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## From Commissionerate to Governor Province, the Role of Muslim League and Congress in the Political Reform Movement of NWFP in British India

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**Abstract:** This article explains the role of the Muslim League and Congress in the struggle of the frontier people for the introduction of reforms in NWFP. The time span of the study i-e the era discussed in the article is mainly from 1901, when the Commissioner Province of NWFP was established, to 1931 when it was granted the status of Governor Province. The article discusses the general outlook of the province, the attitude of colonial masters, the political awakening of the people, the struggle of the Muslim League and Congress in demanding introduction of reforms for the province and finally the proceedings of the Round Table Conferences. The conclusion of the article is that the British agreed to the introduction of reforms because the Indian Political leaders and masses were unanimous in their demand for reforms in NWFP.

### Introduction

Lying between the Hindukush Mountains and the Indus River is the so called no man's land, the North West Frontier Province. After the defeat of the Sikhs in the second Anglo-Sikh war of 1848-49, the Frontier came under British rule. However it was annexed formally with the treaty of Gandumuk in 1879 after the second Anglo Afghan war (Banerjee, 2000).

Throughout colonial times, this region was divided by a double boundary. One was administrative and divided the tribal belt from the settled districts while the other was a political one and divided Pushtuns along the Durand Line (Baha, 1978).

The Frontier marked the limit of the British Crown, on the other side was the Russian border (Khan, nd) The Suspicions built between the Czarist and the British Empire over their respective territorial expansion led to the prolonged shadow boxing of the Great Game. The

fears of Russian ambitions enhanced the importance of controlling the Pathans as the vital "Gate Keepers of the Indian Empire" which was the jewel in the Crown of the British Empire.

From the British annexation of Punjab in 1849 until 1901, the five districts of Hazara, Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan remained within the Punjab Province, which held control over the adjoining border tracts. The province was one of the most backward and financial weak among all the regions of British India. The subsidy from the government was nearly double the revenue that it produced. As 40% of the population belonged to the tribal areas and were exempt from taxes, the burden of revenue fell on the Settled Districts specifically Mardan and Peshawar. Because of this weak fiscal condition and the expenditure spent on the security of the region, much less was left to be spent on social facilities and public goods like education, sanitation and health (Banerjee, 2000).

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This worst condition, which was further exasperated by the attitude of the British Indian government towards the Frontier, led to political resentment among the Pushtun Intelligence and members of the elite class. They thus began their struggle for reform of the political situation of the province.

### **The attitude of Colonial masters and Political Situation in NWFP**

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Lord Curzon, when became Viceroy in Jan 1899, observed the worse situation in NWFP. This was, he believed because of the Punjabi officials and because of the fact that NWFP was administered by some foreign officials as an appendage of Punjab. These officials had neither the will nor the capacity to run the administration of the province properly (Baha, 1978). This issue with the region, according to the Viceroy could be solved only with the formation of a new province. Curzon's Policy was that of a more extensive official engagement in Frontier affairs and enhancement of security in the region.

For these security purposes, the region had to be governed differently than the other parts of British India. According to him, the "trans-Indus region had to be brought under more prompt, more imperative and more direct control and authority of the government of India through the removal of the intervening barrier of the elaborate Organisation of the Punjab Government" (Baha, 1978).

The Viceroy therefore, separated the five settled districts from Punjab and together with the five political agencies formed the North West Frontier Province headed by a Chief Commissioner, directly responsible to the Viceroy. It was formally inaugurated on 26 April 1902 in a grand festive Darbar held in Peshawar.

This change was made with the clear goal of making it simpler to customize policies and strategies to the unique conditions of the Frontier. Such customized policies did not take long to emerge. The Frontiers Crimes Regulations were first introduced, and they made provisions for the eradication of crime in the settled districts. Authorities to demolish properties used by anti-state elements were provided to the police. The related Tranquillity Act also established extensive guidelines and terminology on seditious activity,

severely restricting the ability to assemble. To provide a more mobile military presence, additional steps were agreed in 1904, including greater spending on roads and railroads as well as the permanent stationing of the elite Guides Cavalry at Mardan specifically for the security of the region (Banarjee, 2000). The Law and order agencies were more repressive here than anywhere else and the Frontier was ruled more "colonially" than the rest of British India.

