The toppling of the Kamal Nath-led Congress government in Madhya Pradesh has left the Bharatiya Janata Party without any immediate political fruits to savour. Amidst the raging COVID-19 pandemic, the new BJP government in the state is bedevilled by internal fissures in the party, animosity between Shivraj Singh Chouhan and the central party leadership, and a disgruntled Jyotiraditya Scindia waiting in the wings to strike back. Given this backdrop, the Congress is preparing its ground to gain moral one-upmanship when 24 assembly seats in the state go to bypolls in September.

Since 20 March, the day Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) succeeded in bringing down the Kamal Nath government, Madhya Pradesh, like the rest of India, has been tottering on the edge of an economic disaster as COVID-19 continues to spread unabated (Free Press Journal 2020). However, unlike the rest of India, Madhya Pradesh has witnessed power politics taking precedence over the pandemic.

The 70-year-old Indian republic is no stranger to the ruling party at the centre conspiratorially toppling the opposition-ruled state governments, but the fall of the Kamal Nath government is unparalleled as it coincided with the incipient threat of a global pandemic.
Rattled by what it calls the “robbery of people’s mandate,” the Congress is eyeing to snatch back power through by-elections that are due before September. “Conspiracy at the time of Corona” appears to be the party’s war cry as it is bracing up to take on the BJP in the forthcoming by-elections to 24 assembly seats, necessitated by the resignations of the Congress defectors. It is optimistic that the electorate would punish the “traitors” in the bypolls and would pave a way for the Congress to return to power.

In the 230-member state assembly, the ruling BJP has 106 seats while the Congress’s tally has decreased to 92 after 22 of its members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), including 19 Jyotiraditya Scindia’s supporters, switched over to the BJP. On the other hand, two by-elections have been due for some time because of the demise of one BJP MLA and one Congress legislator (Ramachandran 2020).

For the Congress to return to power, it needs to win at least 22 out of the 24 seats. It looks nearly impossible, given the fact that the BJP as a ruling party leaves no stone unturned to win the elections. Nevertheless, the Congress is pinning its hopes on a possible sabotage by the BJP cadres who might refuse to be swayed by the leadership to support the turncoats in the by-elections.

**Political Woes for the BJP Government**

Political developments since the fall of the government in Madhya Pradesh suggest that the BJP’s morally dubious victory is proving to be pyrrhic. For it has provided none from the victorious side in the toppling game of the 15-month-old Kamal Nath government any fruits to savour; it has, in fact, yielded only disgrace for them to deal with.

Nearly one and half months after he took the oath as chief minister for the fourth time, a beleaguered Shivraj Singh Chouhan is combating COVID-19 with a five-member cabinet thrust upon him. He is likely to be given a nod to expand the cabinet soon, but that will only add to his political woes, as there are too many ministerial aspirants to be satisfied. Additionally, political circumstances leading to his ascension to the chief minister’s post for the fourth time have not offered Chouhan the requisite moral authority to silence the disgruntled members within the party like he did in the past.

Jyotiraditya Scindia, whose overweening political ambitions impelled him to ditch the Congress, stands virtually isolated in the BJP, awaiting an entry into the Rajya Sabha. The union cabinet minister rank that he has been hankering for looks a distant possibility.

Modi stands accused of having deliberately delayed the nationwide lockdown despite the unmistakable danger of the pandemic looming large on the country in order to ensure that his party got enough time to usurp power in Madhya Pradesh (Kulkarni 2020).

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who masterminded the toppling game, seems to have withdrawn himself from the affairs of Madhya Pradesh (New Indian Express 2020; Ranjan
When Scindia met Shah on 18 April to remind the deal they had struck that entailed the induction of six former ministers into Chouhan’s cabinet, Shah asked Scindia to meet party president Jagat Prakash Nadda instead (Times of India 2020).

What has compounded the crisis of credibility for the BJP in Madhya Pradesh is the perception of a mutual mistrust among Modi-Amit Shah duo, Scindia, and Chouhan.

**The Continuing Animosity between Chouhan and Scindia**

Chouhan and the scion of the erstwhile Gwalior princely state, Scindia, have been considered arch-rivals for over a decade in Madhya Pradesh. In the 2013 and 2018 assembly elections, Scindia was Congress’s face against Chouhan. Identifying Scindia as its target, the BJP strategised its campaign around the slogan *Maaf Karo Maharaj, Hamara Neta Shivraj* (Sorry Maharaj (Scindia), our leader is Shivraj) in the 2018 polls.

