

Politics

More than 100 Iranian-Canadians call for party probe of Conservative nomination race

Kaveh Shahrooz withdrew bid for nomination in Richmond Hill after alleging foreign interference

[Ashley Burke](#) • CBC News • Posted: Mar 05, 2024 5:21 PM EST | Last Updated: March 7



Lawyer and human rights activist Kaveh Shahrooz says he believes agents of Iran's regime amplified disinformation about him online to derail his Conservative nomination campaign in the riding of Richmond Hill. (CBC)

More than 100 Iranian-Canadians sent a letter to Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre on Tuesday calling for an investigation of the party's handling of allegations of Iranian regime interference in an Ontario riding nomination race.

Those who signed the letter include academics, physicians and people who lost loved ones on Flight PS752 when it was shot down by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in 2020.

Kaveh Shahrooz, an outspoken critic of Iran's regime, announced on social media last month that he was withdrawing from the Conservative nomination contest in the federal riding of Richmond Hill. He said he faced "unprecedented" foreign interference and intimidation during his campaign.

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Shahrooz also said his pleas to the party for more time to campaign and push back against the interference went "unheeded."

"While I wish the party well, I would be lying if I said I was not disappointed with their approach to this issue," Shahrooz wrote in his media statement on February 22.

- [Iranian government's digital control tactics are a sophisticated form of repression, says researcher](#)
- [Spy agency investigating 'credible' death threats from Iran against individuals in Canada](#)

Shahrooz launched his campaign on February 14. The Conservative Party told party members in Richmond Hill on February 21 that the vote would happen on March 6 and any new party memberships would have to be received by February 23 in order to allow those new members to vote in the nomination.

Shahrooz said that while the party chooses the date of nomination votes, he was left with little time to campaign. He said he wonders if the party "simply wanted to wash their hands clean of a candidate that had become controversial."

The Conservative Party has not yet responded to CBC's request for comment, submitted Tuesday morning.



The Iranian-Canadians who signed the letter are calling for a meeting with Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre. (Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press)

The letter to Poilievre says the undersigned are "deeply disappointed by what we perceive as your party's failure to detect and combat the influence of the Islamic Republic in your election."

"We urge the [Conservative Party of Canada] to thoroughly investigate the circumstances surrounding the decision regarding the nomination date in Richmond

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Hill, including any potential influence, whether direct or indirect, from elements associated with the Iranian Regime, and to take decisive steps to safeguard the integrity of our democratic processes," the letter says.

The Conservative Party has repeatedly accused the federal government of failing to take the issue of foreign political interference seriously. The party called for a public inquiry into foreign interference after media reports last year accused China of interfering in the past two federal elections. [That inquiry is expected to resume](#) sometime this month.

Letter calls for meeting with Poilievre

The letter endorses Shahrooz's claim that Tehran amplified disinformation about him online to prevent a critic of the regime from being elected. The letter says the signatories want to meet with Poilievre to talk about it.

"As people who observe the Iranian regime's behaviour online, we are certain that the amplification was inorganic and completely consistent with the behaviour of the regime's so-called 'Cyber Army,'" the letter says.

The letter says it's "essential to recognize" foreign interference isn't "carried out by those who openly declare themselves supporters of the Iranian Regime."

"It can manifest in diverse guises, including from individuals or groups masquerading as opponents of the regime," the letter reads. "The complexities surrounding Iranian regime influence are multifaceted, akin to navigating a labyrinthine mafia structure. This regime operates with a sprawling and intricate web of proxies, adeptly extending its reach even into opposition factions."

CBC has not independently verified allegations of foreign interference in the Richmond Hill nomination race. CBC has asked the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) if it believes Shahrooz was targeted by Iran's regime.

CSIS said it does not comment on the "possible existence or non-existence of a specific investigation."

CSIS said foreign interference is on the rise and Iran is one of the countries attempting to "covertly influence decisions, events or election outcomes to better suit their strategic interests." CSIS also said that nomination processes are one aspect of Canada's democratic system that can be exploited.

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WATCH: Exposing how Iran tracks and threatens people in Canada**Exposing how Iran tracks and threatens people in Canada**

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CSIS recently confirmed there are multiple 'credible' death threats from Iran aimed at people in Canada. CBC News's chief correspondent Adrienne Arseneault meets with several Iranians who describe their experiences of being monitored and intimidated on Canadian soil.

