

# Referendum in NWFP: A Significant Chapter of Freedom Movement

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## Abstract:

The people of the North West Frontier remained in the forefront of each and every movement launched in the Subcontinent. Although they rallied under the banner of the All India Muslim League in the last leg of the Pakistan Movement, yet they played vital role in the struggle for Pakistan. In these lines, a very significant chapter from the freedom struggle i.e. the holding of referendum in NWFP in July 1947 has been discussed.

## Lord Mountbatten and 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1947 Plan:

Lord Mountbatten<sup>1</sup> arrived at Delhi on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1947 and assumed charge as Viceroy on 24<sup>th</sup>. He was sent to India to work out a system under which he could transfer power to Indians. Giving a pen picture of Mountbatten's personality, the authors of British Raj in India wrote:

"Mountbatten was a highly gifted person. He was a youthful 46, possessed a fine presence, an intelligent mind, the faculty of quick decision, and the resilience to take setbacks in his strides. He was also a hard and methodical worker and kept himself well-informed by incessant discussions with interested parties and his own advisors. At the same time he was inordinately vain and ambitious and had a burning desire to succeed and project himself in the best possible light"<sup>2</sup>

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After preliminary discussions with leaders of All India National Congress and Muslim League, the new Viceroy was able to draft partition scheme with the help of his advisers. After three weeks, the first draft of the partition plan was ready which was discussed in a two-day Governors conference opened on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1947.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning of May 1947, the plan was taken to London by Lord Ismay. It should be noted that V.P Menon was against the Plan and he sketched out his own plan. In the meantime the Viceroy continued discussions and consultations in Simla. The draft plan taken to London was approved by the British cabinet but when it was brought to India and shown to Nehru, he rejected it outright. Consequently, Mountbatten asked Menon to draw a new plan. He himself visited London on 18<sup>th</sup> May along with a new plan and was able to get that approved from the British Government<sup>4</sup>

It is worth mentioning that in the whole process of preparation and alteration of the partition plan, Nehru was constantly consulted but Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was completely ignored.<sup>5</sup> The indifferent attitude of Mountbatten towards Muslim League speaks volumes of his intentions which unfolded in the days to come.

On return to India, Mountbatten convened a meeting of Indian leaders on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1947. The meeting was attended by the All India National Congress leaders Nehru, Patel and Kripalani. From the Muslim League side, Jinnah, Liaqat Ali Khan and Saad Nishtar participated while Baldev Singh represented Sikhs in the meeting...<sup>6</sup> The next Day the Viceroy announced the plan which is known as 3<sup>rd</sup> June Plan. Points of the plan are summarized as follow:

- (a) The Muslim majority areas that would be unwilling to participate in the existing Constituent Assembly would be allowed to convene similar Assembly for them.
- (b) It was decided that in the event of Muslim majority areas' decision to convene a separate Legislative Assembly, then Bengal and Punjab provinces were to be partitioned as per the given mechanism.<sup>7</sup>
- © In order to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of the Punjab and of the Bengal, a Boundary Commission was supposed to be appointed.
- (c) Keeping in view peculiar situation in NWFP and District Sylhet of Eastern Bengal, it was agreed to hold referendum in those areas<sup>8</sup>

### **Abdul Ghafar Khan on Referendum:**

As mentioned above, both the Congress and the Muslim League, while agreeing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June plan, decided that in NWFP a referendum will be held in order to solve the complicated situation in the province. The situation in the province, as described by Chaudry Mohammed Ali, was:

“The situation in the Northwest Frontier province was complicated by the fact that although the province was overwhelmingly Muslim and the bulk of the Muslims now supported the League, there was a Congress Ministry in the Province. And the Congress laid claims to it--- To ascertain the true position; Mountbatten paid a visit to the province.”<sup>9</sup>