The chief minister repeatedly raked up the infamous role of the Scindias during the 1857 mutiny to embarrass Jyotiraditya. The Scindias have always been accused of siding with the British during the sepoy mutiny (Khan 1998). Notwithstanding these barbs, Jyotiraditya was equally unsparing in his attacks against his bête noire Chouhan.

Chouhan betrayed his dislike for the old rival even at a function in Bhopal organised to welcome Scindia on 12 March, two days after the latter joined the BJP.

He likened Scindia’s entry into the party to that of Vibhishan’s in the Rama’s camp in Ramayana, alluding that such a “traitor” is required “to destroy Congress’s Lanka.” The politically loaded comparison caused a flutter in the media (Sharma 2020). Since then the two leaders have not spoken to each other face to face.

Although Scindia has so far eschewed asserting authority in the state government, his entry in the BJP has weakened the chief minister’s hold on the party, evident from the composition of the cabinet sworn in on 21 April.

None of the five ministers, including two Scindia supporters, is Chouhan’s choice. The chief minister was sworn in on 23 March and was not allowed to form a cabinet till his one-man government became untenable in the face of Congress pressure.

When the BJP high command finally permitted him to form cabinet, the number was limited to just five, instead of the constitutionally mandated 12 as per the proviso to Article 164(A).

**Chouhan’s Resolve and the Hostile Party Top Brass**

Chouhan earned then BJP president Amit Shah’s wrath, as he was suspected of having preempted the party’s plan to cobble together a majority following the 2018 assembly elections result.
The BJP had won 109 against the Congress’s 114 seats. Amit Shah was believed to be hell-bent on forming a government by any means. Shah reportedly felt that Chouhan played a spoilsport in the government formation bid because he knew that the party would not choose him as chief minister again.

The Congress somehow managed a simple majority with the support of four independent MLAs, two Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) and one Samajwadi Party (SP) MLAs. The BJP’s uninterrupted rule for 15 years ended. With this, Chouhan’s political decline began. He was nominated as BJP national vice president along with two other ousted BJP chief ministers Vasundhara Raje and Raman Singh.

Realising that his new assignment was Amit Shah’s subtle signal for him to leave the state politics, Chouhan kept a low profile for a while. He eyed the leader of opposition post but his candidacy was ignored in favour of his detractor Gopal Bhargava. By and by, his trusted aides also started deserting him.

However, Chouhan’s resolve to stay relevant in the state politics in the face of Delhi leaders’ antipathy towards him has been remarkable. No BJP leader during Kamal Nath’s 15-month rule was more active in the state than Chouhan. But with all his strident campaigning against the short-lived Congress government, Chouhan failed to win over the party’s top echelons.

Chouhan was assigned no active role in the operation to oust Kamal Nath in March. It was Narottam Mishra, an Amit Shah acolyte, who coordinated the operation with full backing from his mentor in New Delhi.

The move to persuade Scindia to defect and bring with him enough MLAs to topple the Kamal Nath government was initiated by Shah and his loyalists in the state. When the government finally fell, the names that floated around included union cabinet minister Narendra Singh Tomar and Shah-loyalist Narottam Mishra as Kamal Nath’s probable successor.

However, as luck would have it, COVID-19 came to Chouhan’s aid. With time running out and the union government desperate to impose a national lockdown to contain the fast spreading virus, the BJP high command fell back on Chouhan to lead the government. A day after he was sworn in, Modi announced a national lockdown on 24 March.

As the COVID-19 crisis does not appear like going away anytime soon, Chouhan might continue as the chief minister. But the mojo that characterised his 13-year rule earlier till he lost power to the Congress two years ago is sorely missing.

Chouhan was elected as the chief minister in November 2005 when he was a blue-eyed boy of the BJP patriarch L K Advani (Chaturvedi 2017). Congress’s bitter infighting in the run up to the 2008 assembly election facilitated his return as chief minister. He was lucky the third
time when anti-Congress mood swayed the country in 2013. But in the next election in 2018, Chouhan’s luck ran out, only to smile again at him 15 months later.

**A Remarkable Shift in Chouhan's Public Image**

Unlike his 13 years of uninterrupted rule till 2018, when the BJP enjoyed a brute majority, Chouhan’s fourth term as chief minister is fraught with grave risks of instability. In his previous stints, a confident Chouhan manipulated the bureaucracy and the ruling party at will, marginalising his detractors and promoting his acolytes in the process.

