

**Statement for the Record from  
The Sikh Coalition**

**United States Commission on  
International Religious Freedom  
Hearing**

**Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-  
Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences**

**January 25, 2024**

The Sikh Coalition respectfully submits this statement for the record in connection with the above-referenced hearing before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). As a civil rights organization that represents the Sikh community in the United States and addresses violations of civil rights and liberties, we seek to ensure that religious freedom and democracy are mutually advanced here in the United States and abroad.

By way of background, the Sikh Coalition is the largest Sikh American civil rights organization in the United States. We were founded in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, in response to a torrent of hate crimes against Sikhs throughout the United States. Our mission since then has been to work towards a world where Sikhs and other religious minorities in America can freely practice their faith without bias and discrimination.

In recent years, we have also expressed concern with democratic backsliding in the United States; however, this concern is far from unique to the United States. As Sikhs, we remain deeply concerned about the authoritarian turn underway in India, which is both ostensibly the world's largest democracy and home to the vast majority of the global Sikh population. Even before the recent revelations of India's alleged attempts to assassinate Sikh activists in the United States and Canada,<sup>1</sup> Sikhs and other religious minorities were already familiar with India's oppressive tactics to silence dissent and curtail religious freedom, which have often played out in the digital realm. Many Sikhs in South Asia, who live in the state of Punjab, India, have faced systemic oppression such as restrictions on religious practices, economic marginalization, and suppression of political dissent—including extrajudicial punishment,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Justice Department Announces Charges in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City," United States Department of Justice, November 29, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>; John Paul Tasker, "Trudeau accuses India's government of involvement in killing of Canadian Sikh leader," CBC, Sept. 18, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-indian-government-nijjar-1.6970498>.

<sup>2</sup> "In a chilling throwback McCarthyism in the United States, India's Parliament has passed the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Bill, 2019 which will allow the Central government to designate individuals as 'terrorists' without the exercise of due process of law," Rongheet Poddar, "Constitutionality of India's Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Bill, 2019: India's McCarthyism Moment," Oxford



violence<sup>3</sup> and a decade of enforced “disappearances.”<sup>4</sup> Not only are Sikhs a target of religious oppression, so too are Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, Christians, and others. India’s decline in press freedom,<sup>5</sup> willingness to use excessive force against peaceful protestors,<sup>6</sup> arrest and detention of dissidents,<sup>7</sup> and efforts to curtail the free flow of information online<sup>8</sup> all directly affect these minority communities. The historical experience of our community in India<sup>9</sup> has left Sikhs all too aware of how authoritarianism, discrimination, and prejudice can lead to tragedy on the scale of genocidal violence.<sup>10</sup>

As India emerges as “a strategic actor in Southeast Asia” via arms deals and enhanced defense cooperation with nations like Vietnam and Indonesia,<sup>11</sup> it is setting an alarming precedent for using authoritarian tactics through digital mediums domestically and abroad for its neighboring region that is already experiencing its own authoritarian shift.

## I. India’s Use of Online Censorship, Harassment, and Disinformation Campaigns as Suppression Tactics Against Religious Minorities and Dissidents

In recent years, numerous Sikh civil rights organizations around the world, including the Sikh Coalition, have been concerned at the increasing frequency with which Sikhs are being targeted in India as well as other countries, including the United States. When Sikhs and other religious minorities peacefully dissent, the response from the Indian government has too often been marked by attempts to suppress freedoms of expression through internet shutdowns, media censorship, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, escalation of violence, and characterizations of

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Human Rights Hub Blog, August 14, 2019, <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/constitutionality-of-indias-unlawful-activities-prevention-amendment-bill-2019-indias-mccarthyism-moment>.

<sup>3</sup> “Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/17/protecting-killers/policy-impunity-punjab-india>; “Dead Silence: the legacy of human rights abuses in Punjab.” *Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights*, May 1, 1994, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/India0594.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Romesh Silva, Jasmine Marwaha, and Jeff Klingner, “Violent Deaths and Enforced Disappearances During the Counterinsurgency in Punjab, India - A Preliminary Quantitative Analysis”, *Ensaaf* (January 2009), available at <https://ensaaf.org/publications/reports/descriptiveanalysis/>.

<sup>5</sup> “With raids, arrests and hostile takeovers, India press freedom continues to decline.” *NPR*, Apr. 3, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/03/1167041720/india-press-freedom-journalists-modi-bbc-documentary>.

<sup>6</sup> “India: Excessive use of force, arbitrary detention and punitive measures against protesters must end immediately.” *Amnesty International*, Jun. 14, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/india-excessive-use-of-force-arbitrary-detention-and-punitive-measures-against-protesters-must-end-immediately>

<sup>7</sup> “Indian activist’s arrest spotlights crackdown on dissent.” *The Associated Press*, Mar. 9, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/india-media-social-media-crime-arrests-f9331e556a1faf26eced6c05c40a71de>.

