

# Ohio House speaker calls for investigation into Democrat accused of hostile behavior

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Columbus Dispatch

A Cleveland-area House Democrat is facing an investigation after he was accused of hostile and erratic behavior toward constituents, staff and his fellow representatives.

Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost said Monday that his office appointed outside counsel to examine the conduct of Rep. Elliot Forhan, D-South Euclid, at the request of House Speaker Jason Stephens. The move came days after top Democrats stripped Forhan of his committee assignments due to a "continued pattern of harassment, hostility and intimidation."

Stephens also suspended Forhan's badge access to the Ohio Statehouse and Riffe Center.

"Ultimately, hostility, profanity, and dangerous, violent remarks have unfortunately been the hallmark of Rep. Forhan's tenure in the Ohio House of Representatives," House Minority Leader Allison Russo, D-Upper Arlington, wrote in a memo to House Democratic leaders.

Forhan is serving his first term representing Ohio House District 21 in eastern Cuyahoga County.

He first came under fire after a May committee hearing, when he clashed with a cosmetologist in his district over legislation that would eliminate training for boutique services. In her memo, Russo said Forhan made disparaging comments to the constituent and "engaged in shouting, finger pointing and finger snapping."

Democratic leadership sanctioned Forhan and required him to complete implicit bias training, which culminated in a public apology. Russo said Forhan's demeanor during counseling was "erratic," and at times, he refused to accept responsibility for his actions.

That was only the first incident involving Forhan, according to Russo's memo. Among the allegations:

- Over the summer, Forhan arrived unannounced at the home of a female state lawmaker who was at the May committee hearing.

- He threatened suicide multiple times or told others to kill him, including during a mediation session with Equality Ohio. The session came about after Forhan was "inappropriate and disrespectful" to someone with the LGBTQ rights organization.
- Forhan initially called Israel's response to Hamas' attack a "war crime," but he later began touting pro-Israel positions because he believed organizations in his heavily Jewish district would work to replace him.
- House staff expressed concern about an Israeli flag that Forhan placed outside his office, which is next to the office of a Muslim representative. The House Democrats' chief of staff asked Forhan whether he'd consider moving it inside his office, and Forhan did so – but then posted a video on social media blasting the conversation.
- Last week, Forhan screamed at Rep. Munira Abdullahi, D-Columbus, while the two were alone in a committee room. Abdullahi criticized Forhan's flag video, noting that it targeted a staff member and could have put the person at risk. After learning what happened, Democratic leaders dispatched the House sergeant at arms in case Forhan became violent.

"I don't have the time or energy to duke it out over a flag," Abdullahi tweeted afterward. "My anger at Rep. Forhan was about his behavior towards our staff and airing them out on his public page. I won't stand for anyone treating our staff with anything less than the respect and dignity they deserve."

## What Forhan says

In a letter to Stephens, Forhan cast the situation as a "politicized matter within the Democratic caucus" and said an investigation would be a waste of House resources. He also said he cares deeply about workplace safety and contends Russo's memo failed to prove that he harmed staff or created a "reasonable apprehension of violent conduct."

"I struggle to understand, Mr. Speaker, why a committed Israel supporter such as yourself would join an effort to silence a voice speaking in support of the cause," Forhan wrote.

Forhan also questioned why Stephens revoked his badge access and reassigned a legislative aide when the same actions weren't taken against former Rep. Bob Young. Young, a Republican, was convicted of domestic violence for hitting his wife over the summer and pleaded guilty to multiple charges of violating a protection order.

Young resigned from the House in October. Stephens removed Young from his committee leadership position weeks after Young's first arrest.

Forhan declined to be interviewed for this story, saying his letter speaks for itself.

*Reporter Jessie Balmert contributed.*