



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 consultation meeting organized with the assistance of the Sikh Coalition. 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 of anonymizing themselves for the purposes of the present public summary. Where meeting attendees 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 said that the Sikh Canadian community has lost trust in Canadian government officials and agencies, including the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”).
- Certain attendees stressed the need for increased transparency and flow of information about potential risks to those being targeted and to the public more generally. Certain attendees said that increased transparency would better enable people to protect themselves and would assist in rebuilding the trust issues between the Sikh Canadian community and the Canadian government and its agencies.
- Certain attendees talked about the Republic of India’s (“**ROI**”) use of Canadian and Indian media outlets to disseminate disinformation. Certain attendees said that this disinformation narrative is then used to alienate, isolate, and harass individuals speaking out against the ROI in Canada. Certain attendees discussed the difficulties in combatting this overwhelming flow of disinformation and the consequences for those targeted by it, including violent death threats.
- Certain attendees talked about the very real fear experienced by members of the Sikh Canadian community, particularly after the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar [on June 18, 2023].
- Certain attendees spoke about the Indian Consulate’s use of the visa process to harass, blackmail, and incentivize behaviors in the Sikh Canadian community.
- Certain participants discussed the seemingly unchecked activities carried out on behalf of the ROI to silence members of the Sikh Canadian community. Certain participants described measures required to combat the chilling effect of the ROI’s actions, including timely warnings of risk, resources and supports for those at risk, efforts to rebuild trust with the Sikh community, and increased transparency about the steps being taken to respond to foreign interference.

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 that efforts are required to restore the faith of the Sikh Canadian community in the Canadian government. Participant 1 said that foreign interference is preventing Sikh Canadians from being as active as Canadians as possible, explaining that it prevents they and their family from speaking out about human rights issues in the ROI. Participant 1 said that when they first came to Canada, they became active in the anti-apartheid movement, but when they began speaking out against human rights abuses in India, Participant 1 says they began to be impacted by foreign interference from the ROI. Participant 1 said they have never advocated for violence, but India will try its best to silence them.

Participant 1 said that they have been active in Punjabi-language news outlets in Canada. Participant 1 said that the ROI will try to encourage alternative and parallel Punjabi media outlets.

Participant 1 said that in 2017, a Punjabi pavilion was established in a multicultural community festival in Brampton. Participant 1 said that the ROI got involved to protest the Punjabi pavilion. Participant 1 said a local politician also got involved, writing a letter to the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Participant 1 said that the ROI exerts influence in the Canadian political party nomination process, stating that they have seen many examples of these tactics being deployed.

Participant 1 said that the ROI ran parallel police stations in Canada by appointing high ranking law enforcement officials under the garb of diplomats. Participant 1 said that these police stations apply pressure on Indian Canadians and threaten Canadian activists' family members in the ROI.

Participant 1 said they were denied a visa when they sought to travel to the ROI to visit a loved one, and that was how they learned that their name is on the ROI's blacklist.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that they have seen Indian foreign interference in Canada for their entire life. By way of example, Participant 2 said that when the oldest gurdwara in North America was designated as a heritage site, the ROI argued against the awarding of that designation and petitioned the Canadian government to that effect. According to Participant 2, the Indian government was worried that the designation would bolster the confidence of Sikh Canadians and encourage them to speak out.

Participant 2 said that as recently as 2019 when India was passing its citizenship act¹, Vancouver City Council tried to pass a motion to denounce this law on the grounds that it would marginalize and disenfranchise Muslims in India. Participant 2 said that it is known that the Indian consulate leaned heavily on one gurdwara executive committee to support the citizenship act, and that the committee obliged. Participant 2 described this as shocking interference and highlighted that the gurdwara in question hosted visa application clinics organized by the Indian consulate. Participant 2 said that the underlying message is that the ROI wants Sikh Canadians to "stay in line" and if they don't, they won't be able to obtain visas. Participant 2 said that the denial of visas is a known practice. Participant 2 said the practice has a chilling effect on advocacy efforts in the Sikh Canadian community and that it limits the capacity of community members to exercise their rights and freedoms in Canada.

Participant 2 said that Canadian media outlets have been captured by the Bharatiya Janata Party (the "**BJP**"), becoming a vehicle for BJP propaganda.

