FOREIGN MINISTER'S RESPONSE TO US AMBASSADOR

A story for all the wrong reasons

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ON May 31, our diplomat-in-chief, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, sent a message to diplomatic correspondents in Dhaka suggesting what questions they should ask the US ambassador. By the time his message was transmitted to journalists, the US ambassador's press event, DCAB Talk, was over, and the minister's note ended up as a story itself. It couldn't be ascertained whether the message was a government advisory or a tutorial note as there was no official explanation about it following the publication of the story.

It was a story for all the wrong reasons. Contents of his note suggest that he was unhappy – perhaps angry, too – at the US ambassador's public comments on the state of democracy, human rights, press freedom and sanctions on Rab. He wrote, "Please, you (the newsmen) ask the US envoy why they cannot stop such extrajudicial killings in their own country. Secondly, about 100,000 US citizens go missing every year. Even children are deprived of reuniting with their Hispanic parents. Ask the US about their problems, not about Bangladesh." In his message, Mr Momen added, "It is not the responsibility of the US to rule our country and its development. If the US wants freedom of press, why have they censored the Russian television channel RT? If they want accountability, why are the US security forces or police not punished or held accountable for killing more than 1,000 citizens, mostly Black and Hispanic, every year?"

Questions suggested by Mr Momen also included, "... if their electoral process is fair, why don't young Americans

believe in their election system and why is there a low turnout among young Americans? Why is there a 25 percent voter turnout in each election? Is it a participatory electoral process?"

These questions, based on half-truths or questionable facts, coming from none other than a person who has spent more than one-third of his

career in the US, are quite shocking. The foreign minister made his stay in the US a special point when he met Secretary of State Anthony J Blinken on April 4, saying, "I always have some indebtedness to you, because when I was homeless, jobless, and stateless, it is the US that provided me a home and a job, and I am thankful for that." Do we have to believe that he is incapable of differentiating between missing persons and enforced disappearances? The voting statistics he has cited is also far from the truth as the official records show that the lowest

turnout in the US presidential election was 49 percent posted in 1996. In the last presidential election, the turnout was 62 percent.

Questions suggested by Mr Momen were nothing new, rather a repetition of unverified claims made by some politicians in their public speeches. But political speeches are quite different

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from the statements made by people steering diplomacy for their country. One may wonder whether he has minutely followed recent statements and comments by US diplomats, including Ambassador Peter Haas, as they now frequently admit the challenges they are facing at home in relation to press freedom and elections. Ambassador Haas, on May 24, told editors and senior journalists in Dhaka that the US was not perfect when it came to having a free press. Quoting from the most recent Reporters Without Borders World

Press Freedom Index, he said the US had ranked 42nd out of 180 countries, which, according to him, was far from the top. He added, "Frankly, the United States needs to do better." There were admissions, too, about the difficulties the US is facing regarding elections, especially the allegations of fraud made by former President Donald Trump and his followers in the Republican Party.

The biggest problem with these statements, aimed at deflecting the focus of alleged violations of human rights and democratic principles by pointing out failures of others, is that it is a futile exercise and, to some extent, counterproductive. When Ambassador Haas or any other Western diplomat emphasises on a credible election according to international standards, wouldn't it be wiser to respond with expressing commitment to follow such standards? Trying to find justification of a discredited election through pointing out flaws in other countries' elections exposes desperation to deflect the issue.

The same is true when attempts were made to counter issues of human rights abuses, press freedom and accountability by raising questions about intentions and making wild allegations of conspiracies to destabilise the government. This also contradicts assertions by other functionaries of the government that it has been reviewing disputed legislations like the Digital Security Act (DSA) to ensure that it does not become a tool to harass journalists.

The news about the foreign minister's suggested questions to reporters was especially troublesome as he has already earned some notoriety for his diplomatic language. His characterisation of Indo-Bangla relationship or comments about seeking help from India to bring an end to the US sanctions on Rab and importing oil from Russia can be cited here as examples. One may wonder whether these words are advancing our cause and brightening our image abroad, or harming it instead.

