



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHON

Was the US visa policy against undemocratic actors necessary?



Zillur Rahman
is the executive director of the
Centre for Governance Studies
(CGS) and a television talk show
host. His Twitter handle is @zillur

ZILLUR RAHMAN

Recently, the media environment in Bangladesh has been up in arms regarding the potential of upcoming US sanctions. Now it seems that the rumours and hearsay being spread on social media and the tabloids had an element of truth after all. On 24 May, the US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken announced a new visa policy "to Promote Democratic Elections in Bangladesh."

By now, the news has been disseminated far and wide, and many interest groups are spinning the story to fit their own narratives and political agendas. I had the privilege of interviewing the US Assistant Secretary of State, Donald Lu, just hours after the statement was made in order to clarify the message being sent. And the very first question I asked was, "Was it necessary?"

I believe I have an answer to this question and an understanding of the intent behind this diplomatic action, based on the wording of the statement, the interview with Donald Lu, and the recent usage of the Immigration and Nationality Act (referred to in the official statement) by the US in Bangladesh and other countries.

First, however, it is urgent to identify what this new policy is not: it is not a "sanction".

Additionally, according to the assistant secretary of state, this new policy is definitely not in favour of any particular political party or group. "This policy will be applied equally to members of government and to members of opposition," Donald Lu stated. He also proceeded to give examples of how the act will apply to opposition party members if it is found that they had been involved in violence to undermine elections or voter intimidation.

Donald Lu also clarified that the act is not retaliation for any kind of decision or statement made by the government of Bangladesh or by members of the ruling party. The official details of the new policy were revealed to the government even before the prime minister went on her visit to London and gave the much-discussed interview with BBC. Other provocative actions on the part of Bangladesh, such as the prime minister's statement about a response to sanctions on May 13, as well as the revocation of the additional security detail to the US ambassador and the ambassadors of three other nations on May 15, are now recontextualised in light of the fact that the government already knew that this new visa policy was coming.

The assistant secretary of state also made it clear that the policy is not *ex post facto*, which means that the new visa policy will not retrospectively affect individuals who are alleged to have committed actions to undermine democratic elections in the past. As Donald Lu stated, "This is a forward-looking policy, meaning that our hope is that this policy will help prevent violence and promote a free and fair election this coming year in Bangladesh."

Regarding whom the visa policy will particularly target, Donald Lu made it clear that the policy will not target institutions, as visas are only issued to individuals. However, he added that the policy will target immediate family members of perpetrators, meaning spouses and children. This little detail should strike fear into the hearts of the true targets of this policy: those with families living, working or studying in the US, who think they can get away with undermining democratic elections without repercussions. Although the US will not publish any list of individuals whose visas are revoked or blocked, the person whose visa is affected will be informed immediately.

Perhaps the most crucial point to note is that the policy will target both those individuals who give orders to undermine the democratic election process and those who follow those orders. The official press release identified four key methods of undermining democratic elections: vote rigging, voter intimidation, the use of violence to prevent people from exercising their right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, and the use of measures designed to prevent political parties, voters, civil society, or the media from disseminating their independent views.

The wording of the press release is quite similar to the statement made by the US Department of State on

February 25, 2022 addressing individuals in Somalia during the 2022 Somali presidential election, as well as the statement made on May 24, 2023 addressing individuals in Nigeria during the Nigerian presidential election. The common trend is the utilisation of Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act in all three cases. The main difference is that in the case of Bangladesh, the policy was preemptively announced before the election process and serves more as a warning than punishment. Another key distinguishing point in the Bangladesh visa policy is that at least one of the four identified methods of undermining democratic elections allude directly to Bangladesh government's usage of the Digital Security Act (DSA) in suppressing dissenting views, such as how the act was used against national daily *Prothom Alo* on March 29, 2023.

Therefore, as both the people who give orders and the people who follow those orders will be targeted, bad actors who are filing DSA charges, the police force who are carrying out arrests, and also members of the justice system who are complicit in abusing the DSA can be subjected to the clauses of the new visa policy.

Implications

In a world where sanctions are being increasingly seen as counterproductive, this new form of diplomatic pressure sends a strong message without hampering the livelihoods of the common people. The message between the lines is that the USA is keeping a very close eye on Bangladesh at the moment. It also underscores Bangladesh's current importance in the broader geopolitical environment of the Indo-Pacific.

This kind of diplomatic browbeating is most definitely not a good look for Bangladesh. But what should have been a matter of national shame turned

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out to be a policy mostly welcomed by the common people, if we go by the overflow of positive reactions on social media in response to the press statement.

There is precedent for this adulation. Previous stern diplomatic action from the US came in the form of individual sanctioning of prominent officers of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and of course against the organisation itself under the Global Magnitsky Act. As a result, we have seen a drastic fall in the number of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in the last year. Perhaps the people are hoping to see a similar positive effect stemming from this new policy.

Two key questions regarding the policy remain unanswered for the time being. The US Department of State has yet to declare how it will track undemocratic actions in Bangladesh's many urban and rural nooks and crannies during the hectic election cycle. The State Department has also not clarified what the policy will be for those with dual US-Bangladeshi citizenship and those with green cards who might be actively undermining the democratic electoral process, as the usual visa process may not apply to them.

Yet the profoundly positive reaction of the people of Bangladesh towards this policy gives us a dire reminder of the state of the nation. The people of Bangladesh are starved of hope, and they will find hope from wherever it might come. And perhaps, for that reason alone, I believe that this new policy was necessary.