Participant 2 said that they have been the target of disinformation by the ROI as a result of their activism during the 2020-2021 Indian farmers' protest movement. Participant 2 recounted that they openly advocated for increased awareness about the protests and Participant 2 believes this exercise of their rights within Canadian democracy to be the

¹ The 2019 *Citizenship (Amendment) Act* was passed on December 11, 2019 by the Parliament of India.

reason that they were targeted by the ROI, including having their face shown on news broadcasts in India with disinformation about them. Participant 2 said that they were targeted by ROI IT cells. Participant 2 said that these cells dox targets, damage their reputations, and harass them. Participant 2 said they received violent and graphic death threats directed against them and their family members, with the threats being made over the phone and via email.

Participant 2 said that they were warned by their friends and family concerned for Participant 2's safety because a widespread fear of reprisals by the ROI.

Participant 2 said that the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar rocked the Sikh Canadian community.

Participant 2 said that it is commonplace for members of the Sikh Canadian community to discuss whether elected officials in Canada are agents of the ROI or manipulated by the ROI. Participant 2 said that there are some elected officials in Canada that do espouse the ROI's positions. Participant 2 said that members of the Sikh Canadian community question why this is allowed to continue.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said that they have been involved in Canadian gurdwaras and gurdwara collaboration for 15 years.

Participant 3 said that there has been an acceleration in foreign interference from the ROI since Narendra Modi's [current Indian Prime Minister] ascension to power in 2014. Participant 3 said there have been public statements made by high-ranking Indian officials that dissidents in other countries would be eliminated.

Participant 3 said that they have seen Canadian media outlets picking up narratives from Indian outlets about Sikh advocacy for Khalistan, including labelling Sikh activists as extremists. Participant 3 said that anything denouncing the Indian government or opposing their view is labelled as so-called extremism. Participant 3 said that, for example, allegations of "Sikh extremism" were included in a report published by the

Canadian government on domestic terrorism, then subsequently removed, but the damage was done because the ROI ran with the information that was removed from the report. Participant 3 said that they saw the Sikh Canadian community being alienated and discriminated against as a result. They said this kind of activity can lead to increased anti-Sikh hate.

Participant 3 gave the example of disinformation narratives targeting Harjit Sajjan, the current Canadian Minister of Emergency Preparedness and prominent member of the Sikh Canadian community. Participant 3 said that these kinds of allegations lead to alienation from certain political parties.

Participant 3 said the ROI has targeted them, and provided specific examples, including stating that they have been the recipient of multiple duty to warn notifications levied against them and had dossiers sent to their employers on several occasions. Participant 3 explained that this has impacted them personally and professionally in executive level positions they held. Participant 3 stated that these circumstances were made worse by not having received any form of support from the government following receipt of the duty to warn notification; having to find different places to live apart from their family, not being able to take or visit their children at school, amongst other personal, professional, and financial impacts.

Participant 3 said that this targeting scares people who work with them, and has created significant hardships for them, providing a series of specific examples. Participant 3 also explained the considerable hardships this had imposed on their family members. Participant 3 said one of the most difficult repercussions for them is that Sikh Canadian community members have been distancing themselves from Participant 3. Participant 3 said that the ROI's objective of causing fear within the Sikh community was achieved in a number of ways.

Participant 3 said that visas are used as a tool of blackmail and a means to threaten community members. Participant 3 said that individuals have their visas revoked, then they are called to the Indian consulate to discuss the terms of their visas, including forms of cooperation with Indian officials. Participant 3 provided an example in which an Indian

consulate proxy was providing individuals who agreed to assist a specific political candidate with assistance in obtaining visas.

Participant 3 said that the ROI uses a combination of foreign interference, disinformation, and transnational repression to attain its objectives. Participant 3 said that Indian media outlets relay the ROI's narratives. Participant 3 said that these false narratives are then used to harass and abuse certain individuals online.

Participant 3 said community members are having a hard time figuring out who to speak to about the ROI's activities in order to be heard. Participant 3 said that everywhere they go, people seem to be under the influence of false narratives from the ROI. Participant 3 said that this has a deep negative effect on the trust members of the Sikh Canadian community have in Canadian institutions, and that the effect will impact future generations.

