



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 four individuals belonging to the Sikh Canadian community in a consultation meeting organized with the assistance of the Sikh Coalition. This is the summary of the information provided during the consultation 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 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

- The attendees are active members of the Sikh Canadian community. Some of them have been outspoken critics of the Republic of India (“**ROI**”). They described examples of foreign interference they said were attributable, directly or indirectly, to the ROI.
- Certain attendees described attempts by Indian consulates in Canada to infiltrate Sikh and Hindu religious organizations to gather relevant information about community members.
- Certain attendees explained that outspoken Khalistani advocates and critics of the ROI's human rights violations routinely encountered difficulties in obtaining consular services from the ROI's consulates, particularly when applying for visas to travel to the ROI.
- Certain attendees described their experiences as targets of coordinated disinformation and misinformation campaigns conducted on social media platforms, via online news environments and in-person, along with related online harassment including death threats.
- Two attendees recounted that the ROI had falsely accused them of being members of a terrorist organization and described the consequences of those false allegations for themselves and their loved ones, including threats to and extortion of their family members in the ROI.
- Certain attendees recommended that the Canadian government take steps to curtail the Indian consulates' influence activities in Canada, especially those targeting religious institutions. Meeting attendees recommended that Sikh religious institutions be better protected.
- Reflecting on the recent assassination of Hardeep Nijjar, attendees stated that potential targets within the Sikh community should be warned of the dangers they face and be offered protection. Attendees stated that additional law enforcement resources should be dedicated to addressing foreign interference threats.
- Certain meeting attendees recommended that the Canadian government seek to limit the spread of disinformation online including through public education.

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 was the president of a gurdwara¹ in Canada. They described themselves as not very politically involved in Khalistani independence organizations, and emphasized that their focus, as gurdwara president, was helping members of their community, particularly young people, and promoting the Sikh faith. Despite their lack of political engagement, they recounted having nonetheless been impacted by foreign interference they attribute to the ROI.

Participant 1 explained that the previous elected committee was actively engaged with the ROI's consulate in British Columbia (the "**Consulate**"). Participant 1 said that Indian consulate officials had falsely alleged that the gurdwara leadership was preaching Khalistani independence within the community. As a result of these unfounded allegations, gurdwara leadership subsequently refrained from actively engaging with officials from the Consulate. Participant 1 also alleged that the Consulate interfered in gurdwara elections.

As gurdwara president, Participant 1 recalled members of Sikh community self-censoring on issues such as human rights abuses against Sikhs out of fear of retribution. Participant 1 further recounted that after the 1985 Air India Flight 182 disaster, Sikhs became unjustly associated with terrorism, regardless of their individual political beliefs on Khalistani independence. This led to them becoming "soft targets" for violence.

After leaving their position as president of the gurdwara, Participant 1 recounted their difficulties in obtaining a visa to visit the ROI. In 2016, Participant 1 was contacted by an

¹ **Note:** A gurdwara is a place of assembly and religious worship for Sikhs.

individual. This individual provided Participant 1 with a pre-written letter in support of their visa application. However, this letter contained facts and assertions with which Participant 1 disagreed with and Participant 1 said that ultimately, they did not sign the letter. Participant 1 mentioned it was a form of harassment in what they believe was an operation of interference against them.

Indeed, in light of recent arrests of Sikh activists who had travelled to the ROI on what Participant 1 deems to be trumped-up criminal charges, Participant 1 now fears for the safety and well-being even of the average person if they were to return to the ROI, citing concerns about being arbitrarily detained and jailed.

Concluding their response to Question 1, Participant 1 stated the need for the Sikh community to stand up to Indian foreign interference, in the face of the recent assassination of Hardeep Nijjar. They also highlighted that, while their community was currently targeted by foreign interference, foreign interference is liable to affect any other diaspora community in Canada.

Participant 2

Participant 2 was an elected official. Participant 2 stated that they have been the target of coordinated disinformation campaigns by Indian news outlets. Fake news articles were published, which they believed were damaging to their reputation amongst the general Canadian public. In addition to disinformation on traditional news outlets, Participant 2 also mentioned having been the target of disparaging narratives perpetrated by bots on social media platforms and online abuse, including threats to their life.

Participant 2 also mentioned that they heard rumors of calls originating from the ROI being placed to electors in their riding instructing them on who to vote for, but they do not have concrete evidence to that effect.

Another manifestation of the ROI's foreign interference witnessed by Participant 2 is the attempts by Indian consulates in Canada at making inroads within Hindu and Sikh

religious institutions, with the objective of gathering relevant information or using these connections for political and influence purposes thereafter. For instance, Participant 2 explained that individuals who would voice support for Khalistani independence movement within gurdwaras would later experience difficulties when applying for a visa to the ROI. Either their visa application would simply be denied, or in other cases, they would be asked by officials to take a picture with someone from the Indian consulate. Hence, Participant 2 explained that advocates for Khalistani independence were placed in front of a dilemma: either stop their advocacy or face the economic and psychological violence of not being able to go back home.

Participant 2 further explained that they had observed an alignment in the coordinated attacks deployed online against the Sikh community and Khalistani advocates by the ROI's government and right wing influencers. Participant 2 believes that the increased polarization in the online environment increases the risks faced by Sikh Canadians.

