



# Interim Government of 1946 Marked India's Transition from Colonial Administration to Indian-Led Executive Governance Before Independence

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## Recent Developments:

- **2 September 1946** marks the formation of the **Interim Government of India**, constituted under the leadership of **Jawaharlal Nehru** as Vice-President of the Viceroy's Executive Council. Nehru also assumed responsibility for **External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations**, making the arrangement a crucial stage in India's transition from colonial administration to self-government.
- The Interim Government emerged from the **Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946**, which sought to establish a constitutional framework for transferring power while preserving Indian unity. The Mission proposed an interim executive alongside a Constituent Assembly to frame the future Constitution.
- The experiment was politically significant but internally difficult because the **Indian National Congress and All-India Muslim League** had conflicting approaches to constitutional power-sharing, provincial grouping and the future political structure of India.
- The League eventually joined the Interim Government on **26 October 1946**, with **Liaquat Ali Khan** taking charge of Finance. The resulting Congress-League tensions affected the functioning of the administration and demonstrated the growing political impasse preceding Partition.

## What was the Interim Government of 1946?

### *Background and Genesis:*

- The end of **World War II**, Britain's economic difficulties, growing Indian political mobilisation and events such as the **Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946** increased pressure on the British Government to accelerate the transfer of power.
- Prime Minister **Clement Attlee** announced in February 1946 that a **Cabinet Mission** would be sent to India to address the constitutional deadlock.
- The Cabinet Mission consisted of **Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Sir Stafford Cripps and A. V. Alexander**. It arrived in India in March 1946 and subsequently presented proposals for India's constitutional future.

### *Cabinet Mission Plan, 1946:*

- The **Cabinet Mission Plan** rejected the Muslim League's demand for a separate Pakistan at that stage and proposed a weak Union dealing mainly with **foreign affairs, defence and communications**, while provinces retained substantial autonomy.
- The proposed constitutional arrangement had **three levels**, namely the Union, groups of provinces and individual provinces. Provinces were to be organised into three sections: **Section A** comprising mainly Hindu-majority provinces, **Section B** comprising Muslim-majority provinces in the north-west, and **Section C** comprising **Bengal and Assam**.

- The Plan envisaged a **389-member Constituent Assembly**, while also proposing the establishment of an Interim Government to administer India during the transition towards a new constitutional order.
- It further proposed the lapse of **British paramountcy over princely states**, thereby creating the need for a new political arrangement between the future Indian Union and the princely states.

### *Nature and Objectives of the Interim Government:*

- The Interim Government was a **provisional executive administration** intended to manage the affairs of British India while constitutional negotiations and constitution-making proceeded.
- It was designed to function increasingly like a **cabinet government**, rather than merely operating as a collection of departmental members subordinate to the Viceroy.
- Its principal objectives were to **administer the country, prepare for the transfer of power, provide governing experience to Indian leaders and facilitate the work of the Constituent Assembly**.

### *Constitutional and Legal Framework:*

- A key correction to the commonly circulated account is that the Interim Government operated within the constitutional framework of the **Government of India Act, 1935**, through the restructured **Viceroy's Executive Council**. Contemporary records concerning the Cabinet Mission explicitly refer to the Government of India Act, 1935 in connection with the formal establishment of the interim arrangement.
- **Lord Wavell**, the Viceroy, remained the formal head and President of the Executive Council, while Indian political leaders increasingly exercised substantive executive responsibilities.
- **Jawaharlal Nehru** served as Vice-President of the Executive Council and was effectively the principal political head of the Interim Government. His responsibilities included **External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations**.

### Political Crisis and Entry of the Muslim League:

#### *Direct Action Day and Communal Tensions:*

- Differences between the Congress and Muslim League intensified over the interpretation of the **grouping provisions** of the Cabinet Mission Plan and the question of political representation.
- The Muslim League withdrew its earlier acceptance of the constitutional arrangement and called for **Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946**, which was followed by severe communal violence, particularly in Calcutta.
- The communal crisis demonstrated that constitutional negotiations were increasingly being shaped by competing political claims and deepening communal polarisation.

### *Muslim League Joins the Interim Government:*

- Despite the initial League boycott, the Viceroy proceeded with the formation of the Interim Government under Nehru, which formally took office on **2 September 1946**.
- The **Muslim League joined on 26 October 1946**, after concluding that remaining outside the executive structure could reduce its influence over the emerging political order.
- To accommodate the League, changes were made in the composition of the Executive Council, and **Liaquat Ali Khan** became the Finance Member.
- Control over the Finance portfolio gave the League an important institutional position because major government proposals required financial approval. Consequently, disagreements over fiscal policy became an important manifestation of the broader Congress-League political conflict.