Furthermore, the political system in the Frontier was very different from that of the other Indian provinces. Instead of the more Indianized Indian Civil Service, key officials serving in the NWFP were hired from the pretty much entirely British-manned Indian Political Service. Only 17 of the province's 124 administrative officers were Indian as of 1947. Additionally, Indian Political Service employees were directly under the Viceroy's supervision, placing them in a position similar to those of employees in sensitive positions like those in Aden and Kabul or conducting quasi-diplomatic and consular representation to the Princely States (Banarjee, 2000). This demonstrated once more that the regime continued to view the Frontier as a peripheral region, more of a fortress for the defense of British India rather than a core administrative unit.

More importantly, the colonial authorities purposefully slowed down the growth of democracy in the Frontier out of worry for the region's instability and the possibility for unrest given the difficult conditions there. The Minto Morely Reforms were not implemented in the NWFP.

The Government of India Act of 1919 duly implemented the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms, which were first suggested in 1918 and called for the introduction of a fundamentally democratic system of elections throughout India. But in the NWFP, such a manifestation of popular opinion was deemed undesirable, hence the measures were not implemented. The Simon Commission on constitutional reform reaffirmed the NWFP's unsuitability for democratic institutions that were accepted elsewhere in India even in 1929. The Frontier remained a chief commissioner province while many other regions enjoyed the status of governor province with far more civil and political rights for the people.

Sir George Roos-Keppel, then Chief Commissioner of the Frontier, was against consultation with any sort of public body because in his opinion the politics in the Frontier region was connected to the situation in Afghanistan, and the people were influenced from both Central Asia and Persia. Therefore any kind of political adventure in this region would have far-reaching consequences for the Raj (Baha, 1978). So the region should be handled specially and not like Bengal or other provinces where political reforms were to be granted. The Govt. Thus decided to keep the issue aside for a while and let the reforms experiment in other parts before.

### **Political Consciousness in the Frontier:**

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Though the British Indian Government tried to keep this Province away from the Political mobilization of the rest of India, it was not totally immune to the influence coming from the nationalist agitation in other parts of India.

The first major ignition came from the Khilafat Movement, its offshoot Hijrat Movement and the Non-Cooperation Movement. The Khilafat Movement launched in Central India spread to the whole subcontinent. Muslims in the frontier participated in this agitation as well and Sympathized with the Khilafat cause of their Turk Brethren. March 19, 1920, a Khilafat Hartal was observed in Mansehra Town and Peshawar City.

Clerics of local mosques in the Frontier led the people to protests and advised them to boycott British goods. A Sarhad Khilafat Committee was founded and the members took part in the Non Cooperation Movement launched alongside the Khilafat Movement. Boycott of British goods and hartals resulted in British atrocities and members of Khilafat Committee were tortured imprisoned.

The Khilafat Movement led to another one, the Hijrat Movement was launched as a continuation of the Khilafat Movement. India was dubbed as Dar ul Harb and seeking refuge in Dar ul Islam was termed a religious obligation. Scholars like Molana Abdul Kalam Azad and Maulana Abdul Bari issued fatwas (including some forceful fataws) in this regard. Amir Amanullah Khan offered Asylum to intending Muhajirins and in April 1920, the Society for the Assistance of Emigrants had been formed at Delhi. Hijrat Committees were formed on May 14 and the first

batch of the Muhajirin arrived in Peshawar in May 1920. However, the Muhajirin surge could not be handled by the weak economic position of Afghanistan. As they increased in number, the Amir had to take tough measures and he announced that no more Muhajirin be allowed to enter the kingdom from then on. The decision was announced on 13 August 1920.

Although the Khilafat and the Hijrat Movements ended in utter failure, they aroused the people of the province. It was the first time that the Frontier people gathered together for a common cause and participated in political affairs. This agitation gave them a sense of political consciousness.

Apart from these, individual reformers were also struggling to mobilize the pushtuns. Among them, the most prominent is Bacha Khan. He was first an educationist and a social reformer but after a while worked for the Political Mobilisation of the pushtuns as well. Abdul Ghaffar Khan arranged a protest meeting against the Rowlett Bill at Utmanzai which was attended by more than 50,000 people (Shah, 2015). Also, he migrated to Afghanistan during the Hijrat Movement. To the awareness among Pushtuns, Bacha Khan decided that he would launch a journal and in May 1922, the first issue of the monthly Pukhtun came out. In November 1929, with Bacha Khan as its leader, the Khudai Khidmatgars was formed.