Finally, Participant 2 also mentioned that another form of foreign interference by the ROI in Canada was its well-known use of certain elected officials, in multiple political parties, as mouthpieces for the ROI's government's talking points.

Participant 3

As a freelance journalist, Participant 3 was invited to accompany Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on his official trip to the ROI, in February 2018. However, they were not able to join the official Canadian delegation on the day of their departure because of unexplained delays in the treatment of their visa application. Upon arriving in the ROI the next day, they started to cover the events in which the Prime Minister was participating. After one such event, held at the High Commission of Canada in New Delhi, Participant 3 began to receive numerous phone calls from individuals introducing themselves as media reporters, questioning their presence at the event. At the time, Participant 3's family and friends urged them to return to Canada before the end of the Prime Minister's trip, as they were afraid that Participant 3 might be impacted by the increasingly negative coverage of

the official visit in Indian media outlets, or held accountable for some of the controversies. In light of this, Participant 3 abandoned the trip and returned to Canada.

Participant 3 recounted facing unfounded allegations of extremism and terrorism which they believe originated from ROI officials or proxies. Participant 3 said that their family members faced intimidation and extortion in Punjab at the same time as the allegations were made in Canada.

Participant 3 described the suffering that was caused by these incidents. Participant 3 had owned a business, and they were unable to continue their operations as a result of the harassment.

Participant 4

Participant 4 travelled with their family to the ROI from January to March 18, 2023 for their brother in law's wedding. On the day they came back to Canada, the ROI imposed a total telecommunications blackout in the northern Indian state of Punjab. Participant 4 participated in a large peaceful protest organized by gurdwaras in front of the High Commission of India in Ottawa, to denounce the ROI's crackdown in Punjab.

Subsequently, in June 2023, their brother who lives in the ROI informed them that Indian media outlets were announcing that the ROI had charged Participant 4 under the *Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act* on grounds of terrorism. The trumped up charges were based on the false assertion that Participant 4 had thrown grenades at the High Commission of India during the Ottawa protest. As a result, Participant 4 began publicly advocating against the ROI on social media platforms.

Shortly after, the Indian police went to Participant 4's family house in the ROI and threatened their brother and mother, which caused the entire family serious suffering and anxiety. Consequently, Participant 4's brother had to flee to Dubai, where he has stayed out of fear of being arrested by Indian police forces.

Participant 4 also lost the job they had in Montreal because their employer was worried about facing harassment from ROI officials. Hence, Participant 4 has had to move to Edmonton with their family and is now jobless. Participant 4 further mentioned that they cannot travel back to ROI, out of fear of being arrested, and that their family residing in the ROI is still being harassed by Indian police officials.

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

In light of the recent murder of Hardeep Nijjar, Participant 1 stated that potential targets should be alerted and briefed by Canadian law enforcement on measures taken to protect themselves. They highlighted that Mr. Nijjar was leaving his gurdwara alone when he was assassinated. Furthermore, Participant 1 argued that more law enforcement resources should be dedicated to preventing such crimes from happening.

Participant 1 also mentioned that the existence of foreign interference and the threat it represents needed to be recognized within the Sikh community, and the Canadian public more generally, so as to increase awareness. In Participant 1's opinion, stories told by various individuals from diverse diaspora communities to the Commission are just a drop in the ocean in terms of foreign interference actions targeting Canadians.

Finally, Participant 1 argued that disinformation narratives spread online contribute to exacerbating the phenomenon of foreign interference. They believe that this issue needs to be addressed by the Canadian government, so that truth can be used as a tool to counter foreign interference.

Participant 2

Participant 2 argued that influence activities originating from or coordinated by Indian diplomatic missions across Canada needed to be curtailed. In Participant 2's opinion, this involves recognizing and investigating the role played by the ROI government and its diplomats in Canada in directing and influencing organizations operating in Canada to promote their desired narratives.

Participant 2 also highlighted the need to provide security to Canadians that are at risk of being targeted by foreign interference operations. They mentioned individuals faced economic barriers in terms of providing their own security.

Participant 2 further recommended that the Canadian government needed to tackle the spread of fake news which is now being facilitated by the rise of artificial intelligence, especially disinformation narratives aimed at elected officials. Participant 2 suggested that public education aimed at identifying fake news was very important and noted that Taiwan had developed a great education program to address Chinese disinformation narratives. Furthermore, Participant 2 noted that measures need to be taken to address the proliferation of fake accounts and bots on social media platforms.

Participant 2 also stated that it was unacceptable for Canadian elected officials, and especially MPs, to act as mouthpieces for the ROI government. In Participant 2's opinion, this situation contributes to the undermining of Canadian democratic institutions.

Finally, Participant 2 also recommended that Sikh religious institutions needed to be better protected. Mentioning existing policies and institutions specifically aimed at protecting Jewish and Muslim communities in Canada, Participant 2 believes that the recent assassination of Hardeep Nijjar at a gurdwara fully warrants the deployment of similar measures for the Sikh community.

Participant 3

Participant 3 highlighted the need for police officers to better understand the cultural and religious practices of the Sikh community.

Participant 3 also noted that Indian diplomatic missions in Canada should not be allowed to carry out influence operations in gurdwaras such as recruiting sources to gather intelligence on community members. In Participant 3's opinion, they should be strictly restricted to carrying out their official functions as diplomats in a foreign country.

Participant 4

Participant 4 did not wish to add any further suggestions to the ones made by other Participants.