

# Sena split points to a new era in politics

ECI order has short-term implications for politics in Maharashtra, and long-term ramifications for family-based parties

There are two ways to look at the Election Commission of India (ECI)'s decision to award the Shiv Sena name and bow-and-arrow symbol to the Eknath Shinde faction — the immediate, which comprises the political and electoral fallout, and the long-term, which encapsulates the structural challenges and shifts in Indian polity.

First, the immediate implications. The order doesn't end the feud over Bal Thackeray's legacy, but only prolongs a war that will likely be settled in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections. The Shiv Sena has ruled BMC for two decades, and the party's politics revolves around this resource-rich body. Yet, its hold over India's financial capital has been waning. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Shiv Sena contested the last BMC election separately, winning 82 and 84 seats, respectively.

There are three outcomes possible in the BMC polls. First, the BJP and Shinde alliance wins convincingly, pushing the Thackeray faction to the margins. Second, the Thackeray faction, in alliance with the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party, emerges victorious. And third, there is no clear winner, and the Thackeray faction manages to hold on to its base.

A defeat in the BMC polls will be a body blow to Thackeray (especially given that general and assembly elections are scheduled next year). Still, even the more favourable scenarios may not mean a resurrection because the BJP-Shinde alliance will intensify efforts to pick off the remaining members of the Thackeray faction. Moreover, such a battle will expose the central contradiction of the clash — despite polarising rhetoric from both leaders, they are trying to mobilise the same base, and their grassroots supporters have little by way of differing political, social or ideological opinions. Therefore, only one of these two factions is likely to survive in the medium term — and their fate will be determined by what the Shiv Sena base chooses: Dynastic legacy or ideological coherence.

Shinde has a deep connection with party workers and a more coherent link with the polarising rhetoric of party founder Bal Thackeray. Uddhav represents the late patriarch's bloodline legacy and enjoys goodwill among voters, but he, along with his son Aaditya, has made some sharp turns on the party's ideological agenda. It is important to note that neither Shinde nor Thackeray have the charisma or oratory power of Balasaheb. Therefore, the party's organisational machine in urban pockets will be a key determinant in this fight. Shinde has the advantage of power and patronage at the moment. He also claims to be in greater tune with Balasaheb's ideological agenda. But there

are enough examples in Indian politics of blood triumphing over the organisation and ideological style (think of Jagan Mohan Reddy taking over YSR Reddy's mantle despite being ousted from the Congress).

The ECI order holds deeper lessons too. The poll panel used the three-pronged formula to test which Sena faction held the majority — the test of the party constitution, the test of organisational majority, and the test of a legislative majority. ECI relied on the last benchmark as it was the clearest evidence available. Most political parties do not hold internal elections to elect leaders, and give powers through their constitution to family patriarchs

to nominate members in important party committees. Parties also do not have proper consultative mechanisms to where disagreements can be resolved. These factors make constitutions and appointing members in organisational positions in most parties unacceptable to the poll panel.

This is a natural fallout because most political parties are family-based, with centralisation of power in the hands of a few who feel confident that ECI guidelines cannot shake their status. But since legislative strength is becoming the default test for party splits, will we see more outfits comply with inner-party working rules framed by ECI? Such a move is likely to be cosmetic because there is no pressing political (or legal) necessity to make parties more democratic.

Second, the Shinde rebellion marks



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a new trend — of family-based parties seeing coups by members from outside the family. There are enough instances of internal coups — Chandrababu Naidu's rebellion against NT Rama Rao, Akhilesh Yadav sidelining his uncle Shivpal Yadav in the Samajwadi Party, and Sukhbir Badal creating conditions for his cousin Manpreet Badal to leave the Shiromani Akali Dal, among others — but inner family dynamics drove these. But today, the founders of many family-based parties have either died or retired from politics. The new generation does not seem to have a similar hold on the party members, as they lack the charisma, ideological clarity, or willingness (or all three) to work hard.

As these successors became inaccessible to party workers, entrepreneurial politicians such as Shinde emerged as challengers. They had stuck with the founders, even accommodating their desire to pass the baton to their kin, but filled the void by establishing a greater connection with party members. And, once they realised that the next generation of the family is ready to take on the mantle, it became necessary for them to take risks to break the glass ceiling. This happened in the Shiv Sena case — as Aaditya threatened to take the party

away from some older ideological positions, Shinde felt the only way to protect his turf was to strike out on his own.

In the past, many of these politicians lacked the resources and connections to effect a successful coup against a family entrenched in the party and had connections outside to foil such attempts. But today, the dominant position of the BJP in national politics, especially if a coup favours its short-term interests and long-term strategy, has created those facilitative conditions.

This, ironically, presents a dilemma for the BJP. In some ways, it is in the interest of the BJP to see both Sena factions locked in a battle of attrition and weakened on the ground, leaving it as the sole practitioner of Hindutva politics in the state. But it will have to manage its government with Shinde and work out a mechanism for the 2024 round of polls that keeps Shinde happy. Either way, Maharashtra's politics of the last three decades is about to change. The coalition equation of the 1990s has been inverted.

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The views expressed are personal



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