

Special Issue

June (Week 4)

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A short history of resort politics in India

Context: *For the last four days, a hotel in Guwahati has been at the centre of India's **biggest political story**. It is where the majority of MLAs from Maharashtra—rebels against Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray—have been sequestered against the turmoil in Mumbai.*

Details:

- The leader of the revolt, Maharashtra Urban Development and PWD Minister Eknath Shinde, claimed on Friday (June 24) that 50 MLAs are with him, including 40 from Thackeray's Shiv Sena. Before flying to Assam with his flock on June 22, Shinde and a large number of these MLAs spent two nights in Surat, Gujarat, which, like Assam, is run by the BJP.
- While the current situation is extraordinary in several ways—Thackeray, for example, looks in danger of having almost his entire party stolen from under his nose—'resort politics' is neither new nor unique to any party or state in India.
- At least since the 1980s, as coalition governments became the norm, examples of resort politics have been seen again and again.
- It is usually practised when MLAs need to be cornered by a party that is seeking to prove its majority in the legislative assembly, and it is feared that MLAs might be entering into behind-the-scenes negotiations with rival parties or groups.
- This often happens when there are leadership struggles in a party or state, and when the numbers in the House do not strongly favour any party in particular.
- But resort politics is not restricted to states alone. At the beginning of this month, as Rajya Sabha elections were held, 70 Congress MLAs in Rajasthan were lodged at a resort in Udaipur, presumably to keep them safe from poaching attempts. Ultimately, the Congress emerged victorious in three out of four seats in Rajasthan, and Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot hailed it as a "victory of democracy".

March 2022: Goa and the premature attempts at securing MLAs

- Among the results of the five states' elections, Goa and Uttarakhand saw a tighter contest. The Congress moved its leaders to a resort in north Goa ahead of the results, saying the leaders were attending "a series of birthday celebrations".
- However, the BJP ended up winning 20 of 40 seats in the state and comfortably formed its government again. Back in 2017, the BJP had emerged victorious after a similar neck-and-neck fight, as multiple MLAs from the Congress—the single-largest party then—crossed over to the BJP.

July 2020: Rajasthan Congress blocks a repeat of Madhya Pradesh

- On the heels of a similar rebellion by then Congress MLA Jyotiraditya Scindia that led to the fall of the Kamal Nath-led Madhya Pradesh government four months prior, deputy CM Sachin Pilot showed signs of discontent.
- The Congress then gathered its MLAs at the Fairmont Hotel in the state to prevent them from defecting. The MLAs favouring Pilot were themselves in Delhi—and they subsequently moved to a resort in a BJP-ruled state.
- At the end of the episode, there was no change in power, and Gehlot remained the Chief Minister while Pilot was demoted from the post of Deputy Chief Minister.

March 2020: After MLAs move to resort, a government falls

- Congress MLAs reached the Prestige Golf Club in BJP-ruled Bengaluru, and this was triggered by Congress leader Jyotiraditya Scindia quitting the party.



- The Congress's attempts to hold the Kamal Nath government together ended in failure, and Shivraj Singh Chauhan became Chief Minister for the fourth time with the support of those MLAs.
- Scindia joined the BJP, was later elected to the Rajya Sabha as an MP, and is now the Union Minister for Civil Aviation—a position that had once belonged to his late father.

2019: In a surprise, a three-party coalition trumps an ally-less BJP

- Interestingly, the ongoing Shiv Sena crisis has similarities with the events that led to the formation of its government in the first place.
- Long-time BJP ally Shiv Sena broke away and joined hands with the Congress-NCP alliance to form the government.
- On the eve of the Supreme Court's decision on the parties' petition seeking a floor test in the Assembly, a large group of Shiv-Sena-NCP-Congress MLAs assembled at a Mumbai hotel in a show of strength, indicating they had the numbers to form the government.

2000: Congress, RJD use option of last 'resort' to hold off Nitish

- Nitish Kumar was invited by the Speaker to form the government, despite him not having the numbers. Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD emerged as the largest party, but Kumar was called on by the Governor to form the government.
- The Congress and RJD, opposition parties who perhaps sensed what was to come, sent some of their members to a hotel in Patna. Kumar resigned before the trust vote took place, and ultimately RJD's Rabri Devi became the first woman CM of Bihar.

1984 and 1995: Andhra Pradesh's MLAs dance, play cards at resort

- In 1984, Nadendla Bhaskara Rao, the state finance minister, toppled Chief Minister NTR's government with Congress support.
- The film superstar-turned-politician Chief Minister was out of the country, and the governor installed Bhaskara Rao as the CM. From the United States, where he had gone for heart surgery, NTR secured around 160 MLAs by keeping them at his studios with ample facilities.
- NTR's films were screened for the MLAs' entertainment. In the end, the Bhaskara Rao government fell, and NTR was back in power.
- In 1995, NTR's son-in-law N Chandrababu Naidu wanted to oust NTR from the party and sent NTR loyalists to the Viceroy Hotel in Hyderabad to take over the TDP.
- One of those MLAs later recalled playing cards, dancing to Telugu songs, ordering food and keeping the hotel staff awake all night. Naidu eventually became the CM.

1983: CM secures MLA to keep Indira Gandhi from dissolving government

- Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde, who was earlier a part of the Congress party, sought to protect his government from being dissolved by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
- His wins in the 1983 and 1985 Assembly elections in the state had alarmed his rivals in the Janata Party in the state.
- Close to the Assembly trust vote, 80 MLAs were sent to a luxury resort near Bengaluru to reduce the chances of their defection.