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Feudalism, Factionalism and the Muslim Politics in Punjab during 1937 Elections

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Abstract: Indian Punjab was a Muslim majority province with a feudal dominant political base. The Unionist party was organised by Sir Fazl-i-Husain to incorporate the powerful elite into a single party without communal distinction. The party had the majority of the Muslim landed elite with consistent egoistic rivalries over personal clashes. The other contenders were Indian National Congress, All India Muslim League, Ahrars and Ittehad-i-Millat with communal slogans. The paper aims to analyse the pre-election issue of succession between Fazl and Sikander Hayat Khan, along with the advantages and disadvantages for the Unionists and other stakeholders before elections, with a focus on Muslim politics. Why and how the Unionists were able to retain political dominance and how communal parties failed to form any formidable alliance against them are examined to understand the inherent weaknesses and strengths of all groups.

Evolution of Politics and Feudalism in Punjab

British Punjab was the most prominent province due to its diverse populace and its status as a vast agricultural resource base. The population trends depicted Muslims as the majority, followed by the Hindus and Sikhs as religious minorities. The politics of Punjab was dominated by a powerful landed elite as a dominating social segment with a hold over agricultural lands. The polity of the province was divided into land-owning and non-owning classes after the introduction of the Punjab Land Alienation Act in 1901. The emergence of a powerful landed elite diminished religious boundaries in politics in the shape of the Unionist Party that was founded in 1923. (Hussain 1943) Therefore, the condition of the Punjabi Muslims was not a priority of political stakeholders as every candidate was required to get support from the landed elites. The situation further changed with the introduction of "The Government of India Act 1935" provided no workable majority in the legislature. (Times of India 1946). The reason was the segmentation of the provincial polity into rural-urban classes and the

non-religious political alliance of the traditional elites. Furthermore, slogans for rural development cause and monopoly of the landed class became pre-requisite for any party's success.

Muhamad Ali Jinnah, President All India Muslim League, tried to change the political fabric by voicing for Muslim political rights, but the existing scenario forced him to seek support from urban political organisations like "Ittehad-i-Millat" and "Majlis-i-Ahrar", but this could challenge the Unionist supremacy effectively. Despite monopoly over the sources, lands, and political influence, the Unionist party had a weaker point in shaping their internal conflicts and oppositional behaviours due to their rural egoistic society. Jinnah exploited factionalism to break into the Unionist circles to get political support for his party and agenda.

The landed elite of the time had influence over tenants and peasants in their respective constituencies, which required loyalty from tenants to their feudal lord. Most of the Punjabi landholdings were small tracts of land with small farmers. In the 1930s, only 3.4 million persons were paying land revenue while half of them were paying only Rs.5/- or less per annum. There were

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only 6,277 landlords who were paying huge amounts of taxes per annum. [\(The Report of Land Revenue Committee 1938\)](#). The inheritance of the land system led to a reduction in the land-owning class of small farmers due to multiple divisions of land. With the allocation of lands and large land, owners were able to expand and extract almost half of the produce from their tenants. [\(McDouie 1908\)](#). The landlord was able to exploit the maximum share of the product due to increasing population pressure and space for new tenants. There were no other means of earning for people except cultivation, whose land was shrinking and less available. Obviously, it produced a situation for a landlord to make a profit rather than expand his loot. In West Punjab, the agricultural class was living small villages, and there was specific legal protection of their rights to protect them from landlords. [\(M.L.Darling 1925\)](#).

But the political supremacy was not the result of economic and labour exploitation only. Rather it was caste, clan, and *Biradri* affiliation also exerted strong feelings of loyalty among peasants and landlords. The loyal devotees, on the basis of their clan affiliations, could sacrifice lives for their feudal lords, which provided them with a tool-large force to maintain their hold on peasants. The role and position of the landed elite can be gauged from the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (1919) onwards situation. The election results of 1920, 1923, 1926 and 1930 show that out of 51 seats for Legislative Council, 21 were elected on Muslim seats from majority districts, and all were feudal lords or provincial or divisional allies of the British Raj. Most of them returned to the Council more than twice and some others came back twice. Nawab Choudhry Fazl Ali (Gujrat), Malik Sir Feroz Khan Noon (Shahpur), Nawab Sir Jameel Khan Laghari (Dera Ghazi Khan), Syed Raza Shah Gillani (Multan) got success in all the elections. The rest of the candidates returned to Council thrice or twice except Gujranwala, where the same family member replaced the previous one. [\(Baxter 1973\)](#).