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 questioned who Canadian politicians represent, stating that Canadian politicians toe the line that the ROI has drawn. Participant 1 expressed their desire to see Canadian elected officials denounce human rights abuses in the ROI.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that the Indian government interferes in Canada because there is no reason not to, stating that the Canadian government has been largely impotent in the face of interference by the ROI. Participant 2 said there have been no consequences for the ROI's interference in Canada.

Participant 2 said that Canada should investigate Canadian officials suspected of being influenced by or tied to the Indian government, and that there should be repercussions for this misconduct.

Participant 2 spoke about the importance of sunlight and transparency in combatting foreign interference. Participant 2 said that the public should be better informed about the work being done to combat foreign interference.

Participant 2 said that autocratic governments use social media platforms to build narratives. Participant 2 said that Canada needs use the same approach for the good. Participant 2 recommended large-scale content monitoring and filtering. Participant 2 compared trying to push back against the ROI's disinformation to trying to hold back a tsunami, noting that the ROI puts so much effort into the dissemination of its narratives. Participant 2 said that the ROI has full-time, well-funded operations as compared to activists in Canada volunteering their spare time to try to respond.

Participant 2 said that the blind spots in Canada's Rapid Response Mechanism ("**RRM**") must be addressed to better identify issues affecting the Sikh Canadian diaspora. Participant 2 said that when the Sikh Canadian community was buried in threats, RRM reported that there were no significant threats in the online ecosystem. Participant 2 said that when the media attention increased, including reports about specific individuals being targeted, only then did the RRM respond. Participant 2 likened the situation to a fire alarm that only goes off after the building it is in is already engulfed in flames.

Participant 2 said that those who receive a duty to warn must also be offered some sort of protection. Participant 2 said that without this protection, people may stay silent for fear of being murdered on Canadian soil. Participant 2 said that this lack of protection has a chilling effect on Canadian democracy.

Participant 2 said that foreign interference isn't going away. Participant 2 said that a permanent Canadian task force is required that is tasked with investigating and countering foreign interference, that can coordinate between relevant agencies, and that is charged with reporting to the Canadian public.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said that international relations and diplomacy are normal in the political realm, but Canada cannot rely solely on politicians in circumstances like these. Participant 3 said that the delay in sharing information about foreign interference is contributing to issues in the country.

Participant 3 said that clear mechanisms ensuring transparency are required. Participant 3 said that government officials should not be able to redact or withhold information based on political priorities. Participant 3 said that keeping such information from the public puts people at risk. Participant 3 said that, when people are armed with information, they can protect themselves with or without government assistance.

Participant 3 said that the inclusion of international relations as grounds to redact information under Bill C-70² is counterproductive. Participant 3 said that international relations should never serve as grounds to justify withholding information from the public.

Participant 3 said that the Sikh Canadian community does not trust the Canadian government or the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (“**CSIS**”) because the community does not know what risks they face. Participant 3 noted heavy redactions to the NSICOP’s 2019 annual report³, which they said demonstrates that the federal government is ignoring foreign interference and trying to brush it under the rug.

Participant 3 said that democratic countries pride themselves on the freedoms their citizens enjoy, but those freedoms are being snatched from Sikh Canadians. Participant 3 said that a system that informed at-risk communities when threats are detected is required. Participant 3 said that international relations concerns should not be a hindrance to sharing such information.

² Bill C-70, *An Act respecting countering foreign interference*, was granted royal assent on June 20, 2024.

³ The National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (“**NSICOP**”) published its *Annual Report 2019* on March 12, 2020.

Participant 3 said that legislation protecting people in danger of falling victim to foreign interference is required.

Participant 3 said that middlemen acting on behalf of foreign states operate freely in Canada. Participant 3 said that there is fear in the Sikh Canadian community about reporting issues due to a lack of trust in CSIS. Participant 3 said that trust must be rebuilt so people will come forward with information. Specifically, Participant 3 said there should be an operational directive – from the Department of Public Safety to CSIS and other agencies, to work with members of the Sikh and other diaspora communities to create a basis for community members to trust that they can give information to the government, recognizing that many are from countries where people have experienced oppression and may also be vulnerable to transnational repression. Participant 3 said that increased operational support and outreach is required to rebuild trust and provide people with the information and protection they need to feel safe enough to participate in Canadian democracy and civil life.