The Viceroy Lord Mountbatten was convinced that reference to the inhabitants of the Province was necessary in order to decide the claims of the Muslim league and the Congress. Interestingly the Congress accepted the Plan and thus the holding of referendum

but the Red Shirt leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan refused to accept it. He was of the view that the general elections of 1946 were fought on the issue of Pakistan or India, in which the Pro-Pakistani elements were badly defeated. In the Congress working committee meeting, Ghaffar Khan told the members, as reported in his book, *My Life and Struggle*:

"We Pathans were standing side by side with them in the struggle for the freedom of India and that we have made great sacrifices for the cause. 'But you are deserting us now' I told them, and throwing us to the wolves.' We held an election on the question of India or Pakistan and we won this election with a large majority. Is there any doubt about what Pukhtoons wanted? It was clear to the whole world. That is one reason why we do not want a referendum".<sup>10</sup>

Ghaffar Khan further informed the committee that the Pathans were disappointed and angry with the Congress on its wrong decisions. He suggested that if there was to be a referendum that should be on the question of Pakistan or Pukhtoonistan.<sup>11</sup>

### **The replacement of Governor Caroe:**

The Congress and the Muslim League ignored Ghaffar Khan. They went ahead with the plan and the British government fixed the period between 6th and 17th July 1947 for the referendum. The Red shirts decided to abstain from voting.<sup>12</sup> At this stage the issue of the Frontier Governor Sir Olaf Caroe's controversial role came up to the surface. The Red Shirts saw his hand behind the League's Civil Disobedience, disrupting the Nehru visit and non-cooperative attitude towards the Dr. Khan Ministry. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan dubbed him as "friend of the Muslim League".<sup>13</sup> The Red Shirts, therefore, demanded his removal, on the eve of the referendum. The Viceroy Mountbatten decided to accept the Red Shirts demand for the removal of the Governor. The Viceroy did



so because he wanted to save his face in case the Red Shirts lose the referendum and then they might blame Caroe for enabling the League to win.<sup>14</sup> He wrote to Caroe:

"I am afraid that I have recently been bombarded by representations from your detractors (Whom I need not name) to the effect that there is no hope of peace, nor, of a fair and orderly referendum, in the NWFP so long as you hold the rein of office. I do not have to tell you that I myself have a high opinion of your capacity, integrity and selfless devotion to duty under an immense strain. But I feel that the time has come when I must, for the moment at any rate, replace you as Governor of the NWFP."<sup>15</sup>

In reply to the letter of the Viceroy, Olaf Caroe repudiated all the allegations of his opponents and said that what he did was absolutely important and in the interest of the people. However, he made it clear that if his presence caused, "slightest suspicion about the conduct referendum": he would prefer to leave. He requested the Viceroy to sanction long leave for him, which was duly accepted.<sup>16</sup>

The Daily Time of London, while commenting on the Caroe's role in the NWFP paid tributes to him. The paper termed his long leave as "great surprise" and rejected allegations of the Red Shirts against him. The Paper further wrote:

"----- by voluntarily offering to go on leave during the period that a referendum is being held whether the Frontier Province should Join the Pakistan or Hindustan Constituent Assembly----Sir Olaf vindicates himself and shows that he sets the interests of the Pathans--- to which people he is devoted---above personal consideration. His reputation will be enhanced by this gesture."<sup>17</sup>

Lieutenant- General Sir Rob Lockhart, as the acting Governor of NWFP, replaced Sir Olaf Caroe.<sup>18</sup>

## Campaign:

The Muslim League and the Red Shirts started campaign in their own way. The Red Shirts, besides boycotting the voting, tried to convince people not to vote. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was of the view that in case people of the province voted for Pakistan, then that would be tantamount to the continuation of British domination. Mr. Fazli Rahim of Tangi (Charsadda) said in an interview:

"During the anti-Referendum campaign of the Red shirts, we were in our teen age. The Red shirts held public meetings and urged the people not to vote for Pakistan and urged them to demand for the holding of referendum on the question of Pakistan or Puktoonistan. The poets sang anti-referendum poems. I still remember a verse that was recited one day before the referendum. It was "Saba ba bia pa rai aama kegi votoona Che war nizde Nashe Puktoona. (Tomorrow voting for referendum is going to take place. O! Pukhtoon! Don't participate in it)"<sup>19</sup>