The Unionist Party: Communal Unity and Feudal Politics

In that situation, another key player emerged in politics whose background was not feudal, but he managed feudal lords. Fazl-i-Hussain, whose forefathers served governments during the Sikh

and British periods, further strengthened landed elites in politics. The Government of India Act 1919 shifted limited responsibility to the locals in Legislatures that were unavailable in the past. [\(Hussain 1943\)](#). This Act accelerated the growth of political parties to grab future opportunities and Fazl was harp enough to realise it. He had an idea that, finally, the transfer of responsibility would rest in the hands of rural Muslim landlords. Therefore, he came up with the idea of a united party and contested 1920 elections on landholder seats. The Punjabi Muslim community was given 45.5% membership in the legislative council, which was less than their share of the population. Fazl realised the potential of cooperation between all communities in future politics. He came up with the idea of a new "Rural Party" with the slogan of agricultural reforms on a non-communal basis. Later, it gained support from members of the Agriculturist Council and espoused non-communal pro-rural and anti-urban policies such as peasant rights and against moneylenders, rural dispensaries, primary schools, high schools and colleges, cooperative societies and rural veterinary dispensaries. [\(Raj 1988\)](#).

In 1923, Faz-i-Husain transformed the Rural Party into Punjab National Unionist Party as a multi-communal party predominantly from Punjab's landed rural elite. This was challenged by the "*Punjab Sawaraj Party*", which was a pro-Hindu and urban political party to safeguard urban interests. The Unionist Party remained superior to Khalifatists, Hindus, and Sikhs and won 39 seats out of 71, with the majority of the Muslim reserved seats. It remained in the majority number till 1930, when it was reduced to 36 seats in the house. [\(Ali 1988\)](#). The British government imposed the 1935 Act, and elections were expected in the early months of 1937, which obviously ignited political segmentation a year ago. Fazl-i-Husain remained a member of the Viceroy's Council from 1930 to 1935, and after his return, he tried to strengthen the Unionist political footprint in Punjab. Multi-communal support remained the backbone of the Unionist party, and Fazl wanted to expand it further. In 1936, Fazl held All-India Muslim Conference, which was also attended by Sir Agha Khan. The Conference emphasised on the Indian Muslims to utilise their potential and resolved that "the Conference should make a declaration that the Muslims put India first, being as much their

motherland as of other races who inhabit India" (Hussain 1943).

The power culture in Punjab was not meant for the betterment of the masses rather, such rhetoric could bridge up communal cooperation for political benefit. The previous moves of the Unionist politics witnessed endeavours for non-Muslim support to form a government with the realisation that the Muslims alone could not manage power solely. Fazl-i-Husain, for that time, tried to secure an agreement with Congress before the elections. After the conclusion of the Muslim Conference, Fazl opened talks with the Indian National Congress which failed to bring forth tangible outcomes due to their old reputation of Fazl as a pro-Muslim politician. The Hindu press further censured him for his old infringement on Hindu rights and labelled his moves farcical (Tribune 1936). One of the newspapers declared that "Muslim leaders propose to administer the cup of poison with sweet mantras of unity" (Daily Herald 1936).

Fazl's Non-Communalism and the Muslim Politics

Fazl-i-Husain's slogan of communal unity had many critiques within Muslim ranks as well. They were of the view that the party should have positive communal traits along with its agrarian outlook to retain the support of the rural Muslim masses. The critiques proposed the formation of the *Zamindara* Party to contest upcoming elections (Noon 1936). On the other side, Fazl was adamant about retaining the non-communal party, which had a majority following from all communities and was essential to forming a government in the province. All-India Muslim League also wanted to bring Fazl into the communal fold for elections for good reasons. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, President of AIML, grasped the lack of urban support for the Unionist party and its support base in rural areas. Though it could not challenge League in urban Punjab, the rural landed elite's political hold was a hindrance to the expansion of the League in the province. He tried to persuade Fazl's support for communal political affiliation by inviting him to preside over the annual session of AIML in 1936. Jinnah realises the usefulness and domination of the Unionist party and its ability to win elections due to its previous election records. He said, "I fear