<sup>8</sup> “Five years in a row: India is 2022’s biggest internet shutdowns offender.” *Access Now*, Mar. 20, 2023, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/>

<sup>9</sup> WELL-FOUNDED FEAR: Understanding Legal Challenges and Best Practices for Sikh Asylum Applicants and Their Attorneys.” *The Sikh Coalition*, Nov. 1, 2021, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/10/2021.11.01-asylum-report.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Remembering 1984.” *The Sikh Coalition*, Jun. 1, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/blog/2023/remembering1984-4>.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Grossman, “India Is Becoming a Power in Southeast Asia,” *RAND Corporation*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/07/india-is-becoming-a-power-in-southeast-asia.html>.



peaceful dissidents as terrorists. Actions like these contradict human rights freedoms and risk exacerbating civil unrest and alienation of an entire religious minority community.

In March of 2023, Indian authorities executed weeks-long massive mobilizations of paramilitary and police forces, conducted multiple coordinated arbitrary arrests with brutal violence, imposed mobile internet data blackouts, blocked SMS services, censored media, and disproportionately targeted Sikhs and political dissenters across Punjab.<sup>12</sup> Similar oppressive tactics were also displayed during the Farmers' Protests that began in September 2020.<sup>13</sup>

Last year, 2023, was the fifth year in a row that India chose to rely on internet shutdowns to control largely peaceful protests and create a shield of impunity.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Indian government and its intelligence services have demonstrated a pattern of suppressing and intimidating dissidents and aid organizations by issuing indiscriminate and vague legal notices, auditing financials, and even arresting individuals on artificial charges and detaining them for unreasonably long periods.<sup>15</sup> Since 2020, India has regressed further down the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. It is now ranked among the worst for global press freedom with the likes of Russia, China, and Iran.<sup>16</sup> India has expelled foreign journalists due to work critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi,<sup>17</sup> and imprisoned a growing number of journalists in-country for their reporting.<sup>18</sup> Even journalists in the United States who ask simple questions about India's human rights record face online threats and harassment.<sup>19</sup>

Broader actions by the Indian government to censor certain aspects of the country's national conversation evoke grave concerns of fostering a climate that could lead to mass violence against Muslims, Sikhs, and other minorities,<sup>20</sup> especially given that India is considered a

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<sup>12</sup> Anisha Singh, "Letter to U.S. Sec. of State Antony Blinken Re: Support for Sikhs and Democratic Norms in India during March 2023 civil unrest," March 21, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Support-for-Sikhs-and-Democratic-Norms-in-India-March-21-2023.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> "Modi's Response to Farmer Protests in India Stirs Fears of a Pattern." *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/asia/india-modi-farmer-protest-censorship.html>; "India: Government must stop crushing farmers' protests and demonizing dissenters." *Amnesty International*, Feb. 9, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/india-government-must-stop-crushing-farmers-protests-and-demonizing-dissenters/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Five years in a row: India is 2022's biggest internet shutdowns offender." *Access Now*, Feb. 28, 2023, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/>.

<sup>15</sup> "As Farm Law Protests Continue, NIA Sees 'Anti-National' Plot, Summons Activists." *The Wire*, Jan. 16, 2021, <https://thewire.in/rights/nia-summons-activists-linked-to-farm-law-protests-%20suspects-conspiracy-against-india>.

<sup>16</sup> "India: Media freedom under threat." *Reporters Without Borders*, Mar. 5, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/india-media-freedom-under-threat>.

<sup>17</sup> "VICE journalist Angad Singh deported from Delhi." *The Hindu*, Aug. 25, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/vice-journalist-angad-singh-deported-from-delhi/article65810246.ece>.

<sup>18</sup> Kavitha Iyer, "'They Can Target Anybody': India's War on Free Press Is in High Gear," *TIME*, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://time.com/6202430/zubair-modi-muslims-target-media-free-press/>.

<sup>19</sup> Amy B Wang, "White House defends WSJ reporter facing harassment over Modi question," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/06/28/white-house-modi-reporter-wall-street-journal/>.