With the generous support from a large section of the state media, which of course was bought at a price, Chouhan had managed to create a self-image of a benevolent mama. He exploited the image to drill into the party workers’ minds the message that he alone had the capacity to ensure the BJP’s success in elections. Having led the party to victory in two successive elections, Chouhan stood tallest among state BJP leaders. The party cadres were in awe of his stature. His penchant for organising extravagant events in the state in the name of Madhya Pradesh’s branding spawned a nexus of corrupt bureaucrats, politicians, and middlemen. The multi-billion Vyapam scam was only the most notorious manifestation of the nexus that ruled the state under the chief minister’s patronage.

Resentment against his style of working was not insignificant within the party but a shrewd politician that he has been, Chouhan knew who to appease and how to overcome the intra-party dissensions. His government was overgenerous to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leaders; lands were allotted to the saffron outfits for pittance; RSS-run schools were privileged over those of state government in providing aids, and all government-run cultural institutions were filled with Sangh Parivar members from the top to the bottom.

Such a breezy run that he had had is not possible in his fourth term for several reasons. For one, the chief minister’s moral authority is severely eroded, as he is seen as a cunning usurper of power and not the legitimate head of a duly elected government. For another, he has a formidable opposition, both in terms of number and aggression to contend with, unlike in his previous terms.

Next six months will be extremely crucial for the chief minister. His survival in the office will largely depend on two factors: administrative efficiency in dealing with the raging pandemic, and the political acumen to ensure BJP’s success in 24 assembly by-elections due before September.

**Politics Amidst the Pandemic**

As regards his efforts to combat the COVID-19, the chief minister is already under fire for doing too little, too late. On 20 March, the day Kamal Nath bowed out as chief minister, four people tested positive for novel coronavirus in Jabalpur. Since then, the number of positive cases and the resultant deaths have been rising unabated.
Health crisis has begun to stalk Madhya Pradesh from March when the precarious Kamal Nath government was desperately fending off poaching of the Congress MLAs. At that time, many states had already closed down public places, prohibited gatherings, and ramped up health infrastructure.

On 2 March, when the centre issued its fifth travel advisory, the Congress was busy rescuing its MLAs held hostage by the BJP at a Manesar hotel in Haryana. On 10 March, abandoning the state's preparation for the pandemic, the then health minister Tulsiram Silawat was co-opted at a Bengaluru resort with 21 rebel Congress MLAs, who quit later. Silawat was re-ducted in the Chouhan cabinet on 21 April though he was not assigned a medical and health portfolio.

By 16 March, the virus had infected 126 people and killed two. That was the day when BJP dismissed assembly speaker’s decision to adjourn the Vidhan Sabha session in view of the raging pandemic as a ploy to buy time.

The day after Chouhan took oath as the chief minister on 23 March, Modi imposed a nationwide curfew. The ousted chief minister Kamal Nath alleged that Parliament was made to function just to offer a chance to the Madhya Pradesh speaker to run the state assembly and pave a way for bringing down the Congress government.

For nearly a month, Chouhan ran a single-man cabinet. When the Congress objected to the absence of a cabinet, the chief minister formed a taskforce of BJP leaders with state president V D Sharma as its convenor. A cabinet came into being only when the Congress lodged a complaint with the President, citing unconstitutionality of the one-man government’s decisions.

On 22 April, Natottam Mishra took over as health minister. His initiatives have brought a semblance of normal functioning in the health department. However, the avoidable delay in tackling the pandemic with due seriousness has already caused considerable damage to the chief minister’s image, not to speak of the state’s health services.

The COVID-19 is still a developing story. It is impossible to even speculate the extent of the devastation to human lives, health systems, and the economy of the state in the short and long terms.

Steering the state out of the unprecedented crisis, Mishra is saddled with the demands of the chief minister to pay single-minded attention to welfare-centric governance. But that may not be possible because the manner in which the BJP foisted its government on the state has entailed the chief minister to make unethical political compromises for survival.

However, BJP insiders are hopeful that Chouhan may not have to worry too much about the Scindia factor after the by-elections are over. They feel Scindia has been one of the most overrated politicians in India whose charm has little value in the BJP.
Old Feuds Linger On

To secure a majority in the state assembly, the BJP needs to win only 10 out of 24 seats for which by-elections are due. The party is acutely conscious of the fact that its cadres in the Chambal-Gwalior region may not reconcile with the new scenario that entails supporting Scindia’s supporters in the bypolls (Ramachandran 2020; Sarkar 2020).

The BJP has a strong base in the region. Its leadership is expected to prefer losing a few seats rather than antagonise the cadres by pressing them to canvas for defectors from the Congress. In the event, Scindia will have to campaign extremely hard for the victory of his supporters in the face of a possible sabotage from the BJP cadres on one hand and an aggressive onslaught from the Congress on the other.

