



Foreign Interference Commission

Public Consultation Process

Small Group Consultation Meeting Public Summary

In the summer of 2024, Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue and members of the Foreign Interference Commission's (the "**Commission**") Public Consultation Process ("**PCP**") team met with 10 individuals belonging to the Eritrean Canadian community in two meetings organized with the assistance of the Human Rights Coalition (the "**HRC**"). This is a summary of the information shared at that meeting.

Notes to reader:

- The Commissioner has not and will not be making any findings about the accuracy of the information shared at the consultation meeting or make any findings of fact based on this information.
- The meeting attendees did not make an oath or swear to tell the truth before sharing information at this meeting.
- The meeting attendees were not subjected to cross-examination.
- The meeting attendees have reviewed and approved the contents of this public summary.
- Meeting attendees were given the option to anonymize themselves for the purposes of the present public summary. Where meeting attendees who have opted to anonymize themselves, they are designated as "Participant 1", "Participant 2", etc.
- At each of the consultation meetings, the meeting attendees were asked to answer two questions, which are set out below. The meeting attendees were each given a total of 15 minutes to respond to both questions.
- Where necessary, Commission counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets and in the footnotes to assist the reader.

Executive Summary

- Certain attendees discussed the use of an Eritrean faith-based organization to exert control over members of the Eritrean diaspora in Canada. Certain attendees discussed the resulting isolation, alienation, and psychological distress of Eritrean Canadians who depended on branches of that faith-based organization for community and spiritual support.
- Certain attendees described being harassed and stigmatized by members of the faith-based community.
- Certain attendees spoke about the collection of taxes and levies here in Canada on behalf of the Eritrean government that are sent back to Eritrea.
- Certain attendees spoke about the pressure that Eritrean Canadian community and branches of the faith-based organization put on Eritrean Canadians to make these payments.
- Certain attendees spoke about the difficulties that Eritrean Canadians who speak out against the Eritrean government face when they seek to travel to Eritrea or sponsor the immigration of family members from Eritrea to Canada.
- Certain attendees spoke about the Eritrean government's efforts to interfere in the civil, social, and political lives of Eritrean Canadians. One attendee said that Eritrean organizations working to further the Eritrean government's interests receive Canadian government funding. One attendee described being the subject of property damage and an attempted assault.

1. Participants' responses to Question 1

The first question posed to the participants was: *How are you, your loved ones and members of your community impacted by foreign interference in Canada's electoral processes and democratic institutions?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 focused on explaining how the Canadian branches of an Eritrean faith-based organization operate as a structure through which the Eritrean government seeks to exert control over members of the Eritrean diaspora in Canada.

Participant 1 described the Eritrean Canadian community associated with the faith-based organization as tightly knit. Participant 1 identified themselves as a former member of that faith-based organization, and described their work with the faith-based organization's leaders and committees with the genuine intention of supporting its work and its community members.

Participant 1 said that the faith-based organization instituted new leadership that supports the Eritrean government, and forcibly removed those who supported the prior leadership, including in Canada. Participant 1 also said that expressing support for the prior leadership is seen by many members of the Eritrean diaspora as opposition to the Eritrean government.

Participant 1 said that they ceased their involvement with the faith-based organization in Canada after they formed the view that it was straying from its true role, instead acting as a quasi-political arm of the Eritrean regime. Participant 1 mentioned representatives of the faith-based organization intimidating community members who refuse to adhere to the policies adopted under the new leadership.

Participant 1 described the impact of the faith-based organization's activities as causing them and other members of the Eritrean Canadian community psychological distress, in part because of their fear that the faith-based organization's representatives in Canada will report them to the Eritrean government, which would endanger their loved ones in Eritrea. Participant 1 said community members felt betrayed by the faith-based organization, and that they believe their Charter rights have been violated by the actions of its representatives in Canada.

Participant 1 described the Eritrean Canadian community associated with the faith-based organization as “divided” and explained that they feel unprotected from the harassment and stigma resulting from their choice not to support the faith-based organization, which can be seen as a decision to oppose the Eritrean government.

Participant 2

Participant 2 stated that they came to Canada approximately 10 years ago via private sponsorship after facing harassment due to their activities as an activist. Participant 2 described the challenges their family faced in immigrating after a Canadian branch of an Eritrean community organization that initially sponsored their immigration stopped responding to correspondence and communications related to the sponsorship application after finding out about Participant 2’s activism against the Eritrean government. Participant 2 expressed their view that the community organization supported the Eritrean government. Participant 2 explained that they ultimately had to find a new sponsor because of the previous sponsor’s inaction.