that there is a caucus that is likely to be effective because it depends on pocket boroughs. of this caucus, the spearhead is the Unionist party" (Tribune 1936). Jinnah wrote an emotionally flattering letter to Fazl for an invitation in which he branded him a "man of calibre and experience" whose presence was a pre-requisite for the betterment of the community. He tried to realise Fazl that his participation would be a "service to the community" while his refusal would tantamount to "greatest misfortune and a terrible disappointment to me personally" (Ahmad, Jinnah to Mian Fazl-i-Hussain (January 5 1936) 1976).

Fazl rejected the idea of joining hands with the League and wrote a public letter to explain the reasons behind his refusal. Fazl argued that such political marriage between League and the Unionists would be "impractical" as League was the communal body. Moreover, the provincial autonomy granted by the 1935 Act required "decentralisation", and any attempt to form a communal alliance would be an effort to "centralise elections". The population graphs varied from province to province. Therefore, uniform formula to contest the election was not suitable. In Punjab, the Muslim majority was nominal, and it was impossible to attain a majority via separate elections, and that was ill-suited to conduct elections with Muslim communal agency. Fazl condemned Jinnah's initiatives with words that "each province should not be sacrificed for the sake of an All-India leader's aspirations" (Civil and Military Gazette 1936).

Fazl-i-Husain realised that Jinnah would damage the interests of the Unionist Party in Punjab and other non-communal bodies in the other provinces. Therefore, he supported the growth of non-communal bodies in other provinces and provided financial assistance up to Rs.20000/- to encourage the promotion of these organisations (Baxter 1973) s. His efforts to promote non-communalism through economic and political support in some provinces, such as U.P, benefitted Jinnah's stance indirectly (Fazl-i-Hussain 1936). At that stage, Fazl considered Jinnah as his opponent, and he expressed to Agha Khan that the Unionist party was deep-rooted in Punjab while Jinnah tried to exploit its potential, which was refused by every member of the party. Moreover, Sind and North-West Frontier Province were following the footsteps of Punjab while

Bengal and U.P were more inclined towards Jinnah's manifesto.³¹Faz-i-Husain believed that his ambition to form prototypes of Unionist parties was in process in NWFP. And Sind, and even in Bengal, there was emerging support for his stance_(Khan 1936). But the demise of Faz-i-Husain thwarted any further attempts on this issue.

The Muslim politics in provinces were against the dreams of Fazl as it was pre-dominated by personal rivalries, egoistic feuds, and self-interests coupled with non-cooperation with other non-Muslim organisations. The provincial Muslim leaders, such as Fazlul Haq, and Nawab of Chattari, were more inclined to maintain their personal position in politics than non-communalism. Sir Abdullah Haroon in Sind tried to organise Sind United Party on Unionist lines, but his efforts were thwarted by Abdul Majid Sindhi's Azad party and the Muslim Political party of Ghulam Hussain_(Hussain 1943). In Punjab, Faz-i-Husain's successor Sir Sikandar Hayat retained his approach to supporting non-communalism and opposed Jinnah's Muslim-only politics_(Low 1968). This stance created hurdles in the way for Jinnah to take advantage of previous Sikandar-Fazl differences in the pre-election period. Jinnah's initiative to form Parliamentary Board failed to crack Unionist Muslims but their factionalism threatened the party's unity since its inception.

Feudal Factionalism and Pre-Election Politics

Punjab's politics were dominated by three rival groups; Sir Sikander Hayat Khan of Wah, Sir Feroz Khan Noon from the Noon-Tiwana family of Sargodha, and Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana of Mailsi, Multan, aligned with Sir Shahab ud Din of Sialkot due to matrimonial relationship. Daultanas supported Unionist unity in opposition to Noons due to their rivalry. Sikander considered Feroz Khan Noon as his major opponent in politics (Ahmad, *Diary and Notes of Mian Fazl-i-Husain 1977*). The British trusted "loyalist Unionist Block" to maintain their majority in the legislature without knowing the existence of such grouping within Unionist ranks. They wanted the same non-communal alliance to rule over strategically important Punjab in the post-1937 elections period to safeguard their interests_(Khurshid 2014). To strengthen, Fazl, Firoz and Sikander were offered

lucrative jobs outside of Punjab. Sikander did not want to join as Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, but his domestic financial liabilities forced him to join an Rs.5500 salary job_(India, *Report of the Institute of Current Affairs 1943*).