Scindia has started reaching out to his supporters through phone calls. The BJP has also been preparing strategies to mobilise its workers. However, no coordination is visible between the Maharaj and the party he defected to one and half months ago for the forthcoming elections (Dixit 2020).

Scindia’s Delusion of Grandeur

The BJP needed Scindia only to oust the Congress government. With that goal achieved, the ruling party is not inclined to mollycoddle Scindia beyond giving him a minister’s post in the Modi cabinet. The BJP leaders admit that assuming himself as a pan-Madhya Pradesh leader is Scindia’s delusion of grandeur.

Scindia had premised his claim to the chief minister’s post, which was denied to him, on the assumption that he had emerged as the most acceptable leader among the masses in the run up to the Madhya Pradesh assembly election in 2018. It was a tendentious reading of the people’s mood. The fact is that it was the ability of the Congress leaders, including Scindia, to remain united that impressed the voters enough to lean towards the party in the election. Scindia was only one of the faces in the top trinity, the other two being Kamal Nath and Digvijay Singh.

Of course, Scindia’s rigorous campaigning yielded good results for the Congress in his Gwalior-Chambal bastion where the party had won 26 out of 34 seats. But Madhya Pradesh has 230 seats and Scindia’s political citadel comprises only 15% of the total number. Moreover, the junior Scindia’s influence in the region is primarily due to his father’s legacy, which he was able to sustain in the election.

Like his father, Jyotiraditya picked up loyalists among the “subjects” on the basis of their devotion to the palace. Congress did not matter, neither does its ideology.

As political tidings favoured the Congress, Scindia’s handpicked loyalists won in good numbers and credit was apportioned to him. However, when the anti-Congress mood was
strong, as was the case in the last 15 years of the BJP rule, the blame was put on the party’s doorstep and not on Scindia. He had headed the Congress campaign committee in the 2013 election too when the party bit the dust but Scindia’s aura remained unscathed.

Despite being a leader of a small region, which swam and sunk with the rest of Madhya Pradesh in electoral waters in successive elections, Scindia managed to create an impression that he was cut above the rest of other Congress leaders, such as Digvijay Singh and Kamal Nath. He could achieve this remarkable feat because of a combination of factors. His strikingly telegenic looks, networking in high places, and the proximity with the Gandhi family stood him in a good stead. He has friends across the political spectrum in politics, media, and the corporate world. Being a scion of a royal family was an added attraction, which he exploited to the hilt to cast a charm offensive. However, when chips were down, he opted for a softer option of joining the BJP instead of standing majestically tall and alone with all those great attributes the media had endowed him with.

For all the projected mass appeal, Jyotiraditya decided to join BJP rather than launch a party like his father. Maybe because Madhya Pradesh Vikas Congress (MPVC), the party Madhavrao Scindia had floated, managed to win just two Lok Sabha seats in 1996, unlike parties of other Congress rebel heavyweights, such as Arjun Singh–N D Tiwari, Sharad Pawar, Mamata Banerjee, K Karunakaran, A K Antony, G K Moopanar, and Y S Jaganmohan Reddy who had a much higher degree of success.

Having lost the last Lok Sabha poll, Jyotiraditya Scindia wanted to rebuild his career in the BJP and had been trying to topple the Congress government in the state.

An overwhelming majority of the elected MLAs had opted for Kamal Nath as the chief minister and Scindia did not have the support of more than two dozen MLAs. Even when he chose to join the BJP, the number of Congress MLAs that he managed to wean away was less than a quarter of the Congress MLAs in the state.

Scindia’s switch to the BJP is, to all appearances, the result of his inability to imagine politics outside of power. Given his model of politics, this is personally a canny move on his part. For the foreseeable future, the BJP will be a dominant force in national politics. He will once again be elevated to the position where he can be a patron and secure his other interests within a predictable matrix of power in Delhi and Madhya Pradesh.

Contrary to the perception that he quit the party due to persistent neglect by the chief minister Kamal Nath, Scindia had begun toying with the idea of leaving the Congress soon after he was denied chief ministership.

Rahul Gandhi had offered deputy chief ministership to Scindia after the assembly poll results were out in December 2018. Scindia declined but said he would nominate someone for the deputy’s post. Gandhi then reportedly said that in that case, Kamal Nath could also nominate his second deputy.
After the 2019 Lok Sabha debacle, Scindia found himself shadowboxing much like other leaders as dissensions rocked the party and an adamant Rahul Gandhi refused to take back his resignation.

