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3. Debates on the issue of office acceptance by Indian National Congress after 1937 elections

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Abstract

The Indian National Congress's decision to accept office after the 1937 elections sparked intense debates within the party and among the Indian political elite. This article examines the various perspectives and arguments put forth by key figures and factions within the Congress, as well as the reactions of other political parties and the British colonial administration. The debates revolved around the strategic implications of assuming office, the potential for advancing the cause of Indian independence, and the risks of compromising the Congress's principles and unity. The article analyzes the political and ideological factors that shaped these debates and assesses their impact on the subsequent course of India's freedom struggle. By exploring the diverse viewpoints and the ultimate decision to accept office, this study sheds light on the complex dynamics of the Indian National Congress and the challenges it faced in navigating the political landscape of late colonial India.

Key Words: *Indian National Congress, Office acceptance, Indian independence, Colonial India, Political debates*

1. Introduction

Provincial elections were held in British India in the winter of 1936-37 as mandated by the Government of India Act 1935. Elections were held in eleven provinces – Madras, Central Provinces, Bihar, Orissa, United Provinces, Bombay Presidency, Assam, NWFP, Bengal, Punjab and Sindh. The 1937 election was the first in which large masses of Indians were eligible to participate. An estimated 30.1 million persons, including 4.25 million women, had acquired the right to vote (14% of the total population), and 15.5 million of these, including 917,000 women, actually did exercise their franchise. The results were in favour of the Indian National Congress. Of the total of 1,585 seats, it won 707 (44.6%). Among the 864 seats assigned “general” constituencies, it contested 739 and won 617. Of the 125 non-general constituencies contested by Congress, 59 were reserved for Muslims and in those the www.theresearchers.asia

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Congress won 25 seats, 15 of them in the entirely-Muslim North-West Frontier Province. The All-India Muslim League won 106 seats (6.7% of the total), placing it as second-ranking party. The election results were a blow to the League. The Muslim League fared badly even in provinces predominantly inhabited by Muslims.¹

The Constitution had yielded only partial power to the Indians. This power too, moreover, could be taken away from the Indians whenever the British so desired. The British government did not want to discard the constitution which it had framed after so much labour and on which it prided itself so much. It perhaps thought that Congressmen would not be able to resist the lure of office for long and if it succeeded in getting ministries formed of persons willing to work the constitution, it would be cause split in the Congress ranks and wean away some weak men from the party. The Congress was now required to function both as a Government in the provinces and as the opposition to the centre where the effective state power lay. It was to bring about social reforms through the legislature and administration in the provinces and at the same time carry on the struggle for independence and prepare the people for the next phase of mass struggle. Linlithgow wrote in 1936, 'our best hope of avoiding a direct clash is in the potency of Provincial Autonomy to destroy the effectiveness of Congress as an all- India instrument of revolution.'² Whether the Congress should accept the office was the issue to be engaged with. But now the elections were over and results out so the matter needed to be resolved. The Congress had already raised objections to the Governor's special powers. The provinces were to be governed under a new system based on provincial autonomy. The elected ministers controlled all provincial departments but the Governors, appointed by the British Government retained special powers. They could veto legislative and administrative measures, especially those concerning minorities, the right of civil servants, law and order and British business interests. The Governor also had power to take over and indefinitely run the administration of a province. Thus, both political and economic powers remained in the British hands. That the acceptance of the office was conditional was already been made clear by the resolution adopted by the AICC. However, the Congress remained firm in its stand and did not succumb to the temptations of office as the British had visualized. On Gandhiji's advice the AICC subsequently, in March 1937, took a decision that it would not assume responsibility unless the Governors had given assurances to the effect that they would not exercise those special powers. The leaders of the Congress legislators, therefore, insisted on such assurances to which the Governors refused, on the ground that they had no

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authority for nullifying the constitution in that manner. The issue of formation of the Congress ministries, consequently, remained in abeyance and the stalemate continued.³

