



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 three individuals belonging to the Sikh Canadian community in a meeting organized with the assistance of 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. The attendees 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 discussed the consequences faced by political candidates who publicly speak out against the ROI’s human rights record or advocate on behalf of the Sikh community. They also detailed the pressures exerted on Canadian political parties to “red light” potential candidates who publicly speak out against the ROI.
- One attendee explained the pressures faced by media organizations featuring voices critical of the ROI, and the concerted attempts to silence Sikh advocates. Similarly, another attendee detailed attempts to censor Sikh narratives in cultural events.
- Certain attendees described their experiences as targets of coordinated disinformation and misinformation campaigns conducted on social media platforms and via online news environments, along with related online harassment.
- One attendee recounted the existence of influence operations into gurdwara¹ elections, which they attribute to Indian consulates. Furthermore, certain attendees stated that Sikh advocates were routinely threatened with denial of consular services, particularly relating to visa applications.
- Certain attendees recommended increased transparency from Canadian intelligence agencies and decision-makers as it relates to the existence of foreign interference threats and the measures taken to counter them.
- Other attendees expressed their desire for the improvement of reporting mechanisms for individuals experiencing transnational repression, particularly regarding the need to follow-up with individuals who report incidents. Moreover, attendees argued that clear information should be provided to the public about the recourse available to individuals experiencing transnational repression or foreign interference.
- One attendee advocated for increased monitoring of Canadian media organizations that disseminate disinformation narratives.

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

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 said they ran as a candidate in the municipal council elections of a Canadian city. Participant 1 said that during their election campaign, they were the target of an online disinformation and hate campaign they attribute to online bots and agents of the ROI. Participant 1 said that they were repeatedly branded a terrorist and an extremist by supporters of the Indian government. Participant 1 stated their belief that the attacks were motivated by their involvement with and public activism on behalf of the Sikh community. Participant 1 explained that they believe these attacks were intended to have a chilling effect on other advocates and dissenters who are critical of the ROI. Participant 1 noted that their family members had been very worried about the threats they had received, especially death threats, in light of the recent assassination of Sikh activist Hardeep Nijjar. Participant 1 said that they were ultimately unsuccessful in the municipal council election. Participant 1 said that an independent report on online abuse in Canadian local elections [published in June 2023] by the Samara Center for Democracy concluded that Participant 1 had by far the highest percentage of targeted abusive posts of any candidate in the municipal races that were examined across Canada. Participant 1 emphasized that the report provided empirical evidence of the abusive and vicious character of the personal attacks against them.

Participant 1 said that they had previously worked as a senior advisor to the mayor of a Canadian municipality. Participant 1 said that the mayor commemorated the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple² in a social media post. Participant 1 said that shortly after the post was published, a ROI consular official visited their office and formally requested that the mayor's post be deleted, in what Participant 1 described as an attempt to silence an

² **Note:** In 1984, the Indian Armed Forces conducted a military operation against the Golden Temple, a holy site of Sikhism located in Amritsar, Punjab. The fighting resulted in extensive civilian casualties.

elected official. Participant 1 said that around the same time, the Indian government attempted to force the closure of a Punjabi pavilion in a local Canadian cultural festival, by falsely claiming that its organizers were Khalistani “terrorists” and “extremists”.

Participant 1 said that they collaborated on a candidate’s leadership campaign for a national federal political party. Participant 1 explained that, during the campaign, the candidate was informed that the ROI’s government was instructing Indian diaspora groups not to invite them to community events. ROI was also stopping members of the Hindu community from supporting the leadership candidate. According to Participant 1, the Indian government was motivated in doing so by the candidate’s public stance on the ROI’s human rights record and building closer ties to the Sikh and Muslim diaspora. Participant 1 said that Indian consular officials approached an MP who had publicly endorsed the candidate to request that they withdraw their support. Participant 1 described this request as an example of foreign interference against the candidate. Participant 1 also said that individuals linked to the ROI were signing up members for another leadership candidate, although it is unclear if that leadership candidate or their team were aware of any links between those individuals and ROI.