### **Struggle for Reforms**

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#### **Muslim League**

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The educated people of the Frontier were disturbed by this situation of the province. They genuinely wanted the region to prosper as the other provinces did when they were allowed to be administered by their own people and not entirely by British officials. These educated minded people wanted the same for their province as well.

The Hindus opposed the introduction of such reforms in NWFP because it would have left them at the mercy of a Muslim Majority assembly. They wanted to re-amalgamate the province with Punjab whose Non-Muslim population would protect them from a brute Muslim majority. Lala Lajpat Rai, invited by the Arya Samajists of NWFP in Oct 1905, spoke against the division of Punjab in his speech in the Peshawar Arya Samaj School. Malik Feroze Khan Noon, from the Punjab Legislative

Assembly, moved a resolution against the re-amalgamation of the Frontier and the matter gradually went into oblivion.

The British Indian Govt. While responding to the demands of the educated people from the Frontier, appointed an Enquiry Committee under Sir Dennys Bray in April 1922. The Committee had three Muslim and three European members and it submitted its report in Oct 1922. The Report recommended a legislative council for the province which however was discarded by the same committee in 1925.

The Frontier Muslims approached their Coreligionists for support and All India Muslim League agreed to help.

One thing should be cleared here as to the position of AIML in NWFP. Aysha Jalal in her book, Jinnah, The sole Spokesperson asserts that Muslim League was nowhere to be a prominent party in NWFP, especially before the 1936 elections. Jalal is of the opinion that whatever agenda was done against the Congress backed Red Shirts, it was done not by Jinnah or his league but by Cunningham as the governor himself confessed in his letters to Linlithgow (Jalal, [2010](#)). The Muslim League still raised the matter of reforms at the Centre. In its 15th session which was arranged at Lahore on May 24, 1924, resolutions were passed demanding due share for NWFP in the reforms scheme. The same demands were reiterated in its Bombay Session on December, 30-31, 1924.

Representing the Muslims of the Frontier in the Central Legislative Assembly, Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qaiyum presented his case before the House. He warned the Govt. that if the people were not allowed to administer their province in their own fashion, it will lead to protests, agitation and demonstrations against the Govt. as usually happen when people are frustrated with their political situation. Sahibzada requested the members of the House by saying that if they are asking for further reforms for themselves without the Pushtuns being given the chance to have the kind of reforms implemented in NWFP which were already in operation in other provinces, he will not support them in their demand as it was utterly hypocritical on their part.

On Feb 16, 1926, the AIML Council moved a resolution in which it demanded that the reforms

which were currently in operation in the rest of India be extended to NWFP. Again Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qaiyum made an elaborate speech in which he conveyed: "Have we not fought more than once against the Afghans themselves? Who defended the borders of India in 1919?...I have submitted to all your laws including the Indian Penal Code.... Why do you not apply another act to our province, which is called the Government of India Act?"(Shah, [2017](#)).

The Sarhad, a fortnightly newspaper from Peshawar repeated Sahibzada's arguments.

On the second day of the debate, Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan, KB Ghulam Bari, Abdul Haye and Sir Darcy Lindsay supported the resolution (Shah, [2017](#)).

Jinnah while strongly supporting the resolution made a question to those who opposed it whether they were really asking for the attainment of freedom for India. Despite opposition from some communalist Hindus the resolution was carried on the third day.

The government was however still not willing to concede reforms to such a volatile and such important region. The Muslim League in its annual session on Dec 23-31, 1926 urged the government to follow the recommendations of the previous Majority Report of the Bray Committee.

On November 27, 1927, the Indian Statutory Commission was announced to be formed.

The Simon Commission arrived at Peshawar on November 17, 1928. In the hope to influence the decision of the Commission regarding the extension of reforms to the Frontier region, Sardar Aurangzeb Khan asked for reforms and favoured separate representation to the minority. He made an appeal to the grave situation in NWFP while there were liberal institutions on both sides of the Frontier, in the Punjab and Afghanistan. The AIML repeated its demand in the annual session of 1928.

The Simon Commission recommended that reforms were needed in the province a provision be made for such reform, and a Council be made which would be composed of elected and nominated members. The powers of the Council however should be limited in view of the special nature of the Frontier. The Report claimed that "the inherent right of man to smoke cigarette must

necessarily be curtailed if he lives in a powder magazine"(Shah, [2017](#)).