But that non-political role for Sikander was resisted by his hardcore supporters from landed elites such as Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana, Nawab Muzaffar Khan and Mir Maqbol were averse to losing control over the Unionist party headship. The situation became more likely when FAZl fell severely ill by end of 1935 and withdrew from political life. At that moment, Sikander did not want to challenge Fazl's supremacy in the pre-election phase, but Nawab Muzaffar chased Fazl's doctor Col. Harper to inquire expected life of the patient. Though Sikander rejected his involvement in the matter and assured his loyalty, that proved pretended afterwards_(S. H. *Fazl-i-Husain 1936*). Sikander negotiated with some non-Muslim future stakeholders to pose his image as the next leader of the party which raised doubts in the mind of Fazl. It was also reported that Sikander was willing to take non-Muslim "friends" into the cabinet after the elections_(*Tribune 1936*). The rumour was denied by Sikander in front of Fazl, who again assured his support to the latter. Fazl issued a statement to portray that it was proposed by Hindu and Sikh leaders to be part of the cabinet after elections, and "the nature of the new reforms and condition of the existing atmosphere was such that the experience and knowledge and the political gifts of the leader of the Unionists, Mian Fazl-i-Husain, should be utilised.,,"_(*Tribune 1936*).

But time proved that it was just lip service from Sikander and he kept negotiating with Narendra Nath over the possibility of a political alliance with them. Though Fazl protested over this association by claiming his right to hold such talks, Sikander refused to leave and reopened talks over the formation of a new political party in Punjab to procure various strategies to check the communal activities of the Muslim politicians. 46, these talks challenged Fazl's supremacy over Unionists and his position as a final decision-maker. But Sikander again denied any pretension of political alliance and reassured his loyalty to Fazl and the party. The meeting was declared a social contact to enhance communal cooperation without any political agenda. Ahmad Yar Khan issued the statement to the press to soften the situation_(*Civil and Military Gazette 1936*). In fact,

Sikander did not want open confrontation at that stage which could generate

a split in the Unionist Muslims. The such clash could also endanger prospects for the future formation of the Unionist ministry in the province and his expected premiership in the province. On May 13 1936, Sikander endeavoured to assure Fazl-i-Hussain that he had no intentions to form either a new party or plans to form any faction inside the party which could split the Muslims and others_(S. H. Fazl-i-Husain 1936).

But the assurance from Sikander proved temporary respite for Fazl-i-Hussain as he kept on realising himself in the party circles about his expected position as heir apparent. Sikander further manoeuvred by a self-perceived statement from Fazl that his return to provincial politics was needed at that time due to his health issues of Fazl, and he left his lucrative assignment to organise the Unionists. 50 while when Fazl came to know that statement, he openly refuted it in strong words "I have never claimed to be in the exalted position of the leader who has any wonderful claim to the allegiance of all those associated with his work"_(S. H. Fazl-i-Husain 1936). Fazl did not want any situation which could compromise his position in the political circles with the misperception that Fazl might have surrendered in favour of Sikander at any point. But in May 1936, there was strongly worded communication between both over releasing it for the press, which required Fazl's approval. Indeed, this was a subtle message to Fazl for acceptance of Sinakder's position and his ambitions; otherwise, things could go worse in the shape lesser political role for Fazl in the party. Fazl realised the escalating bitterness and the increasing influence of Sikander as an inevitable situation which could possibly deteriorate the Unionist political with increased communal tensions and failed to work of reforms. Finally, he came up with his offer to resign from his position on May 15 1936, in favour of Sikander_(Khurshid 2014).