Participant 1 stated that multiple Canadian political parties, at all levels of government, consider the ROI’s position on potential candidates for their nomination contests, in determining whether to “green light” them. Participant 1 said that the ROI also supports friendly candidates in nomination contests, including by indirectly supporting membership drives.

Participant 1 specified that the ROI has not only been targeting Khalistani rights and independence advocates, but also individuals who speak out against human rights abuse, attacks on Indian democracy, and the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities in the ROI.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that they were a constituency staff worker for an MPP who subsequently became an MP. Participant 2 said that they also worked on this elected official’s campaign to become party leader. Participant 2 said that this elected official was always very outspoken in denouncing the ROI’s human rights record throughout their political career.

Participant 2 said that the elected official's public position on the ROI left some of their supporters afraid to publicly support for the elected official, for example by displaying lawn signs, because of potential reprisals by the ROI. Participant 2 said certain media organizations were expressly reluctant to cover this elected official's campaigns and positions for the same reason. Participant 2 said that on some occasions, members of media organizations told them that their hands were tied on the question of covering the elected official because the organization's parent company was located in the ROI and their jobs were at stake if they were seen to be critical of the ROI or its government.

Participant 2 said that they observed multiple incidents where different Canadian political parties refused to "green light" potential candidates who were outspoken in criticizing the ROI's human rights record. Participant 2 stated that the party took this approach to preserve its relationship with the ROI or under direct or indirect pressure from consular officials.

Participant 2 said they serve on the executive board of a gurdwara and are active within the Sikh community. Participant 2 said that after they joined the gurdwara board, they helped the gurdwara organize public advocacy programs with regards to civil issues in Canada, as well as criticizing ROI's human rights record. Participant 2 said that they personally began receiving calls directly from officials at the Indian consulate. Participant 2 said that, at first, consular officials were friendly and vaguely offered to engage with the gurdwara leadership. Participant 2 said that the officials became more threatening by referring to Participant 2's advocacy activities at the gurdwara and implied that failure to cooperate with them would result in Participant 2's future visa applications being denied. According to Participant 2, threats involving denial of consular services and seizure of assets in the ROI are commonly used against Sikh activists.

Participant 2 stated that gurdwara elections are often targeted by influence operations led by the ROI consulates and its proxies. Participant 2 said that they had first-hand knowledge of gurdwara members being called and lobbied by ROI proxies, offered financial incentives, and threatened with potential consequences, in the context of closely contested gurdwara elections. Participant 2 said that in addition to the influence operations that they had personally witnessed, they had information that similar tactics were deployed against gurdwaras across the country.

Participant 2 said that they used to be a board member for a cultural organization. Participant 2 said that the organization hosted Sikh art exhibits, and that it would frequently receive official complaints from the Indian consulate claiming that the organization supported so-called extremism. Participant 2 said that eventually, the cultural organization started to have difficulties finding spaces that would host their exhibits because of this pressure and disinformation. Participant 2 attributed those difficulties to Indian lobbying against the promotion of Sikh narratives and history. Participant 2 said that attempts at censoring Sikh cultural and community events by pressuring the organizers or removing funding sources were commonplace. Participant 2 recalled that funding for a kabaddi³ tournament featuring a Punjabi team was withdrawn following a coordinated lobbying operation.

Participant 2 said that some Canadian MPs who are vocal about human rights issues in the ROI are openly threatened by ROI officials on online platforms. Participant 2 said that these overt attempts to intimidate Canadian elected officials discourages many members of the Sikh community from pursuing public advocacy or involvement in politics.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said that they have been the host of a community radio program for a long time. Participant 3 said they initially started their radio program in reaction to the sharp decline in press freedom in the ROI. Participant 3 said they used their airtime to freely denounce and speak out against human rights abuse in the ROI, and advocate on behalf of the Sikh community.

