



Why Did Congress Ministries Resign in 1939?

Description

In the mid-1930s, India was a nation grappling with its political future, marked by the persistent struggle for self-rule against the backdrop of British imperial governance. The constitutional landscape was defined largely by the Government of India Act of 1935, an attempt by the British to introduce a measure of reforms while retaining ultimate control. This period saw the Indian National Congress, the leading nationalist political party, navigate a complex path between outright non-cooperation and strategic engagement with the British-sponsored political framework.

The decisions made by Congress during this time were crucial, setting the stage for significant political developments and influencing the trajectory of the national movement. One of the most debated and impactful decisions was Congress's participation in the provincial elections of 1937 and the subsequent formation of ministries in several provinces. This experiment in power, though short-lived, provided invaluable experience and exposed the inherent limitations of constitutional reforms under colonial rule. The eventual resignation of these ministries in 1939, triggered by the outbreak of World War II, marked a pivotal moment, re-energizing the demand for complete independence and signaling a renewed phase of confrontation with the British.

The Government of India Act 1935 and Congress's Election Decision

The Government of India Act of 1935 was a significant constitutional reform package introduced by the British Parliament. It aimed to provide a federal structure for India and introduce provincial autonomy. Key provisions included the abolition of dyarchy at the provincial level and its introduction at the center. Provinces were granted greater autonomy to administer transferred subjects, while crucial subjects like defense and foreign affairs remained with the Viceroy. The Act also proposed an All-India Federation comprising British Indian provinces and princely states, though the federation part was never implemented due to opposition from princely states.

The Indian National Congress formally rejected the Act, viewing it as a scheme designed to perpetuate British imperial rule and not leading to genuine self-government. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru

vehemently opposed it, calling it a "charter of slavery." The Act was seen as falling far short of the demand for complete independence, or "Purna Swaraj", which Congress had declared as its goal in 1929.

Despite this strong ideological opposition, a significant debate emerged within Congress regarding participation in the provincial elections scheduled under the Act. There were two main schools of thought. One faction, led by Jawaharlal Nehru and other socialists, advocated for complete non-cooperation. They argued that participation would legitimize a flawed constitution and distract from the ultimate goal of independence. They believed Congress should focus on extra-parliamentary mass movements.

However, another influential group, including Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, and C. Rajagopalachari, put forth a pragmatic argument for contesting the elections. Their reasoning was multifaceted. Firstly, they believed that participation would demonstrate Congress's popular support across the country, proving that it was the true representative of the Indian people, not communal parties. Secondly, by entering the legislatures, Congress could expose the shortcomings and repressive nature of the Act from within. They could highlight the limitations of provincial autonomy and the ultimate control retained by the British. Thirdly, they argued that ministries could use the limited power available to work for the welfare of the masses, implementing reforms in areas like land revenue, civil liberties, and education. This would provide some immediate relief to the people and build confidence in Congress's ability to govern. Lastly, contesting elections would allow Congress to counter communal and reactionary forces that might otherwise gain ground in the legislatures.

After extensive deliberation, including sessions at the Lucknow (1936) and Faizpur (1937) Congress meetings, the Congress leadership decided to contest the elections. The decision was not an acceptance of the Act but a strategic move to "combat the new constitution" and use the legislative platform as another arena for the national struggle. The resolution emphasized that Congress sought not to cooperate with the Act but to use it to strengthen the resolve for independence.

The 1937 Provincial Elections and Their Results

The provincial elections of 1937 were a watershed moment in Indian political history. They were the first major elections held on a broad franchise under the Government of India Act 1935, encompassing eleven provinces of British India. The elections provided an opportunity for various political parties to test their popular support and for the Indian masses to directly participate in choosing their representatives, albeit with limited electoral rights.

Congress mounted an extensive election campaign, reaching out to millions across rural and urban areas. Its manifesto focused on key issues such as complete independence, the release of political prisoners, restoration of civil liberties, reduction of land revenue, provision of cheap credit to peasants, improvement in industrial working conditions, and social welfare measures. The campaign successfully mobilized public opinion around nationalistic ideals and promises of socio-economic justice.

