



Citizens for Verifiability, Transparency &
Accountability in Elections

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PRESS RELEASE

Hari Prasad's arrest smacks of vendetta by the ECI

VeTA demands immediate acquittal

Peeved by the EVM researchers' research findings that "India's EVMs are vulnerable to fraud", Election Commission hit back at the critics with the vengeance unknown to the scientific community around the world. **Arrest of Hari Prasad Technical Coordinator of VeTA** on charges of theft, house trespass or house breaking etc. under sections 380, 454 and 457 smacks of intolerance and vendetta.

Public Relations exercise

By its vicious actions, **the Election Commission of India has earned notoriety worldwide**. We are getting messages of solidarity from the scientific community worldwide for this witch-hunt. Why is then the ECI feigning ignorance and innocence in the matter? Flustered by the public outcry, the ECI is indulging in a public relations and damage control exercise to save itself from further embarrassment.

Proof of ECI's role

What makes the role of the ECI in pressing charges against Hari Prasad is the sweeping nature of allegations in the complaint by the District Collector/ District Election Officer (DEO). Sample this:

"As the actions of Hari Prasad have far reaching consequences you may please investigate whether there is any vested interests involved here, with ulterior motives to discredit the established election system in the country"
(excerpted from DEO complaint dated May 12, 2010)

Statements like the above are way beyond the domain and capacity of district officials. It is explicit that the DEO was merely taking the express orders of the ECI in filing the complaint. If the complaint and the theft charge was made at the

behest of the ECI, how can it now say that the police investigation is not being done at its behest. You need to stretch your credulity to think that the two are unrelated.

The ECI did not just stop in ordering a complaint against Hari Prasad. That it has unleashed the full force at its command to send Hari Prasad to jail is evident from the fact that more than a dozen very senior police officers of the rank of DSP and above were involved in strategising and effecting Hari Prasad's arrest as if he is a dreaded gangster. Sources in the police confirm that the arrest was a result of severe pressure from the ECI through the governmental authorities.

Proof of Vendetta

Why do we say this is a case of vendetta? Because this is not the first time that an EVM has gone missing from the ECI (several dozen EVMs were stolen in the past according to ECI's own response) but never in the past such drastic action was taken.

Why not fix responsibility on your officials?

The EVMs are in the custody of the District Election Officers (DEOs). If an EVM went missing, it is the district collector/ DEO or some other official who should be held first for dereliction of duty. **It is shocking that the ECI has not any action against its own custodians of EVMs but has zealously pursued FIRs against researchers who merely used them for research purposes and there is absolutely justification for this.** This underscores the ECI's utter disregard for lack of accountability in EVM operations.

Poor storage of EVMs

Until the TV9 demonstration, the ECI had no idea that the voting machine was missing. Even after the telecast, it had taken nearly two weeks for the ECI to establish that the EVM belonged to Mumbai.

This brings out the shocking reality that the EVMs are completely unsafe in their custody and that the much trumpeted talk that the ECI has excellent administrative safeguards is just propaganda and bereft of any basis.

If this is the state of affairs in India's largest metropolitan city, imagine how safe the EVMs would be in far flung areas. Even if people would have carried them away by dozens, it would have gone unnoticed because the ECI had no proper records or inventory of EVMs until recently. It has issued some guidelines after the demonstration by Hari Prasad and team's sting demonstration exposed the weaknesses.

Rather than thank Hari Prasad and his co-researchers for making them realize their faultlines, the ECI has begun the worst ever witch hunt by an independent election body.

What next?

We will fight this battle both legally and outside in the public arena. The media has risen in support of Hari Prasad.

I recently participated in a panel discussion on India's electronic voting machines in Washington D.C along with representatives of the ECI. The experts, comprising some of the best electronic voting security researchers in the world from the world's leading Universities concluded that "India's EVMs do not today provide security, verifiability or transparency adequate for confidence in election results." (Read full statement of international experts at: <http://www.usenix.org/events/ewtwote10/final-letter-eci.pdf>)

We propose to organize a national debate on the issue in September involving leading experts on the subject. Likely to be in attendance are the two international researchers namely Alex Halderman (professor of computer science, University of Michigan) and Rop Gonggrijp (computer security researcher and transparency activist, Netherlands) who were co-researchers of Hari Prasad in the research study exposing vulnerability of India's EVMs.

Would an imprudent Commission want to persist pursuing a confrontational path by pressing for the arrest of these foreign experts who are co-researchers of Hari Prasad or whether it would want to join the debate is a moot question.

In the meantime, even as we exercise all our legal options, we demand that the Election Commission of India withdraw its complaint registered by the district election official (obviously at the ECI's behest) forthwith and stop all further proceedings in the matter. The ECI must be relieved that we are merely seeking acquittal and not a public apology

Such a step would only help it arrest the inexorable decline in its prestige in the world of the international community.

We hope saner sense prevails among the mandarins of the Nirvachan Sadan, the Headquarters of the Election Commission of India.

For more information on arrest, updates, detailed background to the whole issue, log on to our website www.indianEVM.com

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You can also download a copy of my book titled "Democracy at Risk!! Can we trust our EVMs?" at the following link:

http://www.indianevm.com/book_democracy_at_risk_2010.pdf