The League started its pro-referendum campaign in favor of Pakistan, Quaid Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah appointed a committee to plan for the campaign. The committee included Pir of Manki, I.I. Chundrigar, Ghazanfar Ali Khan and Sayed Wajid Ali. Muslim League leaders and Muslim students from Ali Garh Muslim University, Islamic College Peshawar and other institutions spread in the length and breadth of the province.<sup>20</sup> The Quaid-e-Azam in his message to the Pathans said:

"Now when Pakistan has been achieved by the grace of Allah and with your sacrifices, wait for two months more and vote for Pakistan in the referendum. If you

win it, as you shall (Insha Allah) you will get rid of Congress Raj and your own Government would be established where you would rule according to your wishes. It is the duty of every Frontier Muslim to vote for Pakistan and establish their own government."<sup>21</sup>

The Government made necessary security arrangements to avert any clash between the rival groups. The acting Governor Mr. Lockhart, Chief Minister Dr. Khan Sahib, and opposition leader Khan Abdul Qayum in a joint appeal to the masses urged them to remain peaceful.<sup>22</sup>

### **Referendum:**

The Referendum Commissioner Brig. J.R Booth announced that two boxes, one red and other green, will be placed in the polling stations. Of these boxes, the green was for the Pro-Pakistan vote and the red box was for the Pro-Hindustan votes.<sup>23</sup>

The Referendum started on 20 July and was completed in ten days. The turn out was 50.11 percent as out of the total 572799 electorate 292118 cast their votes. Of these, 289244 votes were cast in favor of Pakistan and 2874 went to red boxes. Thus of the polled votes Pakistan got 99.02 percent while India got only 0.98 percent.<sup>24</sup> The following table shows district-wise voting turn out:

Constituency	Electorate	Total Votes Cast	Percent Voting	Votes for Pakistan	Percent of Electorate	Percent of Total Votes in 1946+	Percent of Muslim League Votes in 1946+	Percent of Congress/ UH+ Votes in 1946	Votes for India
Muslim Urban	*50,627	35,942	70.99	35,680	70.48	112.28	246.26	505.23	262
Hazara	109,762	83,656	76.22	83,269	75.86	135.38	283.44	1083.39	387
Peshawar	97,088	40,470	41.68	39,902	41.10	56.42	154.34	92.12	568
Mardan	86,777	36,062	41.56	34,852	40.16	54.80	150.48	98.33	1,210
Kohat	52,020	32,323	62.14	32,207	61.91	94.24	231.34	162.17	116
Bannu	51,080	33,282	65.16	33,137	64.87	86.54	188.36	352.33	145
Dera Ismail Khan	45,642	29,461	64.55	29,303	64.20	91.87	235.06	165.17	158
Total	442,369	255,254	57.70	252,670	57.12	84.17	206.48	189.34	2,584
Total Muslim	*492,996	291,196	59.07	288,350	58.49	87.17	209.87	211.46	2,846
Total Minority	79,802	922	1.16	891	1.12	3.75	-	5.92	28
Total	572,798	292,118	50.99	289,244	50.50	81.20	208.76	190.49	2,874
Pakhtun**	301,527	150,731	50.00	148,649	49.30	68.18	172.84	131.57	2,082

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### Credibility of Referendum:

The Red shirts blamed that massive rigging was practiced during the referendum. Khan Abdul Wali Khan alleged that bogus votes were polled in favor of Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> He also cited the example of an old lady who disclosed to Wali Khan that she also polled 52 votes in favor of Pakistan. In an interview Wali Khan challenged the verdict of referendum as:



"Even after massive rigging in the referendum, only 51% of the total registered votes were polled for Pakistan. According to international law the matter of self-determination is decided through 2/3 majority of the total electorate, which did not happen in the Frontier. Similarly besides restricted franchise, the whole tribal area and princely state of Chitral, Dir, Swat and Amb were excluded. Only the British-influenced settled districts were allowed to vote. Keeping in mind the above facts how can the 1947 referendum be accepted as credible?"<sup>27</sup> Asked Wali Khan.

