

**MAHARASHTRA
SETBACK FOR FADNAVIS**

**MADHYA PRADESH CM MOHAN YADAV
WILL ENSURE MoUs TURN INTO INVESTMENTS**

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Munde blues

Just months into its tenure, the Fadnavis government suffers multiple blows

BY DNYANESH JATHAR

THE DEVENDRA FADNAVIS-led Maha Yuti government in Maharashtra suffered its first major setback with the resignation of Dhananjay Munde as food and civil supplies minister. Munde stepped down on March 4, as the assembly began its session.

Earlier, Munde was seen at a tea party hosted by the minister, mingling with his colleagues, unaware of what lay ahead. It is learnt that Fadnavis met his deputy Ajit Pawar, and delivered an ultimatum: Munde, who belonged to Pawar's NCP, must either resign or face dismissal.

The tipping point was the viral photos that showed the brutal torture and murder of Massajog sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh, allegedly by Munde's men, in Beed, his home district, on December 9. One particularly shocking image was of a goon urinating on Deshmukh's face after his murder.

Munde's close aide Walmik Karad had already been under arrest for attempting to extort Avaada Energy, a company that has a wind energy project in Massajog. Deshmukh had opposed the extortion bid, which allegedly led to his murder. Deshmukh's family and civil society groups have been demanding that Munde should be named co-accused

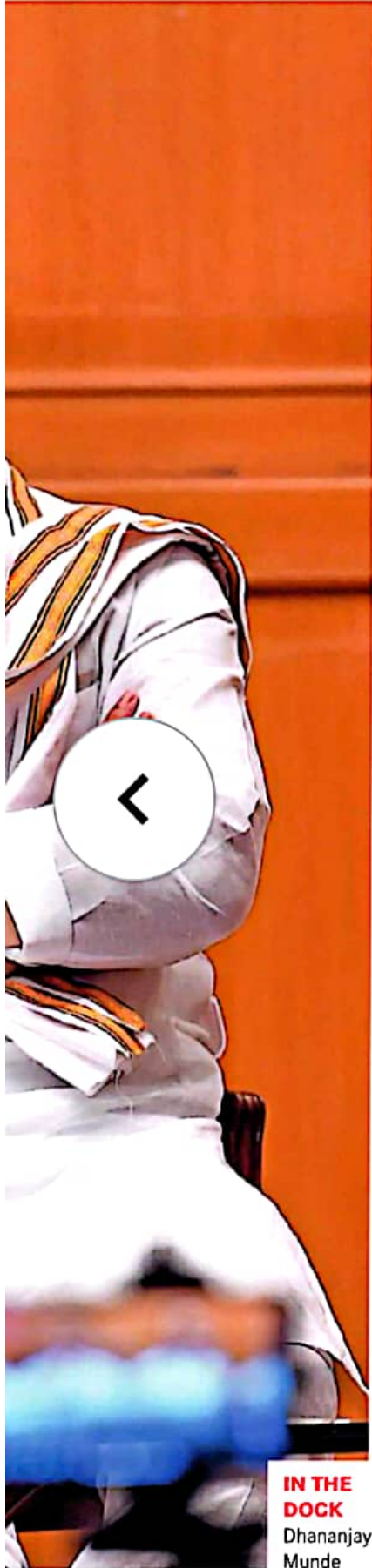
in the murder case. But Munde has denied any involvement, calling for strict action against all accused, including Karad.

His resignation was widely welcomed. Munde's cousin, Environment Minister Pankaja Munde, supported the decision, saying it was necessary for law to take its course. She told journalists in Nagpur that she wished to apologise to Deshmukh's mother. "I just don't have the courage to see the viral videos and photos," she said.

Supriya Sule, MP and working president of the NCP (Sharad Pawar), questioned the delay in Munde's resignation, saying the government must have been aware of the evidence in the charge-sheet much earlier. BJP legislator Suresh Dhas, who has been pursuing the case from the beginning, demanded that the special investigation team appointed by the government investigate a meeting between Avaada Energy officials, Karad and Munde at Munde's official residence in Satpuda.

The case has severely damaged the Fadnavis government. Firm from the beginning that Munde had to go, Fadnavis began cleaning up the police in Beed, which was seen as biased towards Munde and Karad. He appointed a new superintendent of police and set up a special investiga-





IN THE DOCK
Dhananjay Munde

AMEY MANSABDAR

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tion team that reported directly to him. A few days after the SIT submitted its report, he told Ajit Pawar that Munde had to go. Hinting at the decision, Pawar told Munde that he had also resigned when he faced allegations of corruption more than a decade ago. When Munde still refused to step down, Fadnavis gave the ultimatum—resign or face dismissal.

Munde had faced corruption charges when he was agriculture minister from 2019 to 2024. Dhas, social activist Anjali Damania and former state Congress president Nana Patole had brought out documents that allegedly exposed corruption under Munde's watch.

Munde's troubles had been escalating before he stepped down. He was under a cloud of suspicion after Karad was arrested in the Deshmukh murder case. A family court ordered him to pay ₹2 lakh alimony per month to his estranged wife Karuna Sharma, while the Congress claimed it had unearthed another scam when Munde was agriculture minister. Patole alleged Munde had colluded with Powerlooms Corporation Ltd managing director Shrikant Pawar to purchase cotton storage bags at ₹1,250 each, despite their market price being ₹577, resulting in a ₹41.59 crore scam.

"Contracts were illegally awarded to four companies with links to one family," said Patole. "Shrikant Pawar orchestrated the entire process. This procurement was approved when the code of conduct for the Lok Sabha polls was in force; the Election Commission's permission was not sought. Of the four companies, three belong to the Oswal family and the fourth to the Oswals's chartered accountant."

NCP(SP) legislator Rohit Pawar said Munde should be made co-accused in the Deshmukh murder case, while

Damania said she would continue her fight till Munde resigns as MLA.

Even as the storm over Munde raged on, another blow hit the Fadnavis government. A Nashik court sentenced Agriculture Minister Manikrao Kokate to two years in jail on for fraudulently acquiring land under a housing quota. Kokate, also from Ajit Pawar's party, said the case was politically motivated, dating back to the mid-1990s when he was not an MLA and was close to Congress minister Tukaram Dighole. In 1999, he contested against Dighole and defeated him. According to Kokate, the case was the result of the political rivalry between him and Dighole.

The state legislature witnessed tense moments when opposition MLAs began raising the slogan: 'Kokate Aur Munde, Maha Yuti Sarkar Ke Do Gunde'. They demanded Kokate's resignation, citing how Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was treated when he was in a similar situation.

With Munde's removal, Fadnavis has given a strong message that those accused of serious wrongdoings would have to step down or face dismissal. The question now is whether the same applies to Kokate as well. ●