Who is afraid of EVMs and why?

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BANGLADESH'S Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal, in a recent interview with *The Daily Star,* said there was no scope for showing muscle power during voting if the electronic voting machines (EVMs) are used during polls. His remarks have more than anything reignited the debate over the reliability of EVMs in reflecting people's mandate. However, the main opposition party, the BNP, remains as sceptical about EVMs as ever.

It is pertinent to turn to India, Bangladesh's closest neighbour and the world's largest democracy, to find out how the Indian Election Commission manages EVMs during state assembly and parliamentary elections, and sustains the sanctity of the adult franchise.

It was in 1982-83 that the Indian Election Commission first used EVMs on an experimental basis in 50 polling stations of Parur assembly constituency in the southern state of Kerala. The Supreme Court had, however, suspended their use in 1984, on the grounds that their usage could not be allowed till the Representation of the People Act, 1951 was amended. It took another four years to amend the law, enabling the use of EVMs with effect from March 15, 1989. Since the year 2000, EVMs have been used in all elections across India – four Lok Sabha and 122 state legislative assembly polls.

But it hasn't been a smooth journey all the way for EVMs in India, as opposition from various quarters persists till today, with some parties continuing to harbour doubts about the possibility of tampering with the machines and how they are transported from booths to strongrooms of the Election Commission, and then to counting centres. In 2018, the apex court rejected a petition seeking to restore ballot papers. Despite that, political parties that have lost the electoral battles have gone public from time to time, airing their suspicion of EVMs and preference for paper ballots.

Politicians have accused parties of tampering with the machines, hacking them or stealing them to influence poll results. But none of them have been proven. Those complaining about EVMs are caught in self-contradiction. For instance, in 2017, after the Aam Aadmi Party's defeat in Punjab assembly elections, the party had demanded a

probe into the alleged malfunctioning of EVMs, and claimed EVMs can be hacked in 90 seconds. AAP legislator Saurabh Bhardwaj even sought to demonstrate in a public session how EVMs can be tampered with. The Election Commission invited all parties to prove their claims, but no political party took up the gauntlet. Five years down the line, the AAP won the Punjab assembly polls earlier this year and assumed power in the state for the first time, and it did not complain about EVMs.

In early 2017, Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party was decimated in the Uttar Pradesh assembly polls, prompting her to allege that the BJP had tampered with the EVMs. Mayawati was supported by her rivals, the Samajwadi Party and Congress, but the Election Commission rejected the charges.

A series of setbacks in both national and state-level polls prompted India's main opposition party, the Congress, to discuss the use of EVMs and its possible tampering at its brainstorming session in Udaipur city in May this year. Senior party leader Prithviraj Chavan wanted the party to pass a resolution saying India would return to paper ballots if the Congress returned to power. There were many leaders at the meeting who opposed the use of EVMs.

The Congress needs to be reminded of two important things: i) That the party won several elections, including the two consecutive general elections in 2004 and 2009, with votes cast using EVMs; and ii) Chavan's suggestion that Congress make a promise to switch to paper ballots if the party is voted back to power can happen only through the existing system of general elections using EVMs.

Even at the height of the BJP's supremacy in electoral battles in most parts of India in 2018, Congress won assembly elections in the heartland states of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, defeating the saffron party in votes cast through EVMs. So, is it fair for certain parties to blame the EVMs?

Some parties have often complained about instances of EVMs being found in private vehicles of politicians, but they have been nothing more than stray cases, and certainly not at a scale to vitiate the polling in its entirety. The Indian Election Commission has put in place elaborate measures regarding the safety of EVMs during transportation and against loss or theft. Measures include tracking software, installing GPS devices in vehicles carrying EVMs, and mandatory video recording of the entire process.

The parties also wanted the Election Committee to introduce Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) attached to EVMs for further transparency and verifiability in the poll process. The poll body has done that too.