The Muslim intelligentsia criticized the demands as being inadequate. Yamin Khan, a central Assembly member from UP, condemned the recommendations and demanded for the same reforms as in the rest of India. Sahibzada Abdul Qaiyum was exasperated. Commenting on the powder magazine phrase, he said: "these reforms are like lighted matches and will set the NWFP on fire if extended to that province? Perhaps the Government has got some experience of these reforms in the rest of India where they have proved to be lighted matches" (Shah, 1978).

The discussions and debates continued on and by now other elements also started to take a keen interest in the reforms scheme for NWFP. Congress, until now cool towards the affairs of NWFP also became active.

Jinnah, as the leader of AIML and the "sole spokesperson" of Indian Muslims, demanded, on several occasions, the extension of reforms to NWFP. Jinnah supported the resolution moved by Sayed Murtaza Bahadur in the Council and favoured the Report of the Bray Committee. He demanded for reforms in NWFP in his successive speeches of 1926, 1928, 1929, 1930 and 1931. He asserted that it was not logical to stop reforms on the basis of the volatile nature of the Frontier as the situation was worse in another English colony, Canada, where full reforms were being granted. As regards the Hindu Opposition to reforms Jinnah called on Diwan Bahadur T.Rangachariar and said "well I ask, what is your answer to two millions of people who say we do not want to go to Punjab, why must you force them?" Jinnah presided over a session in which the Delhi Proposals were made in 1927. The proposal made the point that Muslims would withdraw their demand of a separate electorate provided the Congress agreed to some demands. One of them was the extension of reforms to NWFP. The same demand make up one point among the 14 Points of Jinnah (Sayeed, [1969](#)).

### **Congress and the Red Shirts**

Here in this discussion, I'll use the terms Congress and Red Shirts in the same meaning as the Red Shirts were politically affiliated with the Indian National Congress. The position of Congress was

very much strong in NWFP and the Red Shirts was the only major party in the province. The group under Bacha Khan worked continuously for reforms; both social and political. Congress leaders from throughout India also supported them in their demand for equal reforms in par with the rest of India.

The resolution presented to Punjab Assembly by AIML Council was supported by Bipin Chandra Pal, an influential Hindu leader from Calcutta. Pal feared that as long as the Frontier remained unsettled, there can be no question of stability and peace in the rest of India. Therefore, for the peace of all the Indians, the Pushtuns be granted the due reforms they deserve. Pundit Jawahr Lal Nehru also supported the demand for reforms and stated that NWFP was part of British India and cannot be excluded from any political reform scheme (Shah, [2017](#)).

In 1928, MotiLal Nehru, a veteran Congress leader presented his famous Nehru Report in the All Parties Conference. The Report included the demand for reforms in NWFP.

Bacha Khan was busy awakening the pushtun nation and reforming the society by eradicating social evils. For this purpose he formed the anjuman e islah e afghana in 1921 and then the Zalmu Jerga in 1929, a sort of youth league on the line of other youth leagues like the Young Turks and Young Afghans.

In November 1929, the Khudai Khidmatgars was formed for the illiterate masses. The organization, besides working for the uplift of the Pushtun society, also worked for the attainment of full Independence for India. The Pushtun nationalists belonging to Khudai Khidmatgars strongly criticized the Special Regulations imposed in NWFP and they demanded that NWFP be given the status of Governor Province like its neighbouring Punjab.

In December 1929, Abdul Ghaffar Khan with other influential red shirts participated in the annual session of Congress held at the bank of Ravi. They met with Congress leaders and informed them of the poor political condition of Frontier and asked for their help. The Congress High command promised their support and assured them that it'll send an enquiry Committee to the Frontier Province.

When Congress launched its civil disobedience movement in 1930, the local congressmen in the Frontier carried out demonstrations, protests and strikes. The Govt. adopted a harsh attitude toward protestors. The Congress Enquiry Committee was not allowed to enter the province and when the Congressmen were carrying out a demonstration against the Raj, they were indiscriminately fired at on April 23, 1930, in Qissa Khwani Bazar of Peshawar killing 200 people on spot. Again the area of Takkar in Mardan was attacked and 70 Khudai Khidmatgars were killed on 24 August 1930. The KK members were beaten, jailed and their property was looted. The Khudai Khidmatgars and other affiliated bodies were banned and Martial Law was imposed by the Government (Shah, 2015).

