushed the League toward separatism. The British were neither neutral arbiters nor innocent bystanders. Their divide and rule policies, wartime repression (Quit India), and hasty exit in 1947 contributed significantly, but they did not create Partition single-handedly. Mass communal violence in 1946-47 acted as a catalyst. It made Partition look like the only way to stop the killing, though ironically it triggered even larger violence during actual migration. Partition was the product of specific political choices, leadership decisions, electoral outcomes, and timing rather than an unavoidable destiny rooted solely in religion. This period remains highly relevant today for understanding identity politics, federalism, minority rights, and the challenges of nation-building in diverse post-colonial societies.

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