June 16, 2023

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500
Via electronic delivery

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing to you today on behalf of many in the Sikh American community who are highly alarmed by escalating human rights abuses and anti-democratic actions in India. We believe that the United States, which aspires to always lead with our values on the world stage, has a crucial role to play in addressing these issues. Specifically, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s upcoming state visit on June 22 presents a critical opportunity for your administration to publicly address these concerns and obtain commitments from Mr. Modi that his administration will recommit to the democratic values ostensibly shared by India and the United States.

While the farmers’ protests in India, which began in September 2020, have largely subsided, the issues that sparked these protests remain unresolved. Sikhs in Punjab continue to face systemic oppression, such as restrictions on religious practices, economic marginalization, and suppression of political dissent—including extra-judicial punishment, violence, and a decade of enforced “disappearances.”¹ When Sikhs and other religious minorities peacefully protest, the response from the Indian government has too often been marked by attempts to suppress dissidents through internet shutdowns, media censorship, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and escalation of violence.

Most recently, in March of this year, Punjab—the only Sikh-majority state in India—faced mass arrests, internet and SMS blackouts, and disinformation campaigns labeling political dissenters or those advocating for the rights of Sikhs as terrorists.² This is the fifth year in a row that India has chosen to rely on internet shutdowns to control peaceful protests and create a shield of

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impunity. Moreover, the 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 of time.

India’s suppression of free speech and the media runs contrary to the principles of democracy. Since 2020, India has regressed further down the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, and is now ranked among the worst for global press freedom with the likes of Russia, China, and Iran. India has expelled foreign journalists due to work critical of Mr. Modi, and imprisoned a growing number of journalists in-country for their reporting. Moreover, 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, especially given that India is considered a country at high-risk for mass killings.

The press is not the only realm where Mr. Modi is comfortable suppressing criticism and dissent. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Amnesty International, who monitor human rights conditions around the world, were forced to shut offices across India after being financially paralyzed by the Indian government. Additionally, social media users critical of India’s draconian policies routinely have their accounts restricted at the request of the government. Any criticism of the Modi government can lead to bans. Individual users have been targeted for

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something as trivial as sharing a BBC documentary that is critical of Mr. Modi;\(^\text{12}\) there have also been coordinated campaigns to restrict trending topics that peaceably acknowledge India’s genocidal violence against Sikhs in 1984.\(^\text{13}\) When American social media companies such as Meta and Twitter do not comply with takedown requests, their employees risk arrests and raids in India.\(^\text{14}\)

The United States must continue to balance our strategic economic and national security objectives with our values of democracy, civil liberties, and human rights. We urge your administration to acknowledge the overwhelming evidence that Mr. Modi is increasingly more comfortable ruling by authoritarian measures than democratic principles—and as a result, tens of millions of India’s most marginalized minorities are at risk. Our own government has documented these concerns. The U.S. Department of State’s most recent human rights report has continued to document significant human rights violations in India, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrest, violence against minorities, and censorship.\(^\text{15}\) And the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF) recent annual report on India outlined national, state, and local government promotion and enforcement of policies that targeted religious minorities and suppression of critical voices.\(^\text{16}\)

We urge you to publicly address these concerns during your upcoming conversations with Mr. Modi. **We encourage you to secure at least two commitments from this state visit:** 1) An end to internet shutdowns that aim to squash peaceful organizing and restrict the freedom of information, and 2) a safe ‘re-opening’ of India for international NGOs that have been legally threatened or erroneously banned from monitoring and reporting on India’s human rights abuses. Ensuring that Mr. Modi makes these two tangible pledges will affirm that the United States remains committed to upholding human rights and democratic norms. It will also begin to provide a much-needed message of support to the minority.


populations affected in India and to the ever-growing South Asian American community who are increasingly alarmed that the United States continues to ignore these abuses.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to seeing your administration take action.

Sincerely,

Sim J Singh Attariwala
Senior Policy & Advocacy Manager
The Sikh Coalition

cc: Secretary Antony Blinken, U.S. Department of State
Assistant Secretary Donald Lu, U.S. Department of State
Ambassador Rashad Hussain, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International
Senator Chuck Schumer, Majority Leader of the Senate
Senator Mitch McConnell, Minority Leader of the Senate
Congressman Kevin McCarthy, Speaker of the House of Representatives
Congressman Hakeem Jeffries, Minority Leader of the House of Representatