

**SIR SAHIBZADA ABDUL QAYYUM'S MINISTRY IN NWFP  
(KPK)  
APRIL – SEPTEMBER 1937**

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**Abstract:**

*The Muslim candidates in NWFP contested election in the name of different local Muslim groups, but in the position of independents. The elected 23 independent Muslim legislators grouped themselves into three parties: Progressive Party headed by Nawab Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Khan, Hazara Democratic Party in which members belonging to Hazarajat were included, Azad Party in which rest of the Muslims and even some non-Muslims were included. These parties allied with each other and formed the NWFP Ministry headed by Nawab Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Khan.*

**Keywords:** Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Khan, NWFP, Congress, Dr. Khan Sahib, Government of India Act 1935.

Since the occupation of the Punjab and the NWFP (now KPK) by the British in 1849 by defeating the Sikh and Muslim armies fighting under the Sikh rule both the provinces were occupied by the British and came to be ruled by the East India Company. After the failure of the War of Independence which the British termed as the Mutiny in 1858 India as a whole became a colony of the British Crown and not of the East India Company, which was disbanded. The whole colonial set up continued to remain same as under the East India Company. The Punjab and the NWFP (now KPK) continued to be jointly administered by the British Colonial Government. The headquarters of these two provinces was Lahore. When the British had established their control especially in the Frontier province, they separated it from the Punjab in 1901. Separate provincial administration was established under the Chief Commissioner with headquarters in Peshawar. As the British were still facing a lot of problems in the Tribal areas especially the borders with Afghanistan, they preferred to keep this province headed by the Chief Commissioner. Under the British administrative pattern a Chief Commissioner's province was not required to establish its provincial assembly. So was the case with the NWFP where there was no provincial Assembly until under the Government of India Act 1935, the province was elevated to the status of a governor's province and separate provincial

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Assembly of the Frontier was created for which the first elections were held in early 1937. Thus, it was very late that the Frontier province came to have its own provincial assembly in 1937. As a result of these first elections no political party was able to win clear cut majority. Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Khan, being an influential political magnate, was able to win support of the majority of the elected members of the provincial assembly and was able to form first NWFP government on 1 April 1937. This government could not last more than six months because of a lot of machinations against it by the Congress. It was as a result of Congress machinations in September 1937 that a vote of no-confidence was passed in the Frontier Assembly and Dr. Khan Sahib's Ministry was installed. In this paper, all the circumstances which brought Sir Abdul Qayyum's Ministry in power, its activities and performance, and the reasons for its ouster and installation of the Congress Ministry will be discussed and analyzed. For this article I have heavily relied on the primary sources because in most of the publications a coloured picture is presented which is based on half-truths or misrepresentations of certain realities. I hope this article will help in clearing a lot of misunderstanding in connection with Sir Abdul Qayyum's Ministry.

### **Frontier Assembly 1937 Elections and the Formation of Ministry**

There were fifty total seats in the NWFP Legislative Assembly. Of these 36 were reserved for the Muslims. From amongst 36 Muslim seats Congress contested 29 seats, but they won only 15 seats. There were nine general seats, eight of which were contested by the Congress and only four won by the Congress. As the All India Muslim League was not well-prepared for the elections of 1937 in the Frontier Assembly, it did not contest any of the seats in the provincial assembly. Therefore, it could not be said that the people of NWFP were not with the Muslim League. The Indian National Congress which was more organized was also not popular amongst the masses. Even the Hindu and Sikh communities were divided. About half of them were with the Congress, while the other half were against it. Thus people at large were not with the Congress. As the Muslim League was not well organized, it could not sponsor any candidate. Rather, keeping in view various groupings within different Muslim sections of the province, it left the matter on the individual influential persons. Therefore, the majority of the Muslims of the NWFP preferred to vote for the independent Muslims. The party-wise position in these elections of 1937 was as follows:

1.	Congress	19
2.	Hindu-Sikh Nationalists	7
3.	Muslim Independent Party	2
4.	Independent Muslims	21
5.	Independent Hindus	1

**Total:** 

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 **50**

These 1937 Frontier Assembly elections show that Congress was able to win only 19 (15 Muslims + 4 non-Muslims) seats. Therefore, it cannot be said that the Congress did win majority support in the house of 50.<sup>1</sup> Of the 14 seats reserved for the non-Muslims the Congress was able to win only 4 seats. Seven elected members were elected from the group of Hindu-Sikh Nationalists who were functioning separate from the Congress. Even one influential Hindu got himself elected as an independent candidate. The other fact which required to be noted in these elections was that out of 36 seats reserved for the Muslims, majority (i.e. 23 members) who got elected did not belong to the Congress. This was because of the fact that majority of the Muslims in the province did not like the Congress activities.<sup>2</sup> Instead they were independents.<sup>3</sup> All these Muslim members supported the candidature of Sir Abdul Qayyum for the Chief Ministership. Four non-Muslims also supported Sir Qayyum. Thus with the support of 27 members Qayyum became Chief Minister of NWFP on 1 April 1937. The political parties who contested these elections were the Congress Party, Hindu-Sikh nationalist Party.<sup>4</sup> By combining together all the Muslim members along with support of some non-Muslim members Sir Abdul Qayyum formed his United Muslim Nationalist Party.<sup>5</sup>

There were certain reasons for the formation Sir Abdul Qayyum's Ministry in April 1937 which need to be thoroughly discussed in this paper. The main reasons in this connection can be that 1) the Congress was not able to muster support of the majority support of the members of the Assembly, 2) the Congress pressure upon the British Government to transfer power to them in the whole of the country because of two reasons – one being that in six out of eleven provinces the Congress was able to get majority in the provincial legislatures, and the other was that the Muslim provinces were going out of the influence of the Congress, 3) Muslim League's weakness in the NWFP. These reasons are to be discussed in detail.

Despite its full preparedness the Congress was not able to get clear majority support of the members of the elected members of the Frontier Assembly. It was Sir Abdul Qayyum who was able to muster support of the majority with his United Muslim Nationalist Party that he was able to show his strength to the Governor Sir George Cunningham.

The Muslim League which had been founded in NWFP in 1912 had become weak by the time the elections of 1937 came.<sup>6</sup> It was because of its poor organization that it could not participate in the elections. It was only after the elections that the Muslim League became active especially after the installation of the Congress Ministry headed by Dr. Khan Sahib which replaced Sir Abdul Qayyum in September 1937.

After the elections of 1937, the Indian National Congress was able to win majority of the members in six out of eleven provincial assemblies. Incidentally,

these six provinces were the Hindu majority provinces. There were five Muslim majority provinces. If the British Baluchistan would have been granted the status of province, it would have been the sixth Muslim majority province which later was included in the demand of Allama Iqbal and Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah as part of what came to be called as Pakistan areas. This situation was very much alarming for the Congress who turned out to be a Hindu organization in the Muslim sense because in four provinces of the Punjab, Sindh, Bengal and Assam neither Congress nor the Muslim League was able to muster majority support. The reason for the Muslim League would have been that it was not well organized by then. But the Congress which was well organized also failed to get success in these four provinces. If the Muslim League failed because of its poor organization, but not on the plea that the Muslim public opinion was not against it but it was favourable to other regional parties like the Unionists in the Punjab, Krishak Seramik Party in the Bengal, Sindh United Party in Sindh, and so was the case in Assam. In case of NWFP, being the only province where some Muslim members were elected on its ticket, it failed to get majority. This indicated that the Muslim majority areas of the British India had risen against the Congress. This because of the perception amongst the Muslim masses that Congress came to be considered more Hindu and less nationalist in its posture.

The other reason for formation of the provincial government was that on Congress call the first April 1937 was celebrated as the Red Letter Day on which the red-colour Congress flag will be hoisted at all the protest meeting which the Congress had planned to stage. The country-wise *hartal* was observed on this day so as to protest against the New Constitution Act of India 1935 which the Congress thought had been imposed on the people by the British Government against the wishes of its people.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of this hartal was circulated on these lines. But in their correspondence and the meetings with the British officials the Congress leaders took the plea that in the six provinces where their majority had emerged, the Governors of the provinces would not use their special powers against the elected government. The Government's plea was in case where some minority interest would be threatened by the Congress government the Governor would use his special powers. This was not acceptable to the Congress leaders because they thought, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru there was no minority issue which required to be addressed.<sup>8</sup> Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah challenged Nehru on this issue. In rebuttal of what Nehru had said, Jinnah issued a long press statement which was published in the newspapers on 30 April 1937.<sup>9</sup> In this statement Jinnah charged that the Congress policy is "to wreck the constitution whatever it may mean". That is why different Congress leaders are expressing "in different ways"<sup>10</sup>. A meeting of the Congress Working Committee was also held in Simla on 29 April 1937 in which difference of opinion between Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress President, emerged. Gandhi wanted to go ahead in a cautious way, while Nehru insisted on "full-steam-ahead" policy.<sup>11</sup> Nehru believed that "Congressmen

should realise that parliamentary work is but a minor part of the national programme, and that the great objective of complete Independence can only be secured by sustained efforts by every Congressman in carrying out the programme outside the Legislatures as laid down from time to time.”<sup>12</sup> Jinnah wanted Nehru not to ignore the minorities and the Muslims. He appealed to “better minded Hindus please think before it is too late”.<sup>13</sup> This was aimed to have two purposes. One was to show strength to the British Government that the people were behind the Congress all over the country. The other was to show the Congress displeasure for the introduction of the Government of India Act 1935 as a whole. This indicated another dubious situation by the Congress because in the previous year it was on Jinnah’s motion that Congress members of the Central Legislative Assembly had agreed to the provincial portion of the Act of 1935. Now when they had won in majority provinces they were thinking in other terms but ostensibly claiming that in the event of installation of the provincial governments the Governors would not use their veto power against the will of the provincial legislature. The government decided to go on its own ways so that the Congress was kept to its own position and did not emerge to the position of giving dictation to the Government. Since in the Muslim majority provinces including the NWFP the Congress had lost to win the Muslim support, the government thought well to act in these provinces so that they could bring the Congress to the senses. It was on this basis that the Government was able to encourage the winning parties in the Muslim provinces of NWFP, Punjab, Sindh, Bengal and Assam to install their government on 1 April 1937. The Government succeeded to install the governments of Sir Saadullah Khan in Assam, Maulvi A.K.Fazlul Haqq in Bengal, Sardar Sikander Hayat Khan in the Punjab, Sir Hidayatullah in Sindh. The Congress felt it too much and started propaganda and started making propaganda that the governments of these provinces were the British stooges. The Congress particularly felt defeated in NWFP wherein its interests were more than any other Muslim province.

### **Formation and Functioning of Sir Qayyum’s Ministry**

Though the Muslim League contested the elections, it could win only 25% of the seats in the Legislatures. Their position in the Muslim majority was also very weak. Although President of the All India Muslim League struggled very hard to form his party’s provincial election boards, but because of rivalries amongst the local Muslim provincial leaders, the League Election Boards could not function effectively. As far as the Muslim masses were concerned, they had actually turned out against the Congress leadership. Since the Muslims were divided amongst the local Muslim parties and the popularity of the Muslim League had not grown to that extent that masses could vote for their candidates, the Muslim votes were divided. So was the case with the NWFP Muslim League Election Board. Sir Qayyum was nominated by Jinnah to be the head of the NWFP Election Board, but the local leaders were so strong in their own local areas that they could understand the necessity of uniting the Muslims under the

