

## EXPLAINED

# Mountbatten Plan at 79: How the June 3 Declaration redrew the subcontinent

*On June 3, 1947, the likes of Viceroy Louis Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah announced that British India would be partitioned. What did the plan propose, and why did both the Congress and the Muslim League accept it?*



Mahatma Gandhi (C) eventually reconciled himself to the decision following his discussions with Viceroy Louis Mountbatten (L). Here, Edwina Mountbatten (R) is also present. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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Seventy-nine years ago, people from all walks of life gathered in streets, public parks, and marketplaces to listen to a historic broadcast scheduled for 7 pm. Shops installed loudspeakers so that passers-by could hear the announcement. As historian Yasmin Khan observed in *The Great Partition* (2007): “From Peshawar to Travancore, from Karachi to Shillong, India became an enormous collective ear, waiting for the broadcasts breathlessly, helplessly and hopelessly.”

Meanwhile, in a [Delhi](#) studio, the principal political actors of the day prepared to announce the **fate of the subcontinent**: Lord Mountbatten, the British Viceroy; Jawaharlal Nehru, representing the Congress; Muhammad Ali Jinnah, representing the Muslim League; and Baldev Singh, speaking on behalf of the Sikhs.

The announcement they delivered came to be known as the June 3 Declaration. What did it propose, and why did both the Congress and the Muslim League accept it?

## A country on the brink

When Lord Mountbatten arrived in Delhi on March 22, 1947, to assume office as Viceroy, he carried a clear mandate from British Prime Minister Clement Attlee: power was to be transferred to Indian hands no later than June 30, 1948. He entered a country already gripped by escalating communal violence. The Calcutta killings of August 1946 had been followed by riots in Noakhali and Bihar, while tensions had spread to Bombay and other parts of the country. Punjab was also descending into conflict, with major outbreaks of violence in Amritsar, Taxila, and Rawalpindi.

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Mountbatten quickly concluded that the idea of Pakistan had become unavoidable.

Following consultations in India and a visit to London in mid-May, he returned to

unveil the Partition Plan on the evening of June 3, 1947.

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Mountbatten meeting with Jawaharlal Nehru (L) and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (R) to discuss the partition of British India in 1947. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

At its core, the plan accepted the division of British India. It proposed that the Legislative Assemblies of Punjab and Bengal would vote on whether their provinces should be partitioned; Sindh's Assembly would decide whether to join India or Pakistan; and referendums would be held in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Sylhet district to determine their future. If partition occurred, a Boundary Commission would demarcate the borders, particularly in Punjab and Bengal.

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The plan also provided for the creation of two independent dominions, India and Pakistan, each with its Constituent Assembly. Princely states were required to accede

to one of the two dominions, and the transfer of power was advanced to August 15, 1947.

“Of course there were last-minute bids by all sides to vary the terms of the announcement,” wrote Ayesha Jalal in *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (1994). The Muslim League continued to oppose the partition of Punjab and Bengal, while Sikh leaders pressed for explicit instructions to the Boundary Commission that would safeguard their claims in key districts of Punjab.

### How did the rival parties agree?

Several factors led the Indian National Congress to accept the June 3 Plan.

One, the desire to contain the spiralling communal violence that had engulfed large parts of the country. Congress leaders believed that only a swift transfer of power to an Indian government could restore order and halt bloodshed. They also concluded that a smaller but more cohesive India with a strong central government was preferable to a united India in which the Muslim League could permanently obstruct governance. As Maulana Abul Kalam Azad observed in *India Wins Freedom* (1989): “Lord Mountbatten advised that it would be better to give up a few small pieces in the north-west and the north-east and then build up a strong and consolidated India. Sardar Patel was impressed by the argument that cooperation with the Muslim League would jeopardise Indian unity...” These arguments, he notes, influenced Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi too.

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Congress was also determined to avoid the fragmentation envisaged in Mountbatten's earlier "Plan Balkan", whereby each province of India could opt to join the existing constituent assembly, group to form a new one or stand apart from either.

In his book, Azad describes his unsuccessful efforts to persuade Congress leaders to resist partition. He notes that both Patel and Nehru had come to view it as unavoidable. "I was surprised and pained when Patel in reply said that whether we liked it or not, there were two nations in India. He was now convinced that Muslims and Hindus could not be united into one nation." Nehru, however, accepted partition with reluctance. "In fact, he admitted that partition was by nature wrong. He had however lost all hopes of joint action after his experience of the conduct of the League members of the Executive Council." Gandhi, too, eventually reconciled himself to the decision following his discussions with Mountbatten.



The Mountbattens with Muhammad Ali Jinnah. For the Muslim League, acceptance of the June 3 Plan guaranteed the creation of Pakistan, the fulfilment of its central political objective. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

For the Muslim League, conversely, acceptance of the June 3 Plan guaranteed the creation of Pakistan, the fulfilment of its central political objective. Led by Jinnah, the League feared that Muslims would be politically marginalised in a united, Hindu-majority India. Partition, therefore, offered what it saw as a clear and definitive path to political self-determination.

However, Jinnah also had reservations about the arrangement. In a letter cited by Khan, he wrote to a journalist: 'It is very difficult for me to understand what led His Majesty's Government to come to the conclusion of partitioning Punjab and Bengal. In my opinion it is a mistake...But now we have accepted the plan as a whole and I feel confident that we shall make a good job of it.'

## 'No firm line between winners and losers'

Although the Muslim League had secured Pakistan, as Khan notes, "there was no firm line between winners and losers.

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Endemic confusion and disorientation followed the announcement, which slices horizontally through all communities." The decision to partition India was now final, but crucial questions remained unanswered. Would people be expected to migrate? Where exactly would the borders be drawn? Which districts would fall within Pakistan and which would remain in India?

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In the days following the announcement, journalists repeatedly pressed Mountbatten on whether the plan would trigger large-scale migration. "Do you foresee any mass transfer of population?" they asked. "Personally I don't see it," the Viceroy replied.

Yet the tragic consequences soon became apparent to the world. In the weeks to come, violence would engulf large parts of the subcontinent, triggering one of the **greatest mass migrations** in history.

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