### Composition and Major Indian Leaders:

#### *Key Portfolios:*

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- **Jawaharlal Nehru:** Vice-President of the Executive Council, External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations.
- **Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel:** Home, Information and Broadcasting.
- **Dr. Rajendra Prasad:** Food and Agriculture.
- **Sardar Baldev Singh:** Defence.
- **Jagjivan Ram:** Labour.
- **C. H. Bhabha:** Works, Mines and Power.
- **Asaf Ali:** Railways and Transport.
- **C. Rajagopalachari:** Education and Arts.
- **Liaquat Ali Khan:** Finance after the Muslim League entered the Interim Government.

### Significance of the Interim Government:

#### *Beginning of Indian Executive Responsibility:*

- The Interim Government represented a major institutional shift because **Indian political leaders assumed responsibility for important departments of the central executive** while British authority formally remained in place.
- It provided Indian leaders with practical experience in **cabinet decision-making, administration, finance, foreign affairs, defence and interdepartmental coordination.**

#### *Foundations of Independent Foreign Policy:*

- Nehru's responsibility for external affairs enabled Indian leaders to begin developing an **independent diplomatic outlook** even before formal independence.
- The experience contributed to the later emergence of India's **non-alignment, strategic autonomy and independent foreign policy** after 1947.

#### *Administrative Indianisation:*

- The Interim Government accelerated the process of transferring effective administrative responsibility to Indian political leadership.
- Experience in dealing with **civil administration, policing, food shortages, economic management and public order** helped prepare Indian leaders for governance after independence.

#### *Princely States and Political Integration:*

- The transition highlighted the importance of developing a coordinated approach towards the **princely states**, whose relationship with British paramountcy was expected to lapse with independence.
- The issue became central after 1947, when the new Indian leadership undertook the political integration of princely states into the Indian Union.

#### *Governing Experience and Developmental Planning:*

- Indian leaders obtained practical experience in dealing with **food security, economic constraints, administrative coordination and developmental priorities.**
- This experience was particularly important because independence required the transformation of a colonial administrative structure into a government responsible to the people.

### From Interim Government to Independence:

#### *Failure of the Coalition Experiment:*

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- The Interim Government demonstrated both the possibilities and limitations of political cooperation between the Congress and Muslim League.
- Persistent disagreements over **constitutional authority, communal representation, finance and the future territorial structure of India** weakened collective decision-making.
- The experience reinforced the perception among several Congress leaders that a permanently divided executive at the Centre could produce continuing political instability and administrative paralysis.

### ***Mountbatten Plan and Partition:***

- By 1947, the constitutional deadlock had become increasingly difficult to resolve through the Cabinet Mission framework.
- **Lord Mountbatten** replaced Wavell as Viceroy and was tasked with overseeing the transfer of power.
- The **3 June 1947 Plan**, commonly known as the **Mountbatten Plan**, formally accepted the principle of Partition and provided the immediate political framework for the creation of two Dominions.
- The **Indian Independence Act, 1947** subsequently provided the legal basis for the establishment of India and Pakistan as independent Dominions, culminating in independence on **15 August 1947**.

### **Historical Assessment:**

#### ***Transitional Constitutional Significance:***

- The Interim Government should be understood as a **transitional constitutional arrangement**, not as an independent sovereign government.
- British constitutional authority remained formally significant, particularly through the Viceroy, but the increasing exercise of executive functions by Indian leaders created an important bridge between **colonial rule and parliamentary self-government**.
- Its importance therefore lies less in complete sovereignty and more in the transfer of **political responsibility, administrative experience and institutional legitimacy** to Indian leaders.

#### ***Limitations:***

- The arrangement could not overcome the fundamental Congress-League disagreement over the constitutional future of India.
- Communal violence, competing claims to political representation and disputes over executive authority weakened the functioning of the government.
- The failure of the coalition experiment occurred against the wider background of the constitutional crisis that ultimately produced **Partition**.

### **Value Addition for UPSC:**

#### ***Prelims Perspective:***

- **2 September 1946:** Formation of the Interim Government.
- **Jawaharlal Nehru:** Vice-President of the Viceroy's Executive Council and Member in charge of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations.
- **Lord Wavell:** Viceroy during the initial formation of the Interim Government.
- **26 October 1946:** Muslim League entered the Interim Government.
- **Liaquat Ali Khan:** Finance Member after the League joined.
- **Cabinet Mission:** Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Sir Stafford Cripps and A. V. Alexander.
- **Cabinet Mission Plan:** Proposed a three-tier constitutional arrangement and a **389-member Constituent Assembly**.
- **16 August 1946:** Direct Action Day.
- **3 June 1947:** Mountbatten Plan announced.

- **15 August 1947:** India became independent.

***Mains Perspective:***

- **Conclusion:** The Interim Government of 1946 was a decisive bridge between the colonial state and independent India. Although it failed to produce lasting Congress-League cooperation, it gave Indian leaders valuable experience in central administration and demonstrated the practical challenges of transferring power in a deeply divided political environment.