

Pawar Struggle in Maharashtra

Ronojoy Sen

Summary

Maharashtra's volatile politics saw yet another twist, with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader, Ajit Pawar, splitting his party and joining the state government as deputy chief minister. The split in the NCP, founded by Ajit's uncle, Sharad Pawar, will impact both state and national politics.

Maharashtra's politics, which has seen a series of twists and turns since the Assembly elections at the end of 2019, witnessed another round of drama on 2 July 2023 when the opposition Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader, Ajit Pawar, was sworn in as deputy chief minister in the state government. Eight other NCP legislators were also sworn in as ministers in the Maharashtra government, which comprised an alliance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Eknath Shinde faction of the Shiv Sena.

The Maharashtra government, headed by Chief Minister Eknath Shinde who [split the Shiv Sena in 2022](#), now has two deputy chief ministers – Ajit, who occupies the position for the fifth time in his career, and Devendra Fadnavis, a former BJP chief minister of the state. In terms of numbers, though, the BJP is the single largest party with 106 members in the 288-seat Assembly. Ajit's induction undermines, to some extent, Shinde's position who now must deal with two powerful deputies and another alliance partner. The move by Ajit, who has made his chief ministerial ambitions clear, also lays bare the naked pursuit of political power without any ideological compunctions, which is a characteristic of many regional parties in India.

Ajit is believed to have the support of [several members of the legislative assembly](#) (MLAs) in the NCP, a party founded by his uncle and 83-year-old veteran politician, Sharad Pawar. The exact numbers are, however, not yet known. In separate shows of strength on 5 July 2023, around 30 of NCP's 53 MLAs were reportedly present at a meeting called by Ajit, which was still short of the two-thirds needed to split the party under India's anti-defection laws, with fewer professing loyalty to Sharad at another meeting.

Ajit's appointment as deputy chief minister is the [culmination of a feud](#) between him and his uncle that had occasionally spilt into the open but, until now, had not split the NCP. Right after the 2019 elections, the rift between Ajit and Sharad became apparent when the former extended support to the BJP and was appointed deputy chief minister. However, his tenure lasted only a few days since the BJP could not muster a majority. Subsequently, Ajit returned to the NCP fold and was appointed leader of the opposition in the state assembly.

More recently, Sharad stepped down as party chief, a decision that was backed by Ajit. However, Sharad changed his decision, ostensibly due to pressure from party workers, and appointed his daughter Supriya Sule and Praful Patel as working presidents. Ajit construed

this as a signal that Sule, and not he, would take over the party after Sharad, possibly leading to the move to join hands with the BJP.

The Ajit faction has already approached the Election Commission (EC), backed by 40 elected representatives of the NCP, to lay claim to the name of the party and its election symbol. Going by the recent precedent of the Shiv Sena split, the EC is likely to recognise the faction which has a majority backing.

The fight over which faction can claim to be the real NCP could go to the courts just as it happened with the split in the Shiv Sena in 2022 and the toppling of the Uddhav Thackeray-led government in Maharashtra. In that instance, both factions of the Shiv Sena – one led by former chief minister Thackeray and the other by Shinde – went to court. Though the [Supreme Court in May 2023](#) did not stay the EC decision or reinstate Thackeray as chief minister, it ruled that the Maharashtra governor's decision to ask the Thackeray government to face a floor test in the state Assembly was not justified. It also importantly ruled that the direction to vote or abstain on the floor of the House should come from the 'political' party and not the 'legislature' party. In a bid to circumvent some of the legal provisions against defections and splits, Ajit had apparently [written to the EC on 30 June 2023](#), seeking recognition of his faction as the real NCP and to inform the election panel that he had been elected the party president. Whether this will stand the scrutiny of the courts remains to be seen.

Even as the two NCP factions battle it out and Sharad fights for political survival, the BJP's hand has been strengthened in Maharashtra. While the alliance between the BJP and the Shinde faction of the Shiv Sena was comfortably placed in terms of numbers, Ajit's induction means that the two main opposition parties in Maharashtra, which send 48 members to parliament, have been split and weakened. The Maha Vikas Aghadi government, comprising the united Shiv Sena and NCP as well as the Congress, which was toppled in 2022, was seen as a template to counter the BJP in Maharashtra. Now two of its constituents are fighting for survival. However, there are some rumblings within the Maharashtra BJP that it might be forced to concede more space to its allies and give them more seats during the 2024 general election.

The break-up of the NCP and the Shiv Sena is also likely to have an impact on the opposition parties' attempts to unite at the national level before the 2024 general election. Sharad, who has been a key figure in the efforts of the opposition to unite against the BJP, also faces an uphill struggle to remain politically relevant in the twilight of his career.

.....

Dr Ronojoy Sen is a Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.