Nevertheless many people have refuted the arguments of the Red shirts regarding the credibility of the Referendum. Rittenberg has analyzed the whole issue and argued that the 51% of the total electorate seems to be deceptive. Because the total number of electorate was taken from the old electorate rolls prepared for the 1946 election. He wrote:

"The 1946 electoral rolls had been adopted without amendment for the referendum, even though they were out of date and included some people who had died or moved out of their constituency. Additionally some voters undoubtedly stayed at home on polling day simply because the Congress had conceded the outcome and they saw no need to vote. Nonetheless, the percentage of the voting was off only 11.20 percent from 1946 and Hindus and Sikhs accounted for over one-third of that decline. The minorities, who formed 13.9 percent of the electorate, could have been expected to boycott the referendum under any circumstances. As it was, a majority of them had fled the province during the turmoil of the preceding eight months and were in no position to vote. Thus the real issue concerns the response of the Muslim electorate, and more specifically the eligible Pakhtun voters."<sup>28</sup>

Wali Khan added that the British who ought to have remained neutral in this referendum, as it suits a just and honest government, openly used police and army to canvass for votes. He alleged that

since the Red-Shirts boycotted the referendum, "the government servants and their henchmen, (the Muslim League) registered thousands of false votes in their names".<sup>29</sup>

Wali Khan also criticized the referendum from some other points of view. While endorsing the allegation of rigging of his father, he pointed out that there was no adult franchise at that time and in the population of 35 lakhs, only 6 lakhs people were registered as voters of whom less than 3 lakhs cast their votes. Similarly he had serious objection to the exclusion of tribal areas and four princely states of Swat Dir, Chitral and Amb on the electoral process.<sup>30</sup> He said,

"We wanted the referendum to be held on third option i.e. the Pathans should have been given a choice to decide for joining in Pukhtoonistan. Our demand was based on logic because in the recent election of 1946, the Pukhtoons had reposed confidence in our party. Had they been given a free choice to vote for Pukhtoonista, they would have certainly voted for it. The referendum was a total fraud. I have given several proofs in my book for the unfair means practiced in it."<sup>31</sup>

The results were a triumph for Muslim League who celebrated the occasion with fervor. In his message of thanks to the Pathans, Quaid-i-Azam said

"I have received thousands of letters and telegrams of congratulations, greetings and good wishes from all over India and from abroad. It is physically, impossible for me to reply each one of those who have sent me their messages and I am very grateful to all of them for their sympathy, good wishes and greetings."<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the Red Shirts repeatedly leveled serious charges against the Referendum, the conducting staff and the Muslim League leadership regarding use of unfair means during the voting.

## Conclusion:

The holding of referendum in NWFP had a very strong legal foundation. The arrangement was provided in the 3<sup>rd</sup> June Plan 1947. The British Government, All India National Congress and All India Muslim League agreed to the plan which was later embodied into the Indian Independence Act 1947, passed by the British parliament. The referendum was necessary because NWFP was a predominantly Muslim majority province where people supported the Muslim League. But the problem was that there was a Congress Ministry in the Province elected as a result of 1946 elections. To overcome the difficulty and ascertain the true position; the concerned parties agreed to go for referendum. The opposition of Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan to the referendum was understandable but then it was too late. He either could not judge the rapidly changing situation or the Congress leadership betrayed him. His revelation of the fact that he registered strong protest with the Congress leadership alleging that "they were deserting and throwing them (Pukhtoons) to the wolves" speaks volumes about Congress' indifference. Similarly the decision of boycotting the referendum has also been criticized by some analysts. According to them, if the Khudai Khidmatgars enjoyed mass support, then they should have participated in the referendum so as to achieve their cherished goal. On contrary, they stayed away thereby clearing way to the League to register landslide victory. The Khudai Khidmatgars blamed the League and the British Government for using unfair means in the referendum. The possibility of rigging in isolated places of the province might not be ruled out but it was not on large scale. As the results were whole-heartedly accepted by stake-holders (The British Government, All India National Congress and All India Muslim League), as such the objection of the Khudai Khidmatgars made no significant difference.