The All India Congress Committee in its meeting at Delhi on 17 and 18 March 1937 came to the following decision, "The all India Congress Committee authorizes and permits the acceptance of office in Provinces where the Congress commands a majority in the Legislature provided the minister ships shall not be accepted unless the leader of the Congress party in the legislature is satisfied and is able to state publicly that the Governor will not use his special powers of interference or set aside the advice of ministers in regard to constitutional activities." The Government had, however, no intentions of discarding the constitution on which, it prided itself so much. The governors subsequently proceeded, in the six provinces where the Congress was in absolute majority, to form interim ministries that could have functioned for a maximum period of six months without going to the legislatures. The government thought and hoped that they might be able to cause split in the Congress ranks and wean away some weak men.⁴

Nehru himself was strongly opposed to the acceptance of office and wished to concentrate the energies of the Congress upon agitation for economic revolution and political independence outside the constitutional field. He regarded the acceptance of office as the antithesis of non-co-operation and did not believe in the idea of destroying the Constitution from within. But many of the Congress leaders, such as Gandhi, Rajagopalachari (Madras), Rajendra Prasad (Bihar), Morarji Desai and Vallabh Bhai Patel (Bombay), Govind Ballabh Pant (United Provinces), did not by any means take so extreme a view. At the Working Committee meeting at Wardha in the Central Provinces, a resolution was passed which said that the Congress adhered to its basic policy of non-co-operation with British Imperialism, except so far as the circumstances might require a variation; and declared that deadlocks should not be avoided when they occurred while pursuing Congress policy.⁵

Nehru praised Linlithgo for his being softer in tone and prima facie conciliatory in approach in Viceroy's speech of June 24, 1937 regarding political deadlock. During the earlier three months there had been a marked change in these utterances. The Secretary of State for India, Lord Zetland had adopted a pompous attitude some time back and his subordinates in India faithfully reflected that attitude. This was criticized by Congress. The objective and policy of the National Congress was clearly laid down. They aimed at the independence of India and for a Constitution that was to be framed by a Constituent Assembly elected by adult franchise. Nehru declared that Congress aimed, in

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other words, at the capture of power by the Indian people as a whole. Only then they will be in a position to face India's appalling poverty and unemployment, the terribly low standard of living of people. For this purpose, great changes in the social structure was necessary and a vast planned system affecting our agriculture and industry and social services. In Nehru's opinion a reactionary Constitution had been imposed upon by the British imperialism, which meant to protect and perpetuate all the tremendous vested interests of the British imperialist and feudal past that had exploited and impoverished Indian people. The provincial autonomy provided by the 1935 Act was "a strange and ugly beast" which may function just as British Imperialism had functioned in India.⁶

It was made clear in each that a Congress Ministry could expect full support and sympathy from the Governor in carrying out its policy but, although time was given for reflection, office was in each case declined in the absence of an assurance which it was constitutionally impossible to give. It said that this result was deliberately planned by Gandhi or his associates. The report explained that a loose formula was intentionally adopted at Delhi in order to avoid awkward questions and to get delegates away without a split. Thus by elaborating it into a demand for an assurance from the Governors, Gandhi, always an expert opportunist, had managed to manoeuvre himself into his favourite position where, without definitely committing himself to the views of either wing of Congress, he could himself appear to be in the right in the eyes of his follower. The wrath of his hoodwinked and disappointed followers of the right wing was diverted against Government and the minority ministries; the left wing was satisfied; and all sections of his followers were obliged to look to him to find a way out the impasse into which he has led them.⁷

During the political deadlock puppet ministers were appointed who did not have the support of even fifteen or twenty per cent of the legislature, and in some cases ministers were not even members of the legislature, who were defeated in the elections. And for fear of being kicked out by an overwhelming majority of that legislature, the legislature was not being summoned. In Europe this was called the fascist way of doing things but in India the British Government dubbed it as democracy. These puppet ministers, with the Governor at their back and the high officials of the civil service to put courage into them, carried on the old tradition of repression and suppressing civil liberties. Nehru cited some remarkable instances of "democracy" and "provincial autonomy" in India under the new dispensation. In Madras province a summer school of socialistically-inclined young men and women, carrying on its work peacefully and quietly inside a house, was declared illegal by the government of

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the puppet ministers. Newspapers were being penalised and their securities forfeited for criticising the ministers. Leading Congressmen were externed or interned from particular places. Arrests were made for speeches are frequent, sometimes for speeches delivered two years ago or during the last election. In the United Provinces, a planned campaign to prevent Congress work had come to light.⁸