<sup>20</sup> "India's Muslims: An Increasingly Marginalized Population," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Jul. 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>.



country at high risk for mass killings.<sup>21</sup> Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Amnesty International, which monitor human rights conditions worldwide, were forced to shut offices across India after being financially paralyzed by the Indian government.<sup>22</sup> Oxfam and Khalsa Aid have also been subjected to raids by the Indian government.<sup>23</sup> The offices of BBC and other media organizations were also subject to government raids.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, social media users critical of India's draconian policies routinely have their accounts restricted at the request of the government.<sup>25</sup> Any criticism of the Modi government can lead to bans and attacks by trolls. Individual users have been targeted for something as trivial as sharing a BBC documentary that is critical of Mr. Modi;<sup>26</sup> there have also been coordinated campaigns to restrict trending topics that peacefully acknowledge India's genocidal violence against Sikhs in 1984.<sup>27</sup> When American social media companies such as Meta and Twitter do not comply with takedown requests, their employees risk arrests and raids in India.<sup>28</sup> Former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey alleged that the Indian government threatened to "shut Twitter down" if they did not censor accounts commenting on the Farmers Protest.<sup>29</sup>

Recent reporting also indicates that a complex web of misinformation has sought to discredit foreign critics of the Modi government, and was set up and is run by an Indian intelligence officer.<sup>30</sup> The social media posts from this entity, Disinfo Lab, have been cited by Indian officials on television and presented on Capitol Hill.<sup>31</sup> Disinfo Lab often perpetuates "unsubstantiated claims to paint U.S. government figures, researchers, humanitarian groups and Indian American

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<sup>21</sup> "Rising Mass Atrocity Risks in India," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, Mar. 30, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/rising-mass-atrocity-risks-in-india>; "India: 2022-23 Statistical Risk.

<sup>22</sup> "Amnesty to halt work in India due to government 'witch-hunt,'" *The Guardian*, Sep. 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/29/amnesty-to-halt-work-in-india-due-to-government-witch-hunt>.

<sup>23</sup> "How the Indian Government Uses Raids to Silence Critics," *Time*, Feb. 14, 2023, <https://time.com/6255425/india-raid-bbc-modi-documentary/>; "NIA teams raid Khalsa Aid's Patiala office, question MD Amarpreet Singh," <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/nia-teams-raid-khalsa-aids-patiala-office-question-md-531112>.

<sup>24</sup> Id.

<sup>25</sup> "Twitter accused of censorship in India as it blocks Modi critics," *The Guardian*, Apr. 4, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/05/twitter-accused-of-censorship-in-india-as-it-blocks-modi-critics-elon-musk>.

<sup>26</sup> "India bans BBC documentary on PM Modi's role in Gujarat riots," *CNN*, Jan. 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/business-india/india-modi-bbc-documentary-twitter-youtube-censorship-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>27</sup> "Sites Blocked, Hashtags Banned: Are Sikhs Being Silenced Online?" *The Quint World*, Jun. 12, 2020, <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/sikh-banned-social-media-siyasat-punjab-operation-bluestar-ghallughara-facebook-instagram>.

<sup>28</sup> "Elon Musk's Twitter Widens Its Censorship of Modi's Critics," *The Intercept*, Mar. 28, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/03/28/twitter-modi-india-punjab-amritpal-singh/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Jack Dorsey: India threatened to shut Twitter and raid employees," *BBC*, Jun. 13, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65886825>.

<sup>30</sup> Gerry Shih, Clara Ence Morse and Pranshu Verma, "Covert Indian operation seeks to discredit Modi's critics in the U.S.," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/10/india-the-disinfo-lab-discredit-critics/#>.

<sup>31</sup> Id.



rights activists" as part of a global conspiracy.<sup>32</sup> We are deeply alarmed by India's attempts to silence journalists, advocates, and nonprofits around the world, and by the precedent that these actions set for other nations.

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As authoritarians in Southeast Asia borrow strategies to undermine religious freedom from China and Saudi Arabia, India is emerging as a notable perpetrator of sophisticated digital oppression that they can look to as well. We respectfully request that members of Congress take the following actions to send a message to authoritarian regimes around the world: India's efforts to silence dissidents and suppress religious freedom are unacceptable, and they will not be replicated by other governments without consequence.

- Publicly condemn dangerous propaganda narratives that attempt to portray entire religious minority communities as violent extremists or terroristic threats.
- Protect the rights and safety of all individuals, especially those targeted by the malicious behavior of foreign governments, by passing the Transnational Repression Policy Act (H.R. 3654/S.831).
- Support the documentation efforts of USCIRF by permanently reauthorizing the congressional body, and passing legislation to reduce presidential authority to waive taking action against Countries of Particular Concern based on longstanding human rights concerns.
- Ensure greater congressional oversight into transnational repression by amending Section 6 of the Arms Export Control Act to include a reporting requirement of any instances where the president declines to enforce the law that would prohibit arms transfers to any country determined to be engaged in a consistent pattern of acts of intimidation or harassment against individuals in the United States.

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<sup>32</sup> Id.