Later under the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931, members of KK were released. Bacha Khan was asked to formally announce his allegiance to Congress which he did in August 1931 officially amalgamating Khudai Khidmatgars with Congress.

Bacha Khan and his friends and followers were staunch supporters of Political reforms in the province. They saw no reason as to why this region was denied its due share of reforms. These nationalists saw their neighbouring province of Punjab which was a full fledged Governor Province and felt aggrieved at their own situation. Some officials among the British administration were also supporting the introduction of reforms including Emerson, H.B Howell, and the then deputy Commissioner of Peshawar. They pleaded for the introduction of reforms and in their opinion, the major cause of the unrest of 1930 was the Government's reluctance in granting reforms to the Frontier. They believed that the urban class felt the dire need for reforms and were frustrated at the political situation of the province. This also explained why Khudai Khidmatgars had strong support bases in the urban areas of Peshawar and Mardan. The withholding of reforms was exacerbating the grievances of the nationalists of the Frontier Province. Emerson in this regard held a meeting with Bacha Khan on August 29, 1931. Khan said that he was intent on his demands and if the people were granted what they wanted in the Round Table Conferences, his movement would no longer be needed to continue.

## **Round Table Conferences and NWFP**

Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, announced the Round Table Conferences' (RTC) upcoming meeting in London in response to the country of India's widespread call for additional democratic changes. The first conference in the series took place between November 12, 1930, and January 19, 1931. The second conference took place between September 7, 1931, and December 1, 1931. The third conference took place between November 17, 1932, and December 24, 1932. On November 12, 1930, the first session's discussions commenced. The Congress abstained from it and refused to send any of its representatives to London. The only person representing the NWFP was Qaiyum. The conference's discussions lasted for several days. Several Sub-Committees were established on December 16, 1930, to look into the Federation, Provincial Constitution, minorities and the NWFP affairs.

A Sub Committee was appointed to look into the affairs of the NWFP. The Sub-Committee presented its report on Jan 1 1931 that unanimously supported the idea of bringing political reforms to NWFP. The Committee recommendation included the grant of Governor Province status to the Frontier Province. The Committee proposed that a Legislative Council be established with both elected and nominated members. Some British legal experts favoured the Committee's proposals for political reforms. They were of the opinion that it would be far more dangerous for the empire to be faced with discontent from the Frontier at times of crises than granting some reforms.

Another Committee was established for the same purpose called the Haig Committee which reverberated the proposals of the above-mentioned sub-committee.

The Congress however rejected the first RTC altogether. When, under the Gandhi Irwin Pact of March 1931 Congressmen were released, the civil disobedience was called off, Gandhi agreed to participate in the second RTC. Gandhi repeated the demands of the Frontier people for full autonomy in the second RTC session.

On December 1, 1931, Ramsay MacDonald stated that the NWFP will be elevated to the status of a governor's province, similar to other governor's provinces in British India, satiating the unanimity of the NWFP's numerous

constituencies. Sir Ralph Griffith, who had been the NWFP's Chief Commissioner at the time, was appointed the Frontier Province's first governor under the new arrangements on April 18, 1932. Lord Willingdon, the Viceroy of India, inaugurated the NWFP legislative council on the same day. A total of 40 people made up the council: 28 were elected and 12 were nominated. There would be 22 Muslims, 5 Hindus, and 1 Sikh among them. The nominees included five Europeans, 1 Muslim, 1 Sikh official, 4 non-official Muslims and 1 Sikh non-official. The Council had no authority over the tribal areas which continued to remain under Governor's control.

### **Conclusion**

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Thus even when the British Govt. felt reluctant in

opening up political procedures of NWFP to the general public, the long untiring struggle of the people of Frontier finally bore fruits. It was possible because of the unity of the masses and the leaders in demanding their due right of reforms. The Frontier was united and all leaders from all political parties or affiliations resonated with one and the same voice. From the nationalist Khudai Khidmatgars to the loyalist khans, all resounding the same note. The Muslim League and the loyalist khans raised their voices in the legislative council, and the KK opted for extra-constitutional means, through protests and demonstrations. Together these efforts compelled the Raj to consider granting political reforms in North West Frontier Province.

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