Sikander realised the negative impact on his image in the party politics because the founder of the party was getting forcible retirement, and it could shatter the solidarity of the party as well. Therefore, he again retreated and denied any intention to lead the Unionist party or to return to Punjab for politics. He also assured his continued support to the party and its cause on all terms. 54 but again, Sikander returned to Punjab in June 1936 and held a meeting with Narendra Nath and

pretended to Fazl that its purpose was to bag 30 to 35 supporters for the party through social negotiations and there was nothing for his political benefits_(Daily Herald 1936). The obvious purpose behind these moves was to get benefit from the absence of Feroz Khan Noon, who was in London and assumed party leadership after Fazl's imminent death. The same happened in the coming weeks as Fazl got seriously ill on June 20 and passed away on July 9 1936_(Hussain 1943).

The path to the supreme leader of the Unionists was open for Sikander now, while his major contender Feroz was also absent from India. The other challenge was acceptability among all circles as there were Muslim leadership and powerful Sikh and Hindu elite in the party_(Baxter 1973). He tackled the Muslim elites by using ties of marital alliances and blood, *Birudris*, and was able to win Sardar Barkat Hayat Khan, Nawab Muzaffar Khan, Nawab Liaqat Hayat Khan, Sheikh Sadiq Hussain, Mir Maqbool Ahmad, Murid Hussain Mian Muhammad Shah Nawaz, and Begum Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz. Ahmad Yar Daultana and his family were his major supporters in his quest for power_(M.L.Darling 1925). In non-Muslim communities, Sikander enjoyed a good image as a more workable and less communal person whose influence could lead them effectively. His social contacts with all communities were an open secret for everyone, and he was a more popular figure among them (Eastern Times 1936). For the British, anyone with reasonable support from all segments was suitable for the premiership of the province, and Sikander was the right person for this task. It was the governor's prerogative to invite the majority support holder to assume ministry and benches in the assembly. Undoubtedly, Sikander enjoyed British support due to his loyalist stance and entrusted position in the past. He was invited to officiate the governor's office during the illness of Sir Geoffrey de Montmorency in 1932, and again in 1935, he was entitled the same in the absence of Sir Herbert Emerson_(Tribune 1936).

The issue of succession retained the status quo in the politics of the Unionist party without generating any visible faction inside the party. The electoral victory of the Unionists in the elections of 1937 was due to the absence of any serious contender in the province.

The Muslim Political Challengers of the Unionist Party

The challengers, All India Muslim League, Majlis-i-Ahrar, and Ittehad-i-Millat, had urban support based, which was limited and confined (Truth 1936). The League failed to gain the Unionist support due to its hardliner approach to communalism. Even it could not muster a long-term (Civil and Military Gazette 1936) alliance with Ittehad-i-Millat due to a lack of sectarian stance. Before elections, Jinnah stated his intention to form an alliance with non-communal bodies after elections triggered resistance from Ittehad-i-Millat, who wanted a more exclusive approach to sectarian and communal politics. Moreover, Jinnah's mediation over the Shaheed Ganj Mosque issue also disappointed them as they wanted the use of violence and force to settle the issue. These developments alienated Ittehad-i-Millat, and they decided to refrain from an alliance with League to contest elections independently.

League and Ahrars formed a short-lived necessity-based political alliance without genuine intention to cooperate in future. The Ahrars were facing a financial crisis due to a lack of funds in 1936, and the League could provide them assistance to get away from it (Civil and Military Gazette). On the other side League needed allies in Punjab for the formation of a formidable political entity to counter the Unionists. Ahrars wanted the exclusion of the Ahmadis from Muslim politics and the incorporation of Anti-Ahmadi propaganda in the League's campaign, which was accepted in a subtle way as a future strategy and paved the way for an alliance between both. 76 The Ahrars had their vested agenda in that alliance to exploit the weaknesses of the League and dominate the political scene by putting their own candidates in almost every constituency. The situation was exacerbated, and the provincial League decided to appoint a sub-committee to counter this move with 4 Leaguers and 2 Ahrars as members (Civil and Military Gazette 1936). The role of this committee was to recommend candidates for issuance of tickets, propaganda material, and directions for contributory funds. Major disagreement appeared over funds for the parliamentary board, where the League wanted Rs.500 per candidate while the Ahrars insisted on payment of Rs. 100 as a donation to the offices

(Civil and Military Gazette 1936). It was the League's strategy to prevent the domination of Ahrars and to limit their political influence in terms of membership and issuance of tickets. The outcome was obvious as the Ahrars left the alliance with League on August 30 1936, and formed their independent election board (Civil and Military Gazette 1936).

