

# SC ruling, display of 162 MLAs shrank Ajit Pawar's chances

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**Mumbai:** The Supreme Court verdict, which came on the heels of a public show of strength by the Sena-NCP-Congress alliance, drastically narrowed Ajit Pawar's options.

Amid claims that the rebel leader would split NCP, the Maha Vikas Aghadi showcased its numbers on Wednesday night with its top leaders standing and addressing legislators. The event not only had MLAs of all three parties but also smaller ones which backed the alliance.

The sight of 162 MLAs under one roof, taking a pledge to stay with the alliance of Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress, made a telling picture given that the state assembly with a majority mark of 145 had BJP's Devendra Fadnavis as chief minister.

The decision to allow the media

in was taken at the last minute but it paid off. "It served to demoralise the BJP-led front. It became clear that our parties are united and we have the numbers," said a senior NCP leader. "The event also reassured our legislators that they were on the winning side," he added.

Indeed, NCP managed to showcase 51 of its 54 legislators at the event, sending a public signal that the rebellion had been crushed.

Ajit Pawar's supporters had opted to remain with his uncle, NCP chief Sharad Pawar, at least overtly. The SC's verdict to call a floor test on Wednesday made things even more difficult. The BJP-led front would have had no time to pull in more legislators. Also, the court's decision to not allow voting by secret ballot and to televise proceedings would have exposed the



Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge, NCP chief Sharad Pawar and Shiv Sena president Uddhav Thackeray along with their MLAs demonstrate their strength on Monday

lack of numbers to the public.

"The verdict was the last straw. After that, there was no choice. They could either resign or be ro-

undly defeated on the floor of the House which would have been humiliating," said a Shiv Sena MP.

Ajit Pawar had overplayed his

hand, banking on legislators close to him to stay with him, said political observers. "Finally, everyone weighs their options. We do not want to face another election. In the Vidhan Sabha polls, Sharad Pawar's aggressive campaign against BJP ensured our victory. Even though I am close to Ajit Pawar, my local opponent is BJP. How could I be part of a BJP alliance," asked an MLA from Western Maharashtra.

As the Monday evening event at a Mumbai hotel produced a picture favouring the Aghadi, its viral dissemination across media created a perception that possibly influenced the outcome of the court battle and resulted in a judicial pronouncement that triggered the premature resignations of Fadnavis and Pawar a day before the scheduled floor test.

The 'Amhi 162' was a coup of

sorts in the war of wits which started with Fadnavis's swearing-in on Saturday morning when it had appeared imminent that the three-way, anti-BJP combine was set to stake claim. According to political leaders, the event hurt BJP with the evidence that it lacked numbers. While it continued to claim that Pawar junior had a bloc of NCP MLAs backing him, their presence in the Sharad Pawar camp suggested that either BJP's confidence was misplaced or it was banking on cross-voting. Either way, it was bad optics.

For the opposition, it was a well-executed move that gelled with its ad nauseum attacks on BJP for "murder of Constitution" and "horse trading". That their ire was targeted at the top saffron duo of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah would have surely discomfited the ruling camp.