

Canada Confronts Allegations of China-Led Electoral Interference; Reports of possible meddling by Chinese government in Canada's elections are pressuring Trudeau government

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Vieira, Paul

FULL TEXT

RICHMOND, British Columbia—A series of public revelations about alleged Chinese government meddling in Canadian politics has roiled the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, prompting calls from opposition politicians and China analysts for tighter monitoring of foreign-interference threats within Canada's borders and a full probe of the alleged activities.

The latest concerns flared when Erin O'Toole, the former Conservative Party leader, said he was told recently by Canadian security officials that Beijing had tried to thwart his path to replace Trudeau as prime minister in the 2021 elections.

In a speech to Parliament in late May and in a subsequent interview with The Wall Street Journal, he said he was told that China's Communist Party gave money to agents in Canada to campaign against him and the Conservative Party. He said he also was told that proxies used the Beijing-run instant-messaging service WeChat to spread disinformation about what the Conservatives were promising if elected, and, O'Toole added, officials indicated China attempted to dissuade people from voting at all in at least one electoral district.

"It was clear from my briefing that there was coordination by China to operate in Canada," O'Toole said in the interview with the Journal. "I think we're seeing the tip of the iceberg with some of these operations."

He added that during the campaign, his team "saw glimpses of interference operations in anywhere between 10 and 15" electoral districts, mostly around Toronto and Vancouver, British Columbia.

A spokesman for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service confirmed that O'Toole was briefed on potential foreign- interference threats, but declined to provide details.

Unlike the U.S., Australia and the U.K., say O'Toole and former Canadian officials, Canada has failed to implement measures—such as a foreign-agent registry—to deter proxies acting on behalf of China's ruling Communist Party.

Canada promised late last year to get tougher with Beijing , calling China a "global, disruptive force" as part of a shift in Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy.

O'Toole's comments followed Canada's expulsion of a Toronto-based Chinese diplomat in May. The diplomat was ordered to leave after cabinet members learned he allegedly ordered authorities in Hong Kong to monitor and possibly intimidate the Hong Kong-based relatives of a Canadian lawmaker critical of Beijing's treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority, Canada's Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly said.

In response, China ordered a Canadian diplomat in Shanghai to leave. At the time, Trudeau said Canada wouldn't be intimidated, and the country would "do everything necessary to keep Canadians protected from foreign interference."

A spokesman for China's Embassy in Ottawa denied allegations of domestic interference, saying they "are unfounded. We never interfere in Canada's internal affairs, including its election process, and have no interests whatsoever in doing so."

Trudeau initially resisted calls for a formal probe into interference allegations, after reports earlier this year in Canadian media outlet the Globe and Mail detailed concerns from national-security officials in intelligence reports about what they concluded was China-led meddling in the 2021 election campaign.

In March, Trudeau appointed a special adviser to conduct a preliminary investigation. The adviser recommended against a formal inquiry, citing concerns about top-secret intelligence becoming public. The adviser added there was "no indication" of China trying to ensure a Liberal victory in the 2021 vote, and Trudeau said the election results represented the will of Canadians.

But after coming under pressure from other lawmakers, the Liberal government said it is now in negotiations with opposition parties about establishing a commission, led possibly by a judge, that could summon witnesses to testify on how Beijing might have exerted influence on Canada's ethnic Chinese voters.

"I hope to announce the next stages soon," Trudeau told reporters July 5 regarding a commission. He and other cabinet members also have promised a foreign-agent registry later this year.

"We need to know exactly what happened and have appropriate responses in place from the government," said Margaret McCuaig-Johnston, a former senior Canadian official and now a senior fellow at the University of Ottawa's graduate school of international affairs. "There seems to be evidence that, in specific electoral districts, the cause of democracy was subverted by Chinese interests."

Worries over Chinese government meddling in elections have been simmering at least since the run-up to the 2021 election. When former Conservative lawmaker Kenny Chiu canvassed for votes door-to-door in the Vancouver suburb of Richmond, he was startled by

the angry reactions when Chinese speakers opened their doors. He said some called him a traitor.

"Most of them just shut the door," he recalled. "They were completely turned off." The responses from voters started to make sense when Chiu's supporters later sent him messages circulating on WeChat that suggested Chiu hated China.

"Chinese take heed," one of the messages said of Chiu, citing the lawmaker's push for a foreign-agent registry like Australia adopted in 2018 and the U.S. has had in place since 1938, requiring lobbyists to declare foreign affiliations.

Another Chinese-language story in Today Commercial News—a Chinese-Canadian publication that publishes the People's Daily overseas edition in Canada—circulated on WeChat said Chiu's push for a foreign registry would "suppress the Chinese community."

Chiu, the incumbent, lost his Richmond district, and he is convinced that Beijing-led interference played a role in his defeat.

"The whole coordination of misinformation has fooled, manipulated and exploited a high number of my constituents in either staying home, or flipping their vote," he said in an interview at a restaurant in a Richmond strip mall.

A spokesman for China's Embassy in Ottawa declined to comment on Chiu's allegations. A spokeswoman for China-based Tencent Holdings, WeChat's parent company, said the messaging platform has "clear policies and processes to address misinformation, including resources to help users identify and easily report it. We review, investigate, and enforce against any content that violates these policies or local laws."

Kimberly Roeder, who lives in southeast Richmond and who voted for Chiu in 2021, said she has Chinese acquaintances who told her they voted against Chiu based on messaging in local Chinese media. "This bothers me deeply," she said of the election-interference accusations. "I find it appalling."

Nearly half of Richmond's roughly 220,000 residents speak either Mandarin or Cantonese. A popular downtown mall is filled with Chinese- and Asian-themed stores. Chinese characters are common on business signs and shop windows.

Mabel Tung, who leads the China-focused human-rights group Vancouver Society in Support of Democratic Movement, said the Chinese Communist Party tries to silence its critics in Canada. It aims to persuade others to help reach its goals through appeals via Chinese-language media, and, if required, harassment, said Tung, who arrived in Vancouver four decades ago from Hong Kong.

Tung said she thinks Beijing's proxies used intimidation tactics at a rally she helped organize in August 2019 to show support for pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong. Hundreds of counterprotesters emerged, wearing mostly red clothing and waving Chinese flags and signs that said, "Love China," and, "No Secession." The Chinese national anthem blasted from car stereos parked nearby.

The day before the rally, Chinese-language messages circulated on WeChat—which Tung later saw—that encouraged the Chinese diaspora to show up in red clothing, disrupt the event, "and teach them how to sing China's national anthem and what the national flag looks like." The China Embassy spokesman declined to comment about the 2019 rally in Vancouver.

Tung said she hopes the election-interference allegations will prod Canadians to become more engaged on the issue of China's influence in the country. "We have been banging the drum on this for a long time," she said.

Bob Mackin in Vancouver contributed to this article.
Write to Paul Vieira at Paul.Vieira@wsj.com