Participant 3 explained that they have been on the receiving end of numerous threatening phone calls, emails and faxes. Participant 3 said that they had been told that they would never again be granted an Indian visa. Participant 3 stated that they had to deactivate their Facebook account due to the high volume of abusive messages they received on that platform.

Participant 3 said that their radio station and the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (“**CRTC**”) had received numerous complaints about

³ **Note:** Kabaddi is a team contact sport popular in Punjab.

Participant 3's program, which typically alleged that Participant 3 promotes Khalistani terrorism, as well as anti-ROI and anti-Hindu narratives. Participant 3 said that during the Indian government's communications crackdown in the state of Punjab [in March 2023], Participant 3's advertisers were contacted by supporters of the Indian government and asked to withdraw their financial support for the radio program. Participant 3 said that in the wake of Hardeep Nijjar's assassination, their radio station was offered incentives if they decided to cancel their radio program. Participant 3 stated that all these attempts to deplatform their program were unsuccessful. Participant 3 noted that they had received steadfast support from their radio station's management.

Participant 3 said that supporters of the ROI display unconditional support for policies and actions of the current Indian government, regardless of the human rights abuses committed and discrimination impacting Indian minorities. Participant 3 said that this support has also permeated to most Indian-language media organizations in Canada, which fail to ask difficult questions to Indian government and consular officials. Participant 3 said that local media outlets organized an event to celebrate happenings at the Indian High Commission. Participant 3 said that community members are reluctant to speak out against the ROI because individuals who do publicly criticize the ROI are harassed and threatened by Indian consular officials and Indian supporters.

According to Participant 3, another target of influence operations by Indian consulates are political parties' nomination contests. Participant 3 said that by supporting candidates who harbour pro-ROI and pro-BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party, the current governing party in the ROI] views, the ROI ensures the dissemination of their desired narratives.

Participant 3 stated that they have not gone back to the ROI for the last thirty years. Participant 3 said that the assassination of Hardeep Nijjar had a chilling effect in the community because it raised the prospect of serious consequences for those speaking out against the ROI. Participant 3 said that some individuals have been hesitant to travel to the ROI, out of fear of potential repercussions.

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 noted that although Bill C-70 [*An Act respecting countering foreign interference*] was a positive development, suggestions have been made as to potential areas of improvement to the legislation.

Participant 1 asked for additional transparency from the Canadian intelligence community and decision-makers in terms of foreign interference threats and measures taken to counter them. Participant 1 said that improved transparency and disclosure of information would help reduce the public alarm about foreign interference threats.

Participant 2

Participant 2 expressed their support for increased transparency requirements from decision-makers regarding foreign interference. Participant 2 referred to the large number of redacted passages in the 2019 and 2024 reports of the *National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians* (“**NSICOP**”) and said that solely protecting Canadian policy interests or international relations should not be a valid reason to redact critical information about foreign interference threats.

Participant 2 expressed concerns about provisions in Bill C-70⁴ granting the Canadian government additional authority to redact information. Participant 2 asked why information is being redacted and whether it could create greater safety if publicly disclosed. Participant 2 suggested that safety and transparency should come first. Participant 2 said that reporting mechanisms should be improved by providing better feedback to individuals who report occurrences of foreign interference and keep them abreast of investigations into the matters they reported rather than left feeling ignored and vulnerable to transnational repression without support.

⁴ Bill C-70, *An Act respecting countering foreign interference* was granted royal assent on June 20, 2024.

Participant 3

Participant 3 stressed the need for increased media monitoring to detect and counter the dissemination of false information across Canada.

Participant 3 said that Canadian law enforcement and intelligence agencies should increase their monitoring of transnational repression threats targeting dissidents and advocates. Participant 3 said that the public should be better informed of who in the Canadian government and its agencies they should turn to when faced with threats and harassment.

Participant 3 supported the implementation of mechanisms to vet candidates in political parties' nomination contests, specifically regarding the source of their funding.