banner of Muslim League. Therefore, Sir Qayyum had to act pragmatically in interest of the local conditions. The Muslim candidates in NWFP contested election in the name of different local Muslim groups, but in the position of independents. The elected 23 independent Muslim legislators grouped themselves into three parties: 1) Progressive Party headed by Nawab Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Khan, 2) Hazara Democratic Party in which members belonging to Hazarat were included, 3) Azad Party in which rest of the Muslim and even some non-Muslims were included. These parties allied with each other and formed the NWFP Ministry headed by Nawab Sir Sahibzada Abdul Qayyum Khan.<sup>14</sup>

The three member Ministry was sworn in on 1 April 1937 with Sir Abdul Qayyum Khan as Chief Minister, Rai Bahadur Mehr Chand Khanna and Sadullah Khan as Ministers.<sup>15</sup> Malik Khuda Baksh Advocate, was elected as Speaker of the Frontier Assembly with the support of 29 members.<sup>16</sup> The Frontier Assembly meeting was held on 14 April 1937. In this meeting all the 50 members were present. Of these 16 members belonged to United Muslim Nationalist Party with 3 independents and 4 members of the Democratic Party. The minority of 19 members led by Dr. Khan Sahib comprised the opposition.<sup>17</sup> On 15 April Sir George Cunningham, Governor of the Frontier Province, addressed the Assembly. During the Governors' address the Congress Members did not participate in the Assembly proceedings.<sup>18</sup> In his opening address the Governor congratulated Malik Khuda Baksh for his election as Speaker. He also stated that "in forming my Council of Ministers, I acted after full and frank discussion with those primarily concerned and in accordance with the Instrument of Instructions which directs me to appoint those persons including so far as practicable members of the important minority communities who will best be in a position collectively to command the confidence of the Legislature".<sup>19</sup> He also explained that the Party government in the provinces as well as in British India was something new in this country but in England it had long been experienced. He also hoped it would take time to establish new traditions and standards of parliamentary traditions in this country.<sup>20</sup> The following important steps were taken by Sir Qayyum's ministry:

1. The provincial government did prove funds of Rs. 24 lakh to the Malakand Thermal Power Project. It also took measures to provide electricity to the far flung areas of the province.
2. Special measures were taken for the growth and expansion of educational facilities in the province especially with reference to Islamia College Peshawar.
3. For the purpose of easing the job hunting and provision work for the common man, the provincial government did establish Government Training School, Peshawar and established in Mardan A Thermal Power School.
4. Special measures were taken for the growth and expansion of the industrial growth and agriculture expansion. For this purpose certain

associations were encouraged to establish cooperative societies in both rural and urban areas.<sup>21</sup>

Sir Qayyum's Ministry did accomplish a number of steps for its credit. The most important was that it removed ban on the political activities in the province.<sup>22</sup> The ban on the Congress politicians was also removed and a number of political prisoners were released from the jails. Ban on Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was also removed. But since he was arrested by the federal government, the federal government had agreed to release Ghaffar Khan from confinement after a resolution in this connection was passed by the majority vote in the Central Assembly in February 1935. Mohammad Ali Jinnah had also spoken in favour of release of the Khan. Resolution in this connection was approved by the Central Legislative Assembly in February 1935. Jinnah not only voted in its favour but pleaded with the British that they should not be cruel to the defeated person in the Non-Cooperation Movement in British India in 1930-1934.<sup>23</sup> Despite the approval of this resolution, Ghaffar Khan's entry into Punjab and NWFP was banned until August 1937.<sup>24</sup>

The other important factor was that this ministry did help in the growth of the Muslim League and in encouraging different persons to establish local branches of the Muslim League – a stance on which the Congress leaders were not happy.<sup>25</sup> For instance in Nowshera District Muslim League was revived in last week of May 1937 because of the efforts of Abdul Wahid Khan who became Secretary of this League with Tila Muhammad as President.<sup>26</sup> This was because of his long association with Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah particularly when during the latter's visit to Peshawar on 21-22 October 1936, Sir Qayyum hosted him and arranged for his reception.<sup>27</sup>

