

If Shiv Sena wishes to remain in power, it can't return to full-blooded Hindutva

Political power is bringing about an ideological re-orientation in the players which may or may not endure

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Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray. So long as politics and business remain deeply intertwined, to rule Maharashtra is to have an enormous hold over Mumbai's financial clout.(Reuters file photo)

The recent political events in Maharashtra have received extensive commentary. The degree of attention reflects two different dimensions, which need to be highlighted.

The first is the towering significance of the state. After the break-up of Bihar into two units in 2000, Maharashtra has not only become the second most populous state of the country, but its capital, the city of Mumbai, continues to be the greatest contributor to political finance. We cannot prove the latter with statistical exactitude, but no observer of Indian politics can deny it.

Compared to their past, Delhi and Bangalore have become many times richer over the last three decades, but they still can't match the wealth of Mumbai. So long as politics and business remain deeply intertwined, as they do in India, to rule Maharashtra is to have an enormous hold over Mumbai's financial clout. The [BJP's](#) unseemly midnight power grab reflected this reality. New York city, to which Mumbai is compared in many quarters, does not play the same role in the US, though it to some extent did during America's Gilded Age (1865-1900), a period associated with the nation's enormous economic rise.

It is the second dimension of the Maharashtra developments, which calls for greater reflection. Just what does the break-up of the BJP-[Shiv Sena](#) alliance, lasting for three decades, and the emergence of a Shiv Sena-Congress alliance, signify? Note that I have left out the NCP from a fuller consideration. The NCP could have gone either way. It represents a regionalist sentiment. Beyond that, it has no great ideological core. It can justify any alliance on the argument that Maharashtra's interests require such a move.

In contrast, the Shiv Sena is strongly ideological, associated with an anti-Muslim stance since the late 1980s, and the Congress, though not as

ideologically resolute as in the past, is irreducibly multireligious. The Congress has, of late, gravitated towards a greater show of Hindu religiosity, but it finds it hard to, or cannot, break its reliance on Muslims. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, it received 38 per cent of the Muslim vote, larger than its share of any other social category. The alliance of an anti-Muslim Shiv Sena and a pro-Muslim Congress simply could not have been predicted. Why have they come together?

Let us start historically. The Shiv Sena, in its early days, was ideologically multidimensional. In their published works, Dipankar Gupta, Ram Joshi, Mary Katzenstein and Usha Thakkar have demonstrated that the Shiv Sena's original ideological framework, constructed by Bal Thackeray in the late 1960s, comprised at least three planks: Jobs for Maharashtrians in Mumbai, anti-Communism and opposition to Muslims. It rose to prominence in Mumbai on the basis of the first two, and the anti-Muslim plank was a distinct third. The Shiv Sena's original targets were the South Indians, who had captured jobs due to their superior skills, and the Marxist labour unions, which dominated Bombay's industrial landscape.

By the mid-1980s, the party needed an ideological rebalancing. Leftist labour unions had declined and South Indians were only significant in Bombay, whereas the Shiv Sena wanted power at the state level, not simply in the Bombay Municipal Corporation. As the Sena hitched its fortunes with the BJP-led Ayodhya movement in the late 1980s, what was distinctly third became primary, bringing it eventually to power at the state level in an alliance with the BJP.

It is this second phase of the party's evolution that appears to have come to an end. In every state election between 1990 and 2004, the Sena won more seats than the BJP; in 2009, both were roughly equal; but after Modi's rise, the BJP has dwarfed the Sena. In 2014 and 2019, the BJP won 122 and 105

seats, as against Sena's 63 and 56. The basic political message is clear. The alliance has been a bigger boon to the BJP than to the Sena, and it is impossible to match Modi's Hindutva credentials. For the sake of future growth and political power, the Sena needs another re-incarnation.

In the Sena's ideological arsenal, regionalism was already present. It used to be said that Mumbai was in Maharashtra, but Maharashtra was not in Mumbai, reflecting the paradox between Mumbai's regional location and its all-India migrant labour force. The Sena can now say that Maharashtra is also not in Maharashtra, for the employment crisis of the Modi era is bound to hurt Maharashtrians more, given the customary educational lead of the migrants over the locals. The idea of 80 per cent jobs for Maharashtrians is a statewide reinvention of the Sena's 1960s' battle cry. The demand, then, was for 80 per cent of Bombay jobs.

A second ideological platform also needs invigoration. The Sena can't grow if it only remains, or is viewed as, an urban party. It needs an agrarian programme, which the NCP can easily add to its pool, and for which the ongoing agrarian crisis provides an opening.

In short, the disintegration of the BJP-Sena alliance is driven by two characteristics of the Modi era. First, having two champions of the anti-Muslim platform has run into decreasing returns for the Sena, while hugely benefiting the BJP. Second, the economic crisis, which the Modi government continues to deny, is beginning to provide anti-BJP opportunities, at least at the state level.

The challenge for the Congress was, of course, more existential. Its two awful and successive national defeats have had a hugely demoralising effect, creating a profound organisational crisis. But the logic of Modi's politics has also provided an unexpected opening in a hugely important

state, which it would be foolish to let go. It is unclear at this point that the Sena will fully abandon Hindutva. Normally, it takes time to reorient politics. The Republican Party was a party of African Americans for decades after the American Civil War. It is now a predominantly White party. The transformation took very long.

The key question is: How badly does the Sena want power? If it wishes to remain in power for the foreseeable future, it can't return to full-blooded Hindutva, or it will be a junior partner in a BJP-based alliance. Political power has a way of bringing about ideological reorientation. This proposition will now be tested in Maharashtra.

This article first appeared in the print edition on December 9, 2019 under the title "Milestone Maharashtra." The writer is director, Center for Contemporary South Asia, Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and Social Sciences, professor of political science, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University

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