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## END NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas Mountbatten, commonly known as Lord Mountbatten, was a British admiral, statesman and the 1st Earl Mountbatten of Burma. He was the youngest child of Prince Louis of Battenberg and Princess Victoria of Hesse and His royal ancestry can be dated back to the Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom. He was the last Viceroy of India. The main developments of his viceroyalty were: (a) Preparation and approval of the 3<sup>rd</sup> June Plan 1947. (b) Partition of India was recommended in order to satisfy Muslims. (c) The British Parliament passed Indian Independence Act in July 1947 as a result of which India was divided into two dominions India and Pakistan. He became the first Governor-General of Independent India in 1947. Mountbatten was assassinated on 27 August 1979 by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). ([www.the-famous-people.com/profiles/lord-mountbatten-15.php](http://www.the-famous-people.com/profiles/lord-mountbatten-15.php) accessed on 15 July, 2010. Also see Jagdish, op.cit, p. 148)

<sup>2</sup> S.M. Burke, Salim Al-Din Qureshi, *The British Raj in India: A Historical Perspective*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1995, P. 485

<sup>3</sup> Riaz-ul-Haq Badakhsha, *Towards Pakistan*, Book Report, Lahore, 1979, pp. 186-187

<sup>4</sup> S.M. Burke, Salim Al-Din, Qureshi, pp. 499-504

<sup>5</sup> I.H. Qureshi, *The Struggle for Pakistan*, University of Karachi, 1979, P.393

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 506

<sup>7</sup> The mechanism of partitioning the two provinces was as follows:

(i) Each of the Legislative Assemblies of Bengal and Punjab would meet in two parts, one representing the Muslim majority districts and the other rest of the province.

(ii) If any of the two parts of the provincial Assembly decided by a simple majority vote in favour of the partition of the province, division would accordingly take place and each of the [part would join whichever of the two Constituent Assemblies (India or Pakistan) liked. (Razaul Haq, op. p. 189)



- <sup>8</sup> H.V Hudson, *The Great Divide*, Karachi: Oxford University press, 1985, pp. 315-321
- <sup>9</sup> Choudhri Muhammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan*, Research Society of Pakistan, Punjab University, Lahore, 1973, . 130.
- <sup>10</sup> Badshah Khan, *Life and Struggle*, Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi (India), 1969. p. 204.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 205.
- <sup>12</sup> The Daily *Khyber Mail*, Peshawar 6.7.1947.
- <sup>13</sup> Badshah Khan, *Life and Struggle*, op. cit, p. 202.
- <sup>14</sup> IOLR, London, MSS, EUR, F. 203/2, Letters Between Caro and the Viceroy "*Mountbatten to Caroe*, Letter No. 1450, dated 6.6.47. .
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, "Caroe to Mountbatten", dated 13.6.1947.
- <sup>17</sup> The Daily *Times*, London, 19.6.1947.
- <sup>18</sup> Janson, *India, Pakistan Or Pukhtunistan*, Almqvist and Wiksell Stockholm (sewden), 1981., p. 217.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Fazli Rahim of Tangi, Charsadda, 3.9.95.
- <sup>20</sup> Janson, op. cit, p. 217.
- <sup>21</sup> *Khyber Mail*, 4.7.1947.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 6.7.1947.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 4.7.1947.
- <sup>24</sup> Janson, op. cit, p. 222.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Khan Abdul Wali Khan, 12.7.1995.at Wali Bagh District Charsadda
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Alan, Rittenberg, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Pukhtoons*, Colombia Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1988op. cit, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> Wali Khan, Interview op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Farigh Bukhari, *Bacha Khan*, Niya Maktaba, Peshawar, 1957, P.71

<sup>32</sup> Khan Abdul Wali Khan, *Facts Are Sacred*, Juan Publishers, Peshawar, 1987 P.113