The results of the 1937 elections were a resounding success for the Indian National Congress. Congress emerged as the single largest party, securing an absolute majority in five provinces: Madras, United Provinces (UP), Central Provinces (CP), Bihar, and Orissa. It also became the single largest party, though without an absolute majority, in Bombay and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

In Assam, Congress also secured a significant number of seats. In total, Congress formed ministries in eight out of the eleven provinces: Madras, Bombay, Central Provinces, Bihar, United Provinces, Orissa, NWFP, and Assam (after initial hesitation and coalition formation in some).

The performance of other parties was largely overshadowed. The Muslim League, despite its claims to represent the entire Muslim population, performed poorly. It could not form a ministry in any province and secured only a small percentage of the total Muslim votes, winning 106 out of 482 reserved Muslim seats. This outcome challenged the British narrative that Congress was primarily a Hindu party and that the Muslim League was the sole voice of Indian Muslims. Other regional parties and communal organizations also had limited success.

The election results were significant for several reasons. They demonstrated the immense popular appeal of Congress and its broad national base, cutting across religious, caste, and regional lines. The mandate reaffirmed the Indian people's desire for self-rule and their support for the nationalist movement. It also exposed the weakness of communal politics at the provincial level at that point, as voters largely chose nationalistic programs over sectarian appeals. The elections provided Congress with valuable experience in parliamentary politics and administration, which would prove crucial in the post-independence era.

Formation and Early Work of Congress Ministries

Following the emphatic victory in the 1937 provincial elections, there was a period of initial hesitation before Congress formed ministries. This delay was primarily due to a constitutional deadlock concerning the discretionary powers of the provincial governors. Congress demanded an assurance from the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, that governors would not use their special powers to interfere in the day-to-day administration of the elected ministries or set aside legislative decisions. This point needs attention. Congress was acutely aware of the limitations embedded in the 1935 Act and sought to ensure a reasonable degree of operational autonomy for its elected governments.

The Viceroy initially offered vague assurances. However, after persistent pressure and a period of political stalemate, Lord Linlithgow made a more explicit statement in June 1937, assuring that governors would not "interfere with the legitimate activities of the ministries." While this assurance was not a complete guarantee, it was deemed sufficient by the Congress Working Committee, and subsequently, ministries were formed in July 1937.

The Congress ministries, upon taking office, immediately embarked on a program of reforms aimed at addressing some of the long-standing grievances of the Indian populace and implementing parts of their election manifesto. Their early work primarily focused on reversing repressive colonial policies and establishing a more democratic and welfare-oriented administration within the limited scope allowed by the Act.

One of the most significant immediate steps was the release of political prisoners, including many revolutionaries and freedom fighters who had been incarcerated for years. This action fulfilled a key promise and signaled a departure from the authoritarian British rule. Simultaneously, numerous repressive laws and emergency powers, which had curtailed civil liberties, were repealed. Bans on nationalist organizations, publications, and public meetings were lifted. This restored a degree of freedom of speech, press, and association, which had been systematically suppressed under colonial

governance.

The ministries also initiated steps to reduce the salaries of ministers and high-ranking officials, symbolizing a commitment to austerity and a desire to bridge the gap between the rulers and the ruled. Efforts were also made to promote Khadi and village industries, aiming to provide employment and foster economic self-reliance. Basic education and adult literacy programs were launched, reflecting a commitment to social upliftment. These initial measures, though modest in their scope due to constitutional and financial constraints, demonstrated Congress's intention to govern responsibly and to prioritize the welfare of the Indian people.

Achievements and Limitations of Provincial Congress Rule

The period of Congress rule in the provinces, though lasting only for 28 months, represented a significant chapter in the history of the national movement. The ministries, despite working under severe constitutional constraints, managed to bring about some tangible changes and demonstrate their commitment to the welfare of the masses. However, they also faced considerable limitations, both inherent in the constitutional framework and arising from the complex socio-political realities of India.

Achievements

One of the most significant achievements was in the realm of **civil liberties**. The ministries acted swiftly to undo years of repression. Thousands of political prisoners were released, including many revolutionaries who had been imprisoned for long terms. Restrictions on the press, such as those under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, were largely lifted. Bans on various political organizations, including peasant and worker unions, were removed. This created an atmosphere of greater freedom and participation in political life, directly contrasting with the preceding British authoritarian rule.