Thomas Juneau, an associate professor of international affairs at the University of Ottawa, said Iran's security and intelligence community is "extremely active online" and employs both human agents and bots to target dissidents abroad by amplifying social media posts that denigrate them.

"They will accuse them of being terrorists, they will accuse them of being members of groups that are unpopular in Iran or elsewhere," said Juneau.

Shahrooz said he faced a coordinated online campaign alleging he was connected to groups with which he has no affiliation.

One Farsi-language post on X (formerly known as Twitter) that was viewed by CBC News alleged there were suspicions that the People's Mojahedin Organization had bankrolled Shahrooz's nomination campaign. That group, also known as Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or MEK, is an Iranian dissident group that was listed as a terrorist organization [in Canada until 2012](#).

Shahrooz said the claim is false and he has no connection to MEK. The tweet has gotten more than 174,000 views.

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WATCH: CSIS investigating death threats from Iran against people in Canada**CSIS investigating death threats from Iran against people in Canada**

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CSIS is among a group of international spy agencies investigating 'credible' death threats originating from Iran against people abroad — including in Canada.

Conservative Ontario MPP Goldie Ghamari — herself a prominent Canadian critic of the Iranian regime — circulated that social media post alleging a link between MEK and Shahrooz's campaign.

Ghamari also published online her own text message exchange with Shahrooz indicating that he asked her for her "thoughts and advice" on his nomination campaign.

"My message to Iranian-Canadian opportunists: keep my name out of your mouth," Ghamari posted on X about Shahrooz.

"Especially if you have a shady and undisclosed nomination campaign fundraising background. If you reach out to me, I won't give you advice. Instead, I will cancel you. We pro-democracy and anti-IRGC/MEK Iranian-Canadians see you. You've been warned."

Ghamari did not respond to CBC's request for comment.

Shahrooz told CBC News that he expected attacks, but what he experienced "went far beyond the traditional mudslinging of nomination campaigns."

"In the span of two weeks, my name trended twice on Twitter," he said. "There is no reason why a relatively unknown candidate in a relatively obscure race for a nomination in a 905 riding needs to organically get that kind of attention."

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A user on X (formerly known as twitter) posted an image on February 16 showing Kaveh Shahrooz's name was trending on Twitter. (@ranting4Canada/X)

He said he's seen scores of Farsi social media posts about him, some of which have received hundreds of thousands of views. He alleges the attention was "manufactured by a foreign state."

"I 100 per cent believe Iran's cyber army was involved," said Shahrooz. "That doesn't mean that every negative thing written about me was written by the cyber army. What it does mean is that the cyber army played an important role in amplifying the mudslinging."

The MEK is widely disliked by Iranians generally and being affiliated with the group is a "mark of death," Shahrooz said. He said affiliation with this group is often a capital crime in Iran.

He said several of his campaign volunteers said they feared their loved ones could be targeted because they worked on Shahrooz's campaign. He said one volunteer told him she had to drop out of his campaign because her father was traveling to Iran soon.

Shahrooz said he was targeted for intimidation personally online and his location was posted on social media.

- [Participants tell foreign interference inquiry to keep Canadians in the loop](#)
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"This guy Kaveh Shahrooz is meeting everyday with a bunch of old people at the Tim Hortons at Steeles & Bayview," said one tweet in Farsi. "Traitors be damned."

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"That post sent shivers down my spine," Shahrooz said. "It frightened me because it suggested to me that my movements were now being monitored and they were being reported."

Shahrooz said that when he took his allegations to the Conservative Party, they told him to contact the security services. He said he's reported his allegations to CSIS.

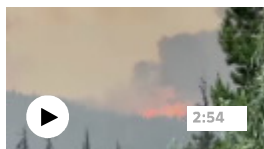
Those who signed the letter wrote that the Conservative Party's decision to set the nomination date when it did "effectively eliminated" Shahrooz, "who had just launched his campaign and initiated his membership drive."

Shahrooz also tried to secure the Liberal nomination in Richmond Hill in 2015. He lost to Majid Jowhari, who went on to win the seat.

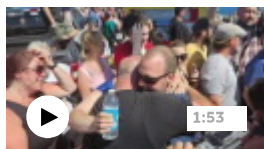
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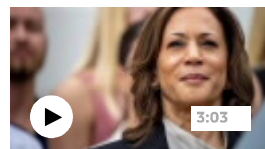


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