

Alliances In Shinde Mode

What new Maharashtra CM tells us about making, breaking govts & 2024 possibilities

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By making Eknath Shinde Maharashtra's new chief minister BJP has in effect transformed the Shiv Sena rebellion into a successful coup. Political implications of this tactical move by BJP are many, and we will come to some of them later.

Let's first recognise that the fall of the Uddhav Thackeray government is the seventh time since 2014 that a democratically elected government has collapsed after losing its assembly majority through defections or rebellions. In all cases but one, BJP formed the new government, thus turning poll defeats into victories outside the ballot box.

In most cases, BJP benefited from the crumbling of Congress. Defections happened on the back of the disillusionment and opportunism of Congress MLAs seeking a political future. That's why what happened in Maharashtra – an internal tussle in Shiv Sena, a party otherwise known for its internal discipline and organisation – is a different case.

Sena rebel chief and now CM Shinde had declared that behind his decision to break with Uddhav lay his wish to reunite with Hindutva ideology and rebuild the 'natural' alliance with BJP. Shinde represents a section of the Sena old guard that was unhappy with the power-sharing agreement established with NCP and Congress, or with the elevation of Aaditya Thackeray as a cabinet minister.

Uddhav's ability to work with former political adversaries irked some of his own party members, who also complained of lack of access to him. And finally, Uddhav's tryst with political moderation did not go down well with Sainiks who had muscled their way up under the reign of Bal Thackeray.

But ideological affinities and party organisational culture don't fully explain what happened.

● First, alliances in Indian politics are never built on ideology alone. The past has taught us that if there were



strong ideological overlaps between BJP and old Shiv Sena, they hardly prevented periods of dissension and tension between the two parties.

- Second, if these rebels were indeed ideologically committed to rejoining the realm of Hindutva politics, theatrics of rebellion, and probably a mix of inducements and strong persuasion, would not have been necessary. The way MLAs were corralled in Guwahati indicates that the usual factors that engineer defections were at play.
- Third, 21 rebel MLAs have criminal charges against them, including Shinde himself, who tops the list with 18 charges. It would not be the first time that the fear of the law pushed MLAs towards another party.
- Fourth, not all rebels conform to the image of disgruntled old Sainiks. Data on individual incumbency tells us that of 39 Sena MLAs who rebelled, 16 are first-time MLAs. Only 15 have been elected more than twice. Five rebels come initially from other parties and had defected to Sena in the past. Therefore, we cannot know

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In other words, the decision to rebel may have been informed by the ideological affinities that exist between old Sena and BJP, but that certainly does

not account for everything, especially for a party whose identity and political culture was never completely defined by this brand of politics.

What lessons can be drawn from this episode?

- First, with Shinde as CM, MVA's fall will weaken any possible anti-BJP coalition even more. Maharashtra accounts for 48 Lok Sabha seats, which will be crucial in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.
- Second, related to the first, CM Shinde may make Sena politicians and workers who have stayed with Uddhav feel more tempted to cross over. True, the battle over the ownership of Sena will still be in part a legal and a political one. But with an old Sainik as CM, partnered with a powerful BJP, Uddhav's Thackeray name will lose some of its sheen for Sainiks. How the Sena base, especially its young cadres, respond will be critical to both Shinde and Uddhav.
- Third, the Shinde-as-CM move also queers the pitch for NCP and Congress. Both would have wanted a stronger Uddhav faction.
- Fourth, for Congress as a party the loss of power in a major state is yet another blow. It was reduced to the status of a political observer in the state and was powerless to help an ally in need.

As politics plays out, we must also recognise that there is a routinisation of the idea that bringing elected governments down through defections is fair game in a democracy, which is deeply troubling. As I have argued in the past in similar circumstances, mass defections and resort politics make a mockery of any notion of popular mandate and constitute a breach of trust with the electorate. Admitting defeat and not seeking to undermine an elected government through any means is an important democratic norm that ought to be respected, if not enforced.

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