Congress had evidences that secret meetings were being held at which the puppet ministers and high officials of the civil service were planning against Congress. The U.P. Provincial Congress Committee had drawn attention to one such planned campaign of repression as a flagrant example of the working of what is called provincial autonomy. There was an extensive jute strike near Calcutta in which twenty thousand workers were involved (The Calcutta jute mill workers were on strike since February, 1937 for securing their elementary right to form a union and for the redress of their legitimate grievances). The police and the military were used against them and firing took place. The strike was ultimately called off on certain assurances from the ministers. Those assurances remained unfulfilled. A strike in the Bengal Nagpur Railway continued from 13 December 1936 to 10 February, 1937 due to the demotion of a number of workers. It was well organised and entirely peaceful and all the efforts of the officials of the railway and the government to break it failed. Thereupon promises were made on behalf of the government conceding certain demands and the strike was called off. The subsequent steps taken by the government betrayed them and there was a strong resentment. In Dhubri in Assam, in a match factory owned by the Swedish Match Trust, a strike has been in progress for the last six months and in spite of extreme hardship and starvation the workers was still carried on. In the rural areas the condition of the peasantry was appalling. Over a hundred large factories for manufacturing sugar grew up in the United Provinces and Bihar and vast tracts were given over to sugarcane cultivation. The Peasant, despairing of wheat cultivation owing to the fall in agricultural prices, turned to sugarcane. For a short period they did just slightly better by this change-over, while the factory owners made large profits. The government imposed an excise duty on sugar by certification. The condition of the peasantry in those areas was in an extremely bad shape. This was the real background of the Congress stand. An act which protected and safeguarded imperialism and all other vested interests must have to be denounced by the Congress. A good deal of learned debate was conducted in the press and on the platform both in India and in England on the rights and wrongs of the Congress demand and it was not till the middle of the year that the Viceroy saw the need for allaying the apprehensions of the Congress leaders. In a message dated June 22, 1937, Linlithgow explained that there was no 'foundation for any suggestion that a Governor is free, or is entitled, or

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would have the power, to interfere with the day-to-day administration of a Province outside the limited range of the responsibilities specifically confined to him. Before taking a decision against the advice of his ministers even within that limited range a Governor will spare no pains to make clear to his ministers the reasons Which have weighed with him in thinking both that the decision is one which it is incumbent on him to take, and that it is the right one'. Linlithgow's elucidation of the 'constitutional position satisfied the Congress, whose executive decided on July 7, 1937 that 'Congressmen be permitted to accept office where they may be invited thereto'. At the same time, the Working Committee urged that the assumption of governmental responsibility by the Congress did not in any way affect its predetermined policy of 'combating, the new Act on the one hand and prosecuting a constructive programme on the other'. It is understood Gandhi made no secret of the fact that he had not found in Lord Linlithgow's message the assurance which he had in mind when he inserted the assurance clause in the AICC resolution at Delhi. With the Governor's special powers of interference thus left intact, Gandhi apprehended that frictions were very likely to occur, sooner rather than later, as it would prove difficult to prevent the overlapping of the sphere of the Governor's special powers and the normal field of activities of Ministers. Without committing himself to any definite opinion Gandhi admitted that there was some force in the argument of those who maintained that the Congress should utilize the office of ministers in the six majority Provinces with a view to generating strength in the masses of the country.⁹

The All India Congress Committee, at its meeting held at Delhi on 18th March 1937, passed a resolution affirming the basic Congress policy in regard to the new Constitution and laying down the programme to be followed inside and outside the legislatures. Lord Zetland, Lord Stanley and the Viceroy have made declarations on this issue on behalf of the British Government. The Working Committee carefully considered these declarations and was of the opinion that though they exhibit a desire to make an approach to the Congress demand they fell short of the assurances demanded. Again the Working Committee was unable to subscribe to the Doctrine of Partnership propounded in some of the aforesaid declarations. The Committee therefore came to the conclusion and resolved that Congressmen be permitted to accept office where they may be invited thereto. But it desired to make it clear that office was to be accepted and utilised for the purpose of working in accordance with the lines laid down in the Congress election manifesto and to further in every possible way the Congress policy of combating the new Act on the one hand and of executing the constructive programme on the other.¹⁰

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