In the **agrarian sector**, Congress ministries introduced several important reforms to alleviate the distress of peasants. Tenancy Acts were passed in provinces like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madras, providing greater security of tenure for tenants, reducing rents, and preventing arbitrary evictions. Debt relief legislation was enacted in provinces like Bombay, Central Provinces, and Madras, aiming to protect peasants from usurious moneylenders by setting limits on interest rates and allowing for debt moratoria. These measures, while not revolutionary, provided much-needed relief to a large segment of the rural population.

The ministries also focused on **social reforms and welfare**. Efforts were made to introduce prohibition, particularly in Madras and Bombay, though with mixed success. Significant steps were taken towards Harijan upliftment, including temple entry for Harijans in several provinces. The famous Wardha Scheme of Basic Education, conceptualized by Mahatma Gandhi, was initiated, emphasizing education through vocational training and productive work. Programs for adult literacy and public health were also launched.

In the **industrial sector**, efforts were made to improve working conditions and promote industrial peace. The Bombay Industrial Disputes Act of 1938, for example, made conciliation compulsory in labor disputes. Although this act also contained provisions that were criticized by labor unions for restricting strikes, it represented an attempt by the government to manage industrial relations.

Furthermore, the ministries attempted to streamline administration and make it more responsive. Steps were taken to reduce the salaries of ministers and high-ranking officials as a symbolic gesture. The greater participation of Indians in administration was encouraged.

Limitations

Despite these achievements, the Congress ministries operated under significant **constitutional and financial constraints**. The Government of India Act 1935 retained ultimate power with the British Viceroy and provincial governors, who could override ministerial decisions. Crucial subjects like defense, foreign affairs, currency, and, to a large extent, finance and the police, remained beyond the control of the provincial ministries. This meant that any radical reform requiring substantial financial outlay or fundamental changes to law and order could be stalled or vetoed.

A major limitation was the **incomplete nature of agrarian reform**. While tenancy and debt relief laws were passed, they often did not go far enough. The benefits primarily accrued to statutory tenants and rich peasants, while the vast majority of landless laborers and sub-tenants, who were the most exploited, received little or no relief. The fundamental structure of the zamindari system, a key demand of many peasant movements, remained largely untouched due to the constitutional protection of property rights and strong opposition from landlords. This became a source of discontent among radical peasant groups.

Another complex issue was the **repression of popular movements**. At this stage, one issue becomes clear: while committed to civil liberties, the Congress ministries, as governing bodies, sometimes found themselves in the uncomfortable position of using police force against strikes and peasant agitations. In some instances, labor strikes were suppressed, and peasant protests were met with firm administrative action. This led to internal criticism from the socialist and left-wing factions within Congress, who felt that the ministries were not adequately upholding the rights of workers and peasants.

The ministries also faced growing **communal issues**. The Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, launched a propaganda campaign against Congress rule, accusing it of being "Hindu Raj" and persecuting Muslims. Reports like the Pirpur Report and the Sharif Report were published, detailing alleged atrocities against Muslims, though these claims were largely unsubstantiated or exaggerated. This campaign, while politically motivated, contributed to widening the communal divide and made it difficult for Congress to fully address the fears of minority communities.

Finally, the **short duration** of Congress rule—just 28 months—meant that many reform initiatives could not be fully implemented or allowed to bear fruit. The ministries were essentially an experiment cut short, leaving many of their long-term goals unfulfilled.

The Outbreak of World War II and Ministry Resignations

The political landscape in India was dramatically altered by the outbreak of World War II in Europe in September 1939. Germany's invasion of Poland led Britain and France to declare war on Germany. Without any consultation with Indian political leaders or elected representatives, Viceroy Lord Linlithgow unilaterally declared India a belligerent nation, joining the Allies in the war against Germany.

This declaration immediately sparked widespread indignation across the Indian political spectrum. The Indian National Congress, in particular, viewed it as a gross affront to India's right to self-determination and a clear demonstration of Britain's imperialistic mindset. The Congress leadership argued that a country fighting for its own freedom could not be dragged into an imperialist war without its consent.

The Congress Working Committee met repeatedly to deliberate on the crisis. While condemning Nazism and Fascism, Congress made it clear that a free India could ally itself with democratic powers, but a slave India could not. It demanded a concrete declaration from the British government regarding its war aims, specifically asking for a clear statement that India would be granted complete independence after the war. Furthermore, Congress demanded the immediate establishment of a truly representative national government at the center, capable of commanding the confidence of the legislative assembly, as a precondition for India's participation in the war effort.