Participant 2 said that many Eritrean refugees who oppose the Eritrean government are not able to immigrate to Canada once their political views become known to Eritrean groups in Canada.

Participant 2 described feeling isolated after arriving in Canada and stated that their isolation was due at least in part to efforts by pro-Eritrean government groups in Canada to exclude them from the Eritrean Canadian community. Participant 2 said that the Eritrean government works through branches of the faith-based organization in Canada to effect transnational repression of the Eritrean diaspora in Canada, including the collection of a levy of 15% of the faith-based community members’ incomes. Participant 2 explained that the moneys levied were sent to the Eritrean government.

Participant 2 described efforts to resist the use of the faith-based organization in Canada as an instrument of transnational repression, including trying to enforce adherence to its bylaws, but said those efforts have so far been unsuccessful. Participant 2 said that they were advised that one Canadian branch of the faith-based organization has two sets of

bylaws: one that is shared with the Canadian government, and one that is ultimately used in practice. Participant 2 described this as acting with a lack of transparency, and said it was an example of the disinformation spread through the Eritrean Canadian community. Participant 2 explained that the new set of bylaws had been mandated by the Eritrean government.

Participant 2 then provided various examples of repressive actions by the faith-based organization targeting members of the Eritrean diaspora. These examples include manipulation of the faith-based organization's board elections, expulsion of community members who oppose or are critical of the Eritrean government, and expulsion of faith-based organization officials who refused to adopt the new bylaws.

Participant 3

Participant 3 expressed the view that the Eritrean government had replaced legitimate leaders of an Eritrean faith-based organization with pro-government leadership, leading to disputes within the Eritrean Canadian community of that faith. Participant 3 said that the limitations on the Canadian branches of the faith-based organization's activities resulting from such disputes had had a disproportionate impact on elderly members of the Eritrean Canadian community, depriving them of their community and spiritual support.

Participant 3 spoke about the Eritrean government's efforts to obtain funds from members of the Eritrean Canadian community. Participant 3 described the use of Eritrean Canadians' religious or spiritual beliefs to coerce them to make financial contributions that are then directed to the Eritrean government.

Participant 3 also spoke about the impact of opposing the Eritrean government on Eritrean Canadians. In particular, Participant 3 said that Eritrean Canadians who oppose the Eritrean government may not be able to travel to Eritrea and may face challenges sponsoring the immigration of family members from Eritrea to Canada. Participant 3 said that these challenges dissuade people from expressing and acting on their views and beliefs for fear of the consequences for themselves and their loved ones. Participant 3

explained that officials of the faith-based organization inform the Eritrean government about community members who harbor anti-Eritrean government views.

Participant 3 recounted an incident in which supporters of the Eritrean government openly took pictures of dissidents during a religious assembly. Participant 3 explained that they were photographed and designated as such as a target.

Participant 4

Participant 4 said they are a former religious official within an Eritrean Canadian faith-based organization. Participant 4 described the Eritrean government's removal and replacement of the leader of an Eritrean Canadian faith-based organization and the Eritrean government's efforts to dissuade Eritreans from supporting the former leader in Eritrea, including through fines, arrests and extrajudicial killings.

Participant 4 said that the Eritrean government leverages its ability to impact the lives of those living in Eritrea to influence the activities of Eritrean Canadians. Participant 4 gave examples of how this leverage is implemented through Canadian branches of the faith-based organization, including excluding Eritreans from important activities and from receiving certain faith-based services. Participant 4 said that Eritrean Canadians live in terror because of these efforts on the part of the Eritrean government.

Participant 4 further explained that they had been excluded from the Eritrean faith-based organization because of their refusal to accept the new leadership imposed by the Eritrean government. Participant 4 described their experiences being blackmailed and harassed by faith-based organization officials prior to being expelled from the organization.

Participant 5

Participant 5 explained that when they moved to Canada, they became an active volunteer with an Eritrean Canadian community organization. Participant 5 said that they remained committed to volunteer work until it became clear to them that other individuals involved were working to advance the interests of the Eritrean government in a very open

manner. For instance, Participant 5 mentioned that innocuous events would turn into propaganda sessions. Participant 5 no longer works with the organization.

Participant 5 said that their volunteer work for the organization included assisting in the organization's work sponsoring refugees to immigrate to Canada. Participant 5 said this aspect of their volunteer work often left them heartbroken due to the refugees' experiences and stories. Participant 5 expressed their view that the organization's immigration sponsorship program was not run properly, stating that families that did not "toe the line" established by the organization were not able to obtain the organization's assistance for their family members seeking to immigrate to Canada.