For Scindia, the election proved a double whammy as he lost his seat from Guna. Scindia’s political clout had been entirely based on his electoral invincibility and the massive inherited wealth which guaranteed him the position of a perpetual disburser of power and patronage to his loyalists. In the wake of his 2019 defeat, that aura of invincibility was shattered.

Immediately after that, he broke ranks with the Congress to support the abrogation of Article 370 (Business Today 2019). This was followed by his support of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act–National Register of Citizens (CAA–NRC), which has been the most profound attack on the constitutional ideals of Indian Republic.

In January 2019, he had a meeting with Chouhan which both described as a courtesy call. Scindia erased references to the posts he held with the Congress from his Twitter handle (the “former Union Minister, MP of Guna” is now described as “public servant, cricket enthusiast”). He also let his unhappiness be known in the public with a survey he had commissioned to assess the damage caused by the floods in the state in 2019, and claimed that poll promises were unkept.

In Madhya Pradesh, he had reasons to feel acutely vulnerable after the shocking defeat in Guna as two veterans Kamal Nath and Digvijaya Singh joined forces against him.

Kamal Nath had succeeded in getting his son Nakul Nath elected from Chhindwara while Digvijay Singh managed to get his son Jaivardhan Singh a berth in the Congress cabinet. Scindia felt that his future was bleak in the state Congress as Nakul Nath and Jaivardhan Singh have ascended in the state’s firmament as two rising stars.

While Nakul has not exhibited his political ambitions to reach beyond the pocket burrow of Chhindwara, Jaivardhan has been meticulously groomed by his father Digvijay Singh, who has a following across Madhya Pradesh.

Scindia could not be unaware of the history of the protracted political battle between his father and late Arjun Singh, the political mentor of Digvijay Singh. Arjun Singh overcame Madhavrao’s political challenges to anoint his protégé Digvijay Singh as chief minister in 1993. His national appeal notwithstanding, Madhavrao could never expand his base in Madhya Pradesh outside Chambal–Gwalior. First Arjun Singh and then Digvijay Singh saw to it that Gwalior Maharaj’s influence remained confined to his erstwhile princely state. Madhavrao too did not try hard to spread his charm outside Gwalior region.

After the 2018 assembly election, Jyotiraditya Scindia developed an overweening ambition to emerge as pan-Madhya Pradesh leader at the expense of both Kamal Nath and Digvijay
Singh. But the veteran duo frustrated the young Maharaj’s manoeuvrings.

**BJP and the Beleaguered Scindia**

The BJP noticed with alacrity an ally in Scindia in October last year when he claimed farm loan waiver, a poll promise that former party chief Rahul Gandhi had said would be kept within 10 days of coming to power, was not fulfilled.

What triggered the final move was the public spat that Scindia had with chief minister Kamal Nath in February. "It is impossible that Congress party makes a promise and does not fulfil it. If Congress has promised something then it is very important to fulfill it ... nahi to sadak par utarna padega [otherwise we will have to take to streets]," he told media persons on 15 February. Responding to the media over Scindia’s threat to protest, Kamal Nath said: "toh utar jayein [So, do it]" (Hindustan Times 2020).

Jyotiraditya Scindia defection to the BJP marked the third desertion of the Congress by a member of the erstwhile Gwalior royal family, known for its political and legal disputes often centred around enormous wealth in its possession.

Jyotiraditya’s paternal grandmother Vijaya Raje Scindia was the first to quit Congress in the 1960s. His father Madhavrao Scindia too left the Congress in mid-1990s, after alleging that prime minister P V Narasimha Rao had implicated him in the Jain Hawala case. He floated MPVC, but returned two years later to emerge as a senior Congress leader till his death in a plane crash in 2001. His aunts Vasundhara Raje and Yashodhara Raje and cousin Dushyant are all now in the BJP.

His exit from the Congress was thus the culmination of a long and twisted family legacy that has seen this politician return to the roots of his grandmother, the Rajmata.

For now, the BJP's top leadership is clear about how it wants to handle the situation. The idea is to give Jyotiraditya Scindia a national role, along with a Rajya Sabha seat, while ensuring Chouhan remains the king in Madhya Pradesh.

However, it may not be easy and seamless. Scindia has his own ambitions. His big grouse against the Congress had been that he was sidelined by Kamal Nath-Digvijaya Singh duo, and was forced to remain confined to the Gwalior-Chambal region, despite having a youth appeal across the state.

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