Deciphering Maharashtra's defections, its politics

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The issue of political defections typically takes centre-stage at a particular moment in the life of a polity. This is the intervening period of transition when an old system of political dominance gives way to a new one.

In Maharashtra, the era of Congress dominance, which had weakened by the 1990s, sputtered to an end in 2014. Yet, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has not been quite able to take over the reins from the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) combine, given the attitude of the local elites in regions such as western Maharashtra, leading to a chaotic decade of attrition. Whether the dramatic switch of the Ajit Pawar NCP faction to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) signals the birth pangs of a new era of the BJP's dominance, or is merely a contingent truce, remains to be seen.

A State-level focus

The BJP's singular majority at the national level since 2014 has whetted its desire for State-level dominance in a number of States. The success of these various State campaigns has been predicated to a large extent on an array of mass defections from erstwhile ruling and/or primary Opposition parties. The volatile politics of the northeastern States, dependent on central aid, fell to this trend the earliest.

The BJP became the ruling party in Assam in 2016 following key defections from the Asom Gana Parishad and the ruling Congress. This was the model of rapid party expansion, built on defections of leaders particularly from dominant caste/classes, which was later used in Tripura and the wider northeast. In Arunachal Pradesh, in 2016, almost the entire State unit of the Congress – 44 out of 45 MLAs, including the Chief Minister, Pema Khandu – defected overnight to an NDA ally, and shortly thereafter to the BJP.

Thus, the split of the NCP in Maharashtra now is better understood in the context of national politics. Such a move enables us to move beyond the immediate plane of contingent factors such as leadership successions and the coercive meddling of central agencies. It will also help explain the split of the NCP and the Shiv Sena (within a dizzying year) in terms of the evolving structural dynamics of Maharashtra politics.

The national context is particularly important because the politics of Maharashtra, like the politics of Assam, deeply intersects with the slow-moving terrain of national politics. This has provided the State with its characteristic political stability, underwritten by the hegemony of the dominant farming caste of the Maratha-Kunbis, and bolstered with the support of a largely sympathetic Centre. Political scientist Suhas Palshikar has suggested that the traditional "Congress system", the model of informal accommodation of diverse constituencies within the party, has survived perhaps the longest in Maharashtra.

Until 2014, the Congress party (or a breakaway Congress faction) ruled the State for almost the entire post-Independence period. The State remained largely unaffected by the ideological challenge of the Mandal revolution which reshaped the political structure of northern India. The only significant exception was the three-year period between 1995-1998 when the NDA alliance (the Shiv Sena and the BJP) took control of the State. This short-lived, abortive transition in State politics also coincided, unsurprisingly, with a hazy period of national transition marked by the NDA coalition's ascent to power at the national level.

> The evolving structural dynamics of the State's politics is better understood in the context of national politics

Maharashtra's political economy as factor

The reason why national and State politics move in lock step in Maharashtra has much to do with its political economy. The State has not evolved a regional business elite like in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh or Gujarat. Instead, the commanding heights of the economy are still controlled by a pan-India business elite.

Journalist Harish Damodaran, in his book, *India's New Capitalists: Caste, Business, and Industry in a Modern Nation* (2008), drew a distinction between the Patels and Marathas, the dominant agrarian castes in Gujarat and Maharashtra, respectively, in terms of the trajectory of their upward mobility. While the Patels have moved over the last three decades from agricultural co-operatives to modern urban sectors such as finance and petrochemicals, the Marathas have lagged behind. Therefore, the NCP and the Shiv Sena have disavowed a pronounced regionalist agenda. Instead, regional parties attempt to co-opt the national business elite, and hanker after a share of power at the national level in order to predictably divert State resources as patronage into rural co-operatives and allied sectors.

Therefore, Ajit Pawar, in the (as yet one-sided) battle with his uncle Sharad Pawar for control of the NCP, has age on his side as well as political history. One can see in junior Pawar's coup a reprise of 1978, or 1999, when Sharad Pawar formed a breakaway Congress during the Congress's spell in the political wilderness at the national level. More precisely, Ajit Pawar's decision to join forces with a Narendra Modi-led BJP echoes Sharad Pawar's move to merge his Congress(S) into the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress(I) in 1986. Much like the NCP, the Congress(S) made this calculated manoeuvre despite being the largest Opposition party in the State. Also, in both cases, the crafty Pawars hitched their political future to the principal ruling party which also commanded a formidable majority at the central level. In fact, it was this voluntary vacation of the oppositional space that allowed the Shiv Sena to expand in rural Maharashtra, channelling discontent against an entrenched establishment. Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena surged from a single seat in the 1980s to 52 seats in 1990, emerging as the principal Opposition party.

The sociological base of the NCP, much like the Congress(S) at the time, functions as a powerful constraint on the party. In 1977, scholar Donald Rosenthal wrote of the "expansive elite" of Marathas in western Maharashtra, drawing political control from a colonisation of State policies in the areas of agricultural investment, education and rural self-government. The NCP's political support still remains rooted to this rural economic base, consolidating the Maratha elites into political networks and then linking them to a mass voter-base, even as the urban economic landscape has transformed over the last five decades. The sugar cooperatives of Maharashtra, as Damodaran wrote, are 'self-governing republics headed by powerful chieftains' who follow dynastic lineages to durably embed themselves in local politics. This is a decentralised confederacy, not a command-and-control structure.

Organisational strengths

The informal organisational base of the NCP constitutes a major reason why the party has melted away into the NDA camp, while the Shiv Sena, in comparison, has proved more resilient. Political scientists Chhibber *et al.* (2014) had coded the organisational strength of various parties into three blocks: weakly organised; moderately organised and strongly organised parties. The relevant parameters are formal organisational structures governing channels upward mobility, linkages to an activist base, and political mobilisation between elections, among others. In their calculations, the Shiv Sena had moved from a party that was a strongly organised party to one that was a moderately organised party during its life cycle. In contrast, the NCP (in 1999 and 2004) has been coded as a weakly organised party.

The Shiv Sena of Uddhav Thackeray has retained to a large extent its organisational base in large urban areas such as Mumbai, Nashik and Pune. The party has a hierarchical system of control linking affiliated bodies of urban workers and a large activist base dotting numerous party *shakhas*, to the charismatic personality of the supreme leader. The Thackerays not only closely control appointments and decision-making but also evoke a populist-emotional appeal among the base of the party. Consider the limited number of municipal corporators that have shifted to the Eknath Shinde Sena, over the last year, and the mass defections of NCP corporators to the Ajit Pawar camp.

As political scientist Herbert Kitschelt, among others, have written, political parties are but a collection of numerous power-seekers, kept together with an array of incentives. Local elites across Maharashtra have been facing the daunting task of rethinking and recalibrating these incentives. Of course, the Thackeray Sena has also been weakened in rural areas from the defections of several local party bosses last year. Yet, it is Sharad Pawar's ideologically non-descript NCP, whose politics remained confined to the adroit management of political networks, which is facing the more serious existential crisis.