Participant 5 said that during the time they were still actively volunteering with the Eritrean Canadian community organization, individuals associated with that organization tried to direct them to be violent with a colleague who was voicing views the organization did not agree with. Participant 5 did not comply with those directions.

Participant 5 said that the Eritrean government has worked steadily to create a network to interfere with the lives of Eritrean Canadians. Participant 5 said that Eritrean Canadians who voice opposition to the Eritrean government face emotional, mental, and physical attacks in Canada.

Participant 6

Participant 6 described the evolution of dynamics they had observed in the Eritrean Canadian community, and in particular an Eritrean Canadian community organization, during the period between the early 1980s and the present.

Participant 6 said that, while the Eritrean Canadian community was divided in the late 1980s, at least some of that division was overcome after Eritrea gained independence in 1991. Participant 6 said that this newfound spirit of cooperation within the Eritrean Canadian community, which included a focus on shared heritage and related local programming, lasted until approximately 2005.

Participant 6 said that, in or about 2003, a representative of the Eritrean Consulate wrote to the community organization and asked it to begin working under the leadership of another Eritrean Canadian organization. Participant 6 said that the organization proposed by the Consulate was working to further the interests of the Eritrean government.

Participant 6 said that in or about 2005, the community organization they were involved in split in two. Participant 6 said that one part of the former organization aligned itself with the organization previously proposed by the Consulate and began to attack the other part of the former organization. Participant 6 said this further divided the community. Participant 6 provided an example in which a dance group was prevented from participating in a community festival.

Participant 6 described their use of community media to share information with the Eritrean Canadian community about the activities of the Eritrean government. Participant 6 said they suffered repercussions for these efforts, including that they and another member of their family living in Canada were prevented from travelling to Eritrea to visit a close family member who was ill and subsequently passed away.

Participant 7

Participant 7 shared information about Eritrea to provide context for their remarks, including stating that Eritrea has no rule of law or constitution, that it has not held elections since 1991, and that it ranks last on the Freedom House freedom index. Participant 7 said that the Eritrean government interferes with every aspect of life in Eritrea. Participant 7 also stated that a United Nations (“UN”) Special Rapporteur found, among other things, that Eritrea had committed crimes against humanity. Participant 7 said that the conditions in Eritrea have led to a mass migration, citing a UN report in stating that over 600,000 Eritreans have sought asylum, noting that this figure did not include people in the formal refugee process.

Participant 7 said that Eritrean Canadian community organizations that are funded at least in part with money from the Canadian government work to advance the Eritrean government’s interests in and control over the Eritrean diaspora in Canada. Participant 7

said that events billed as Eritrean cultural heritage events are actually “propaganda parties” for the Eritrean government.

Participant 7 spoke about being the focus of a smear campaign after raising concerns about violence in the Eritrean Canadian community. Participant 7 said they were able to curb this smear campaign by threatening legal action against certain of those behind the campaign.

Participant 7 said agents of the Eritrean government visited their father in Eritrea to send a message that Participant 7 should stop their work as an activist.

Participant 8

Participant 8 said they came to Canada at the end of 1993, and described experiencing harassment by the Eritrean government working through agents in Canada. Participant 8 agreed with other participants that Eritrean Canadian community organizations are used to further the Eritrean government’s interference with the Eritrean diaspora in Canada. Participant 8 explained that Eritrean consulates in Canada facilitated this transnational repression, by instructing Eritrean supporters to target certain organizations or individuals in Canada. Furthermore, Participant 8 stated that individuals who are critical of the Eritrean government are branded as non-Eritreans and unpatriotic.

Participant 8 said they were not able to travel to Eritrea to visit their ailing parents because of their work in Canada advocating against the Eritrean government. Participant 8 said they were ultimately not able to attend their parents’ funerals in Eritrea.

Participant 9

Participant 9 said they are a former journalist in Eritrea and described being lucky to have been able to immigrate as a refugee to Canada, stating that their former colleagues were jailed due to their work. Participant 9 said they have continued their activism here in Canada and have suffered harassment and efforts to intimidate them as a result, leaving them feeling unsafe, unwelcome, and isolated in Canada.

Participant 9 described being targeted because they are a well-known Eritrean Canadian activist who carries out their activism using their name as opposed to anonymously. Participant 9 said they have been publicly identified as an enemy of Eritrea and have been named as such in articles. Participant 9 co-founded a human rights organization in Canada that attempts to expose human rights abuses in Eritrea.