The British response to Congress's demands was evasive and ultimately unsatisfactory. Viceroy Linlithgow, while expressing gratitude for India's material support, issued a statement (often referred to as the "August Offer" later, but the sentiment was similar in 1939) that reiterated Britain's commitment to Dominion Status for India after the war. However, he offered no immediate transfer of power or the formation of a national government. The British government maintained that constitutional changes during wartime were impractical and that the diverse interests of various Indian communities prevented any immediate consensus on a new constitutional arrangement. Now this becomes important: the British continued to use the argument of India's internal divisions to justify their unwillingness to part with power.

The British refusal to concede to Congress's demands for a clear declaration of independence and an immediate national government was interpreted by the Congress leadership as proof that the war, for Britain, was not about democracy and self-determination for subject nations, but rather about perpetuating its imperial interests. The nationalist sentiment could not accept the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom abroad while denying it at home.

Consequently, on October 27, 1939, the Congress Working Committee resolved to call upon all Congress ministries to resign from office. The resignations were carried out systematically by early November 1939. This decision was a powerful symbolic gesture, a protest against the unilateral British action and a reaffirmation of the demand for Purna Swaraj. The ministries' resignation marked the end of the brief experiment of constitutional governance by Congress and opened a new phase of the national movement, signaling a return to extra-parliamentary struggle.

The resignations were met with mixed reactions in India. While nationalists generally supported the move, the Muslim League observed December 22, 1939, as a "Day of Deliverance" from Congress rule, further highlighting the deepening communal divide. The resignations created a political vacuum at the provincial level and set the stage for intensified political confrontation between the British and Indian nationalist forces in the years that followed, eventually leading to movements like the Quit India Movement.

UPSC Perspective

The period from the Government of India Act 1935 to the resignation of Congress ministries in 1939 is highly relevant for the UPSC [Civil Services Examination](#), both for Prelims and Mains. Understanding this phase requires a grasp of constitutional history, political strategy, and socio-economic impact.

For the **Prelims examination**, focus should be on factual details:

- **Key Dates:** Remember the year 1935 for the Act, 1937 for provincial elections, and 1939 for the resignations.
- **Provinces with Congress Ministries:** Be able to recall the eight provinces where Congress formed ministries: Madras, Bombay, Central Provinces, Bihar, United Provinces, Orissa, North-West Frontier Province, and Assam. Also, know the three provinces where Congress did not form ministries (Bengal, Punjab, Sindh).
- **Key Personalities:** Lord Linlithgow as the Viceroy during the crucial period of WWII declaration and resignations.
- **Congress Presidents:** Subhash Chandra Bose presided over the Haripura session in 1938 and the Tripuri session in 1939, which were important for internal debates and decisions regarding the ministries.
- **Specific Acts/Schemes:** Mention of tenancy acts (e.g., Bihar Tenancy Act), debt relief acts, and the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education.

For the **Mains examination**, the focus shifts to analytical and critical understanding:

- **Analysis of Congress's Strategy:** Evaluate the nuanced strategy of Congress in contesting elections despite opposing the 1935 Act. Discuss the internal debates, the reasons for participation (exposing the Act's flaws, demonstrating popular support, working for public welfare), and whether this strategy was effective.
- **Evaluation of Ministry Achievements and Failures:** Provide a balanced assessment of the Congress ministries' performance. Analyze their success in areas like civil liberties, agrarian reform, and social welfare, juxtaposed with their limitations due to constitutional constraints, financial issues, incomplete reforms (e.g., landless laborers), and instances of repressing popular movements.
- **Reasons for Resignation:** Explain in detail the immediate trigger (unilateral declaration of India's involvement in WWII), Congress's demands (clear war aims, immediate independence, national government), and the British refusal, leading to the collective resignation as a fundamental assertion of India's right to self-determination.
- **Impact on National Movement:** Discuss how this period influenced the trajectory of the freedom struggle. Analyze its role in demonstrating Congress's governance capabilities, exacerbating communal tensions (Muslim League's "Day of Deliverance"), and setting the stage for future mass movements and constitutional deadlocks.
- **Implications of the Government of India Act 1935:** Analyze how the Act provided limited provincial autonomy while retaining significant central control, highlighting the inherent contradictions and ultimate inadequacy of the reforms in meeting Indian nationalist aspirations.