The situation in NWFP during April-May 1937 was disturbing in terms of law and order especially in the Tribal Areas. The Northern Command of British India was busy in deploying troops in these months. Three Brigades –Jhansi Brigade, Dehra Dun Brigade and Allahabad Brigade—were also deeply in the Tribal Areas in May 1937.<sup>28</sup> In June-July also worse situation in Waziristan was also reported.<sup>29</sup>

Abdul Ghaffar Khan who had been released from a five years confinement came to Lahore in August 1937 and said that he was not happy with the government of Sir Abdul Qayyum. Therefore, he was trying to install a Congress Ministry in the Frontier Province for which great efforts were required.<sup>30</sup>

In the six Hindu majority provinces the Congress provincial ministries were installed not in April but in July 1937. The Congress tried its best to form the Ministry earlier but it could not win support from the Hindu and Sikh members of the Assembly. It was finally in September 1937 that it could muster support for the formation of the Congress Ministry in NWFP.<sup>31</sup>

### **Vote of no –Confidence Against Sir Qayyum’s Ministry**

The Congress Ministries in the six-Hindu majority provinces had been formed in July 1937. The Congress did try its best to form the Ministry in the NWFP also in the same month, but due to lack of support from a number of groups belonging to the Coalition Ministry of Sir Abdul Qayyum, these efforts could not succeed. However, by September a number of Khans and Hindu-Sikh members had been won over because of various reasons including pressure from Gandhi and other Hindu leaders. For influencing the Muslim members, the services of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad were acquired by the Congress. In this way some Azad Party members and some Muslim members from Hazara Party were bribed and they became ready to support the formation of Dr. Khan Sahib’s Ministry.<sup>32</sup> After the required support had been managed, Dr. Khan Sahib, Leader of the Opposition Party in the Frontier Assembly, moved a resolution of no-confidence in the Frontier Ministry of Sir Qayyum which was passed by the Assembly on 3 September by 27 votes to 22.<sup>33</sup> The 27 members comprised 19 Congressmen, 4 Democrats, 2 Independents, and two who recently resigned the Hindu-Sikh Nationalist Party which was supporting the Qayyum Ministry.<sup>34</sup> As a result of this resolution Sir Qayyum’s Ministry resigned. The session of the Assembly was postponed to 17 September. Next day Dr. Khan Sahib, leader of the Congress Party in the Frontier Assembly, was invited by the Governor to form the Ministry. Thus the new Ministry was appointed with the approval of the Frontier Governor: Dr. Khan Sahib became Chief Minister, Lala Bhanu Ram Gandhi was appointed Finance Minister and Qazi Ataullah was appointed as Education Minister.<sup>35</sup> Sir Abdul Qayyum became leader of the Opposition in the Frontier Assembly.

Even after losing his Chief Ministership, Sir Qayyum had a close liaison with the Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. When preparations were being made for the holding of Lucknow session of the AIML on 15-17 October 1937, Jinnah also wrote letter to Sir Qayyum who was representing the Muslim League group in the Frontier Assembly, on 2 October 1937 inviting him to attend the forthcoming Lucknow session of the Muslim League. Because of desertions of a number of independent Muslim members through force or favour, Sir Qayyum felt it too much and fell ill. Sir Qayyum, who had retired to his home town Topi for rest because of illness replied Jinnah on 10 October 1937 that despite his illness he would try his best to attend the Lucknow sessions. Sir Qayyum also assured Jinnah that he would try to send as many MLAs and other representatives from this Province as he could get hold of, when he shortly returned to Peshawar. He wished “this most important session of the history of Muslim India all success in every respect.”<sup>36</sup>