All three Muslim parties were urban in their following, with a lesser number of landed elites in their circles. Ahrars had a following of urban religious people with anti-Ahmadi slogans and no penchant for reconciliation with other groups. Ittehad-i-Millat was another prototype of Ahrars obsession with getting Shaheed Ganj Mosque to the Muslims. The League was the only potential challenge for the Unionists, who had limited say in rural feudal societies and almost broke with the urban religious parties in the recent past (Hussain 1943). Jinnah's efforts to get Unionist support in his effort to strengthen League in the province also met with failure as Fazl always remained stuck to his non-communal stance. Moreover, the local newspapers, Eastern Times and Inqilab, criticised Jinnah and the League for their pursuit of communal alliances in the province, which could possibly, hamper communal relations in the province. But the other reason behind this criticism was elite control over the resources of the province. Obviously, the elite control over the government could create problems for their publication.⁸⁹ the only support given to the League was from *Ehsan* and *Nairang*, whose circulation was limited, but they criticised the landed aristocracy politics in Punjab (Nairang 1936).

The rural-urban Muslim population division also shows the then political trends which dominated the voting behaviour of the masses. Islam in danger or Muslim rights slogan had less appeal for the already Muslim-dominated province. The majority of the Muslim population resided in rural areas where the landed class was predominantly influential, with no other contestants. Punjab's total Muslim eligible electorates were 1336311 and out of these 86% voted in the rural Muslim constituencies (India, Result Showing of the Elections in India 1937). There were only two elites, Raja Ghazanfer and Zaman Mehdi, who supported the League, while the rest of the constituencies were close to the League as it failed to make an alliance with the

Unionists, while its provincial leadership failed to impress the public with communal slogans. 96 on the other side, Indian National Congress dominated the urban political scene with no particular political opposition to the Unionists as they did not want to

alienate their urban following. Nehru visited Punjab in 1936, but his focus remained neutral

without any appeal to the Muslim masses or any conflict with the Unionist agenda in the province (Zamindar 1936).

The Unionist party, despite their rivalries, emerged as dominating political stakeholder with little or no formidable resistance from the Muslim political organisations. The party overcame the personal issues of its members and attracted the non-Muslims equally with its election manifesto (Civil and Military Gazette 1936). The election process showed more personal combats between candidates than political agenda, but the published list revealed dominant figures whose victory was clear even much before polling day. The Unionist election manifesto was another advantage for it. All three major political parties issued similar election manifestos with promises of restructuring the society and economy, education, and abolition of the *zamindari* system to limit the power and influence of feudal lords. Surprisingly, the Unionist party's support was based on the landed aristocracy, which was aiming to abolish itself after the elections (Ali 1988). Therefore, the political manoeuvring proved fruitful for the Unionists

during the elections and led to their victory and majority in the upcoming elections.

Conclusion

The Unionist political monopoly was based on landed elite who exercised hold over more than 70% of the Muslim electorate of the province. Their collaboration was not without factional tussles due to their historic egoistic clashes with other landholders across the province. Fazl tried to bring the power elite into a single non-communal political party which proved a political success. The last years of Fazl's life witnessed two contenders for succession, Sikander Hayat Khan and Feroz Khan Noon. Sikander was more ambitious than others and initiated activities in expectation of the next leader nominated after Fazl. On one side, he assured Fazl of loyalty and commitment, while on the other side, he constantly built pressure for future nominations. Though this cold tussle did not damage the Unionist party's influence and hold over politics yet it created some situations. League tried to make alliances with Ahrars and Ittehad-i-Millat, which failed due to inherent disagreement over core issues. Congress did not want to disrupt the political scene at that time which could prove counter-productive for it. The absence of a strong alliance favoured the Unionist party in the 1937 elections, where it was able to win the majority of Muslim seats under its banner.

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