

Political Crisis in Maharashtra: BJP-backed Government in Power

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Summary

The political crisis in Maharashtra has ended with the Eknath Shinde faction of the Shiv Sena forming the government with the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) support. The decision to appoint Shinde as Chief Minister, with the BJP's Devendra Fadnavis as his deputy, will lend stability to the new government. However, the fall of the Maha Vikas Aghadi government coalition has dealt a blow to opposition efforts at unity.

The political crisis in Maharashtra, which had been getting prime-time coverage in India over the past few weeks, ended with the newly installed government, headed by Eknath Shinde, comfortably winning the floor test in the Assembly on 4 July 2022.

The political drama began with suspected cross-voting during the elections to the indirectly elected Legislative Council in Maharashtra on 21 June 2022. When Uddhav Thackeray, then Chief Minister of the coalition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government, called a meeting of the Shiv Sena legislators, Shinde, along with 11 other party members of the state legislative assemblies (MLAs), were absent. This was the first sign of an open rebellion within the Sena.

Soon, more Sena MLAs joined Shinde's faction. They were initially corralled in neighbouring Gujarat and then flown to the northeastern state of Assam. The numbers eventually swelled to 39, which meant that the rebel faction had over two-thirds of the 55 Sena MLAs in its ranks, and the numbers to split the party as well as escape India's anti-defection laws. The rebels also had the backing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose 106 MLAs in the 288-seat Maharashtra Assembly meant that the MVA government no longer had the majority. As is the standard practice with political defections in India, the matter moved to the courts once the deputy speaker of the Maharashtra Assembly disqualified some of the rebel MLAs. Even as the Supreme Court granted the rebels temporary relief, the state's Governor asked the government to prove its majority on the floor of the House. Once the Supreme Court allowed the floor test, Thackeray read the writing on the wall and resigned as Chief Minister on 29 June 2022. The next day, Shinde was sworn in as the Chief Minister with the BJP's Devendra Fadnavis, a former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, as his deputy. The Shinde faction predictably won the floor test by a comfortable margin of 65 votes.

The fall of the MVA government in Maharashtra had some parallels to states such as Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, where Congress-led governments collapsed, and a BJP government replaced them. As in the other states, the BJP played an active role in fomenting dissent within the governing coalition in Maharashtra. Indeed, the rebel MLAs first took shelter in Gujarat and later Assam – both BJP-governed states – and were given security cover and other assistance by state agencies. However, the events in Maharashtra were different from Karnataka or Madhya Pradesh.

The MVA coalition government, from its inception, was an uneasy one. The coalition, comprising the Sena, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Congress, was formed after the Sena pulled out of its pre-election alliance with the BJP on the issue of chief ministership. The MVA proved its majority on the floor of the House on 30 November 2019 following a month of uncertainty after election results were announced.

There were many, including me, who had written then that there was no guarantee that the government would last its [full term](#). The primary reasons for the prognosis were the disparate nature of the coalition, the rumblings within the Sena in tying up with the Congress and the NCP, and fears of the BJP attempting to unseat the government. All these came true to some extent in the events that led to the fall of the MVA and the exit of Thackeray.

Perhaps the key factor was the discontent within the Sena on the alliance with its traditional foes. The NCP, in particular, was a party that had been pitted against the Sena from its early days and the alliance with the NCP had not gone down well with several Sena old-timers. There was also a feeling within sections of the Sena that the NCP's supremo, Sharad Pawar, was the architect of the MVA alliance and was pulling the strings in the government. In addition, there was a sense that the Sena was diluting its Hindutva identity, which, along with Marathi pride, were the ideological pillars of the party, by breaking away from its long-time and natural ally, the BJP.

The rebel leader and current Chief Minister, Shinde, used the fault-lines within the Sena to stir a rebellion. Though Thackeray was seen as an efficient administrator who did a decent job during the pandemic, he was viewed as aloof and surrounded by a coterie, including his son, Aaditya, who was a cabinet minister. Shinde, a grassroots leader and four-time MLA from Thane, was able to use this to his advantage.

The BJP, although the senior partner in the current government, shrewdly decided on Shinde as the Chief Minister to keep the Sena rebels happy. By appointing Fadnavis as Deputy Chief Minister, the BJP will have a strong say in controlling the agenda of the new government and lend stability to the government.

For Thackeray, who is left with a rump Sena, it will be a long and difficult road to rebuild his support. In the fight over the Sena and its legacy, Shinde and his faction decisively have the upper hand now. At the national level, the fall of another anti-BJP coalition has dealt a blow to opposition efforts at unity in the run up to the 2024 general election.

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