Participant 9 said that, because of the Eritrean government's control of certain Eritrean Canadian community organizations, Eritrean Canadians who upset the Eritrean government find it difficult or impossible to access services they need in Canada, which are often offered through such organizations. They also stated that Eritrean consulates direct Eritrean government supporters in Canada to harass and protest against Eritrean Canadian activists. For instance, Participant 9 recounted an incident in which Eritrean consular officials publicly instructed government supporters to target and harass Participant 9.

Participant 9 said that the Eritrean government sends supporters to Canada under the guise that they are refugees. Participant 9 also noted the use of Eritrean community festivals as vehicles of political and military propaganda on behalf of the Eritrean regime.

Participant 9 said that as a result of Eritrea's transnational repression of the Eritrean diaspora in Canada, the only Eritreans in Canada who speak up against the Eritrean government are those who have nothing to lose. Participant 9 said that many Eritrean Canadians do not dare to speak up out of fear for their loved ones in Eritrea, or business interests.

Participant 9 also stated that letters had been sent to their employers in Canada, asking for their dismissal on the basis of their activism against the Eritrean regime. Participant 9 said that they were not dismissed, but they felt that their advancement prospects were affected by these letters, as they sowed doubts in their employers' minds.

Participant 9 detailed the impact that the transnational repression they have experienced have had on their partner and children. Participant 9 also stated that the repression they

have experienced have led them to be hypervigilant, to limit their social interactions, and to be suspicious of unknown individuals.

Participant 10

Participant 10 said they were sponsored by non-Eritrean Canadians to immigrate to Canada. Participant 10 said their sponsors, unfamiliar with the dynamics of the Eritrean Canadian community and believing they were assisting Participant 10, connected them with an Eritrean Canadian community organization. Participant 10 said they and their partner became involved with the organization as volunteers. In particular, they acted as interpreters for sessions the organization ran for community members about various topics including Canadian laws, drug use, and child development.

Participant 10 said that, while they initially felt good about this volunteer work because they were connecting with and supporting other Eritrean Canadians, they came to learn that the organization was focused on supporting the Eritrean government. Participant 10 said that the organization, among other things, pressured community members to pay a 2% tax to the Eritrean government. Participant 10 said that they initially agreed to pay such levy, as they did not know whether this was legal in Canada.

Participant 10 said they were sickened by the community organization's activities, and that they began to collect evidence of what the organization was doing and speaking out about it. Participant 10 also began to assist with similar community sessions hosted by a different organization. Participant 10 said the Eritrean community organization that they used to volunteer with intimidated other community members to stop them from attending Participant 10's sessions. Participant 10 said that they also suffered from other efforts to silence them, including damage to their car by an unknown person or persons and a time when unknown persons tried to drive their car into Participant 10's car.

In Canada, Participant 10 described being intimidated and alienated by Eritrean Canadians, including representatives of a faith-based organization.

2. Participants' Responses to Question 2

The second question posed to participants was: *What are your suggestions for how you and others in your community who may be vulnerable to foreign interference could be supported and protected, and for how foreign interference could be detected or combated?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 expressed the view that the Canadian immigration system currently fails to detect false refugee claims made by Eritreans who are actually loyal to and working for the Eritrean government. Participant 1 said this failure results in Eritreans working to further Eritrea's transnational repression of Eritrean Canadians being permitted to immigrate to Canada. Participant 1 said that more care should be taken in the immigration system to prevent people from entering Canada under such false claims.

Participant 1 said that Canada should monitor the activities of the Canadian branches of an Eritrean faith-based organization and Eritrean Canadian community organizations to ensure they abide by Canada's democratic principles and laws, including freedom of worship.

Participant 1 said that Eritreans who immigrate to Canada are coming from a place where there are no elected politicians or election processes. Participant 1 said a copy of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms should be provided to every person as part of the Canadian immigration process.

Participant 1 said that the Canadian government should grant political protection to Eritrean Canadians who are harassed by those working on behalf of the Eritrean government.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that the Canadian government should review the history of the Eritrean faith-based organization they discussed in their response to Question 1, including its by-

laws and the changes that have been made to those by-laws, and restore them to their original purpose.

Participant 2 said that the involvement of the Canadian branches of the Eritrean faith-based organization in the Canadian immigration process as a sponsor for those seeking to immigrate allows that organization to silence those who would otherwise voice their opposition to the Eritrean government and certain of its practices, which Participant 2 asserted constitute human rights violations. Participant 2 said that the Canadian branches of the faith-based organization should not be permitted to act as a sponsor in the Canadian immigration system.