Because of his serious illness Sir Qayyum could not attend the Lucknow session of the Muslim League. He could not recover from this illness and finally died on 4 December 1937.<sup>37</sup> This was a great loss to not only to his family but the

Muslim League as well because with his illness and finally the death the greatest shock was felt by Jinnah, the President of the All India Muslim League who had to work very hard to make the Muslim League popular in the years to come when movement for Pakistan was successfully marching in other Muslim majority areas. However, the work of Sir Qayyum was taken up by Sardar Mohammad Aurangzeb Khan, Advocate, who being member of the Khilaf group of the Muslims in the province tried had to revive the Muslim League in the NWFP.<sup>38</sup>The job of the Congress and the Red-Shirt leaders of the NWFP (now KPK) became very easy because they were no longer to face the challenges from the great personality of Sir Qayyum.<sup>39</sup> However, the functioning of the Congress ministry made the Muslims of NWFP realize to become united. It was this feeling which later led to the revival of Muslim League in the province under Sardar Aurangzeb in 1938.<sup>40</sup>

### **Sir Qayyum's Contribution Before 1936**

Sir Qayyum's contribution for the development of NWFP is par excellence and he did contribute a lot of services not only for the province and to bring it to the level of province but also contributed towards the rise of consciousness amongst the Muslims of the province at a time when other local politicians were either in the oblivion or were not placed to do anything. His first contribution was that when in 1893 Sir Durrand demarcated boundary between India and Afghanistan, the local officer who assisted Durrand was Sir Qayyum.<sup>41</sup> As junior officer Sir Qayyum assisted Major Sp. Political Agent of the Khyber Agency, in preparation of the first book of Pushto grammar. Major Sp. later became first Chief Commissioner of NWFP in 1901 when it was separated from the Punjab and started functioning as a separate province. Winston Churchill started his political career at the age of twenty when he was involved in the battle of Tirah in 1903 between the British and the Afridis. During this war Churchill learnt a great lesson from Sir Qayyum who was considered to be an expert officer in the tribal affairs. Sir Qayyum was not a son of a landlord but still he belonged to Yousafzai tribe who are the descendents of Sultan Sikander Lodhi of Delhi. Sir Qayyum also assisted in the establishment of Islamia College, Peshawar whose foundation stone was laid on 21 March 1913 by Haji Sahib Trangzai. He Laid the foundation of the mosque only. Sahibzada Qayyum retired from service in June 1919. He was elected Member of the Indian Legislative Assembly in 1922. He attended two Round Table Conferences in London during 1930-31 and his contribution towards introduction of reforms in the NWFP, which attained the status of province on 19 April 1932. He was taken as the Senior Minister in the first Cabinet of the Governor of NWFP and remained to continue as such when he was elected as member of the NWFP Legislative Assembly in 1937 and rose to the position of Chief Minister of the province. His services as Chief Minister of the province have already been discussed. He died on 4 December 1937.<sup>42</sup>

Actually Sir Qayyum was associated with Jinnah since long. Both were colleagues at the Indian Sandhurst Committee which is also known as Skeen Committee of the Indian Legislative Assembly during 1925-1926. Both were also colleagues in the London Round Table Conferences in 1930-1931. They jointly worked for the cause of the Muslims. It was because of his long association with Sir Qayyum that when Jinnah visited the Frontier Province from 18th to 24th October, 1936, he stayed at the house of Sir Qayyum in Peshawar. Sir Qayyum's house rather became centre of all the top class political activity in the province during the week long stay of Jinnah in Peshawar.<sup>43</sup>

Sir Qayyum was an experienced politician who was highly respected in the NWFP where he did accomplish a number of things to his credit. For instance he was one of the founders of the Islamia College, Peshawar. As senior Minister in the Governors' cabinet during 1932-1936 he took measures to help in the growth of the Islamia College, Peshawar. It was because of this reason that he came to be known as Sir Syed of Sarhad.<sup>44</sup>

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