Common Student Confusion

Many students encounter specific points of confusion when studying this period, often stemming from the complexities of Congress's political strategy and the British constitutional framework.

One common question is why Congress, while opposing the Government of India Act 1935, chose to participate in the provincial elections. The misunderstanding often arises from viewing opposition as synonymous with non-participation. It is important to correct this by explaining that Congress's decision was a strategic move, not an endorsement of the Act. Their participation was intended to:

- Demonstrate their strength and mass support to the British and the world.
 - Expose the limitations and undemocratic nature of the Act from within the legislative framework.
 - Use the limited power available to work for the welfare of the Indian people, thereby strengthening the nationalist movement's credibility.
 - Counter communal forces by presenting a strong nationalistic alternative.
- This was a tactic of combating the Act from within rather than outright cooperation.

There is also often confusion regarding the specific achievements versus the stated limitations of these ministries, especially concerning agrarian reforms and popular movements. Students might oversimplify the achievements or overlook the constraints. To clarify:

- **Achievements:** Congress did pass significant tenancy reforms and debt relief legislation, which provided genuine relief to many farmers. They also made notable progress in civil liberties, education, and social welfare.
- **Limitations:** However, these reforms were often incomplete. For instance, tenancy acts primarily benefited statutory tenants and rich peasants, largely ignoring sub-tenants and landless laborers. The fundamental zamindari system remained largely untouched due to constitutional and political constraints. Moreover, Congress ministries, acting as administrative bodies, sometimes used police force to suppress labor strikes or peasant movements, creating internal contradictions within the nationalist movement and causing disillusionment among some sections. This highlights the inherent difficulty of balancing governance with revolutionary political aims under colonial rule.

The exact sequence of events leading to the resignations in 1939, particularly the role of World War II, is also a common point of misunderstanding. Students might not fully grasp the immediate trigger and the rationale. It is crucial to outline the steps clearly:

1. **Outbreak of WWII:** Britain declared India a belligerent without consulting Indian leaders.
2. **Congress's Demand:** Congress demanded a clear declaration of war aims regarding India's post-war independence and the formation of an immediate national government.
3. **British Refusal:** Viceroy Linlithgow refused these demands, offering only vague promises of Dominion Status after the war and expressing inability to transfer power during wartime.
4. **Resignation:** Congress viewed this refusal as proof of British imperialism and decided to resign as a protest and a reaffirmation of the demand for complete independence. This was not merely a political maneuver but a principled stand against unilateral imposition and for self-determination.

Short Revision Points

- Congress contested 1937 elections to demonstrate popular support and expose the Act, not to cooperate with the Government of India Act 1935.

- Congress won a majority in eight of eleven provinces, forming ministries in six initially (UP, CP, Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Bombay), later adding Assam and NWFP.
- Communal parties, including the Muslim League, were largely rejected in the elections, failing to form ministries.
- Notable Congress Presidents during this period include Subhash Chandra Bose (Haripura 1938, Tripuri 1939).
- Key achievements included repealing emergency powers, releasing political prisoners, enacting tenancy reforms, and providing debtors relief.
- Key limitations included incomplete agrarian reform (often ignoring sub-tenants), financial and constitutional constraints, and sometimes repressing popular movements.
- Ministries resigned in October-November 1939 after Britain declared India a party to World War II without consulting Indian leaders.
- Congress demanded complete independence and a national government, while Viceroy Linlithgow offered only Dominion Status after the War, rejecting immediate transfer of power.

FAQs

1. Why did Congress contest the 1937 provincial elections despite opposing the Government of India Act 1935?

Congress contested strategically to demonstrate its popular support, expose the Act's limitations from within the legislatures, and use limited power to work for public welfare, thereby strengthening the nationalist movement and countering communal forces. It was not an acceptance of the Act but a tactical move to combat it.

2. In which provinces did Congress form ministries after the 1937 elections?

Congress formed ministries in eight provinces: Madras, Bombay, Central Provinces, Bihar, United Provinces, Orissa, North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), and Assam.

3. What were the main reasons for the Congress ministries resigning in 1939?

The main reason was the unilateral declaration by Viceroy Linlithgow that India was a belligerent in World War II without consulting Indian leaders. Congress demanded a clear British statement on India's independence after the war and an immediate national government, which the British refused, leading to the ministries' resignation as a protest against imperial imposition.