Participant 2 said that the Canadian government should deploy a clear mechanism, including investigators, to monitor Eritrean Canadian organizations suspected of effecting transnational repression of the Eritrean diaspora in Canada on behalf of the Eritrean government.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said that the Canadian government should stop the Eritrean government from collecting taxes from Eritrean Canadians.

Participant 3 said that the Canadian government should create a country-wide system for reporting instances of interference by the Eritrean government.

Participant 3 said that the Canadian government should create a system to identify agents of the Eritrean government in Canada, stating that such agents have held key positions in Canadian governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Participant 3 said the control of the Canadian branches of the Eritrean faith-based organization referenced in their response to Question 1 should be returned to the Eritrean Canadian faith community.

Participant 4

Participant 4 said that the Canadian government needs to look seriously at the Eritrean government's involvement in Canadian branches of the Eritrean faith-based organization mentioned in their response to Question 1, along with its involvement in Eritrean Canadian festivals and holiday events.

Participant 4 said that the Canadian government should investigate individuals in Canada believed to be agents of the Eritrean government and how they managed to immigrate to Canada. Participant 4 said those found to be instruments of the Eritrean government should be deported.

Participant 4 said that the Canadian government should recognize that some Eritreans have been forced to act on behalf of the government against their will. Participant 4 mentioned one such individual who suffered severe injuries during forced military service in Eritrea who subsequently came to Canada, stating that the Canadian government should assist in providing required medical services to such people.

Participant 4 stated their desire for action to be taken regarding the human rights abuses in Eritrea.

Participant 5

Participant 5 recommended implementing a reporting mechanism for those experiencing interference or repression by the Eritrean government. Participant 5 also highlighted their support for the enactment and enforcement of the provisions of the Foreign Agents' Registry.

Participant 5 recommended preventing any organization backed by the Eritrean government from receiving federal funding in Canada, noting that the reporting mechanism they suggested could help with this.

Participant 5 recommended ensuring that relevant law enforcement actors are educated on the situation faced by Eritrean Canadians.

Participant 5 recommended that Eritrean Canadian organizations that help people working on behalf of the Eritrean government to immigrate to Canada under the guise of refugees not be given any further funding or refugee quotas.

Participant 5 recommended that Eritrean Canadian community organizations hosting events that promote the Eritrean government be stopped from doing so.

Participant 6

Participant 6 said the Canadian government should not condone the activities of the Eritrean government in Canada and should publicly condemn the Eritrean government. Participant 6 said that those promoting and working on behalf of the Eritrean government in Canada should be sanctioned.

Participant 6 said that the Canadian government should use its standing with organizations promoting human rights internationally to voice concerns about Eritrean practices.

Participant 6 said that provincial and municipal governments should be educated on the issues faced by the Eritrean diaspora in Canada.

Participant 7

Participant 7 said that the Canadian government should investigate the role of the Eritrean consulate's offices and unaccredited consular staff in directing violence in the Eritrean community in Canada.

Participant 7 said that interpreters working in the immigration system in other countries have been expelled from those countries because of the interpreter's ties to the Eritrean government, and that Canada should take similar actions. Participant 7 explained that interpreters had access to very sensitive information on refugees' motives to leave Eritrea.

Participant 7 said that entry visas should be denied to Eritrean propagandists and artists.

Participant 7 said that an awareness campaign and a safe reporting mechanism for those experiencing interference or repression by the Eritrean government should be implemented.

Participant 7 stated that community and faith-based organizations should not be allowed to levy sums of money from Eritrean Canadians for the purposes of sending these funds to the Eritrean regime.

Participant 8

Participant 8 suggested creating a safe mechanism by which those who have worked to further the interests of the Eritrean government could share information about such activities with the Canadian government.

Participant 8 noted that public education and awareness campaigns should be deployed to increase awareness amongst the Canadian public of foreign authoritarian governments continued attempts to spy on Canadians.

Participant 9

Participant 9 suggested an active investigation into organizations in Canada working to further the interests of the Eritrean government, including but not limited to the enforcement of the 2% Eritrean tax.

Participant 9 stressed the need for measures to be deployed by the Canadian government to protect Eritrean Canadians from transnational repression activities.

Participant 10

Participant 10 said there should be a way of reporting the work of organizations furthering the interests of the Eritrean government, including those who run groups for single mothers and elders in order to influence them.

Participant 10 recommended investigations into groups affiliated with the Eritrean regime that sponsor refugees that are favorable to the regime.