The bloody legacy of Henry Kissinger



Dr Sayeed Ahmed
is a consulting engineer and the CEO
of Bayside Analytic, a technology
focused strategy and management
consulting organisation.

SAYEED AHMED

Henry Kissinger, a controversial but most influential geopolitical strategist in American history, turned 100 on May 27. Over the last few days, many articles have labelled him as "crooked," "war criminal" or plain "evil." Some also agree that despite all these, he remains an influential thinker in geopolitics who has deeply shaped US foreign policy. American policymakers still consult him on world affairs, such as the Ukraine war or the conflict with China. But Kissinger's legacy has indeed been bloody.

A brilliant political theorist with a PhD from Harvard,

president to end him instead. After the coup, Pinochet continued his murderous repression with full American support, which Kissinger ensured.

With an assassin-like apathy, Kissinger repeated the same in 1976 after an Argentine coup overthrew President Isabel Perón, where the military rulers carried out atrocities on an even greater scale. In the so-called "Operation Condor" that followed, left-wingers were killed throughout Latin America, which some in the State Department pointed out, but Kissinger muffled all such voices. This was a repetition of

on Vietnam, forcing him to acknowledge that it was indeed a useless war. Later, Kissinger admitted it was the most disastrous decision for him to agree to the interview in which he likened his foreign missions with Hollywood's lone cowboy image. He later tried to retract it, but failed, because Fallaci had recorded the entire conversation.

Kissinger, a cold-blooded Machiavellian and prophet of realpolitik, has no qualms about doing unpleasant things with unpleasant people. That explains how he could order carpet bombing in Cambodia, destruction of the economy in Chile ("make the economy scream"), or stopping grain shipment to Bangladesh (which he termed a "basket case" and wanted it to remain so). Born in Germany, Kissinger had direct exposure to Hitler's anti-Jew persecution. His family fled to London and then to New York in 1938 when he was 15. His biographer Walter Isaacson



To many in the world,
the name Kissinger
is synonymous with
duplicity.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

the events in Bangladesh where Archer Blood was ostracised by the administration for sending reports of Pakistan's genocidal activities in Dhaka.

Each of these incidents is enough to raise charges of war crimes.

Maverick journalist Christopher Hitchens made a strong case for it in *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (2001). The book is an indisputable testament of how Kissinger's ambitions and ruthlessness directly resulted in widespread murders and indiscriminate slaughter in Indochina, Bangladesh, Chile, and East Timor. The Vietnam War (including conflicts in Laos and Cambodia) perhaps received the greatest publicity in the world press partly because of the huge public protests in many countries of the world, including the US. Kissinger knew well that it was an unwinnable war, but he still continued it, causing many deaths that could have been avoided. Later, he made sure before interviews that the book would not be mentioned and has always avoided questions about the Vietnam War.

It was Kissinger's plan for General Augusto Pinochet to overthrow (and kill) Chile's democratically elected President Salvador Allende in 1973 with extensive support from the CIA. The Nixon administration was actually willing to work with Allende. But Kissinger, in typical Machiavellian style, convinced the

people in Asia know Kissinger for his infamous roles in Bangladesh (1971, killing millions), Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (where he prolonged the war and initiated carpet bombing that killed 150,000), and Indonesia (actively involved in Suharto's killing spree and attack on East Timor, killing at least 100,000). But his notoriety in Latin America is perhaps unparalleled.

During the Yom Kippur War between Israel and the Arabs in 1973, he allowed the Israeli army to advance before initiating any diplomatic efforts to stop the war. Later, the US replenished Israel's defence equipment with arms worth \$2 billion when Golda Meir asked for \$850 million only. Kissinger left his marks in every continent, almost in every country, with similar effects, such as large-scale civilian deaths, economic devastation, and perpetual shifting of the balance of power favouring an ally.

Ironically, Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 for achieving peace in Indochina, jointly with Vietnam's General Le Duc Tho. The general turned it down because he didn't agree that peace was achieved, but Kissinger accepted it with "humility." The award remains among the most disputed in Nobel Prize history.

To many in the world, the name Kissinger is synonymous with duplicity.



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Not dissonant
- 27 Back at sea
- 6 Moon of
- 30 Biped feature
- Saturn
- 31 Farm grazier
- 11 Make amends
- 32 Cardinal
- 12 Love to pieces
- 33 Game outing
- 13 Recurring
- 35 Saw
- theme
- 38 Make broader
- 14 Amusing
- 39 Friend of
- Wendy
- 15 Score count
- 40 Ouzo flavor
- 17 Demand
- 41 Derisive look
- 18 Pole worker
- 42 "In the Seven Woods" poet
- 19 Pumps full of
- bubbles
- 22 "The Rise
- of Sky-walker"
- heroine
- 23 Attacked
- violently
- 24 Crichton
- novel
- 25 Stop the flow

DOWN

- 1 Meddle
- 2 "Becket" actor
- 3 Inform
- 4 Have — (have pull)
- 5 Untouched
- 6 Tic-toe link
- 7 Chapel reply
- 8 Soup choice
- 9 Out of bed
- 10 Bottle parts
- 16 Medium sessions
- 20 Immediately
- 21 Flurry
- 24 Potent brew, slangily
- 25 Uppsala's nation
- 26 So far
- 27 Maine park
- 28 Green shade
- 29 Cords
- 30 Catches
- 34 Of high quality
- 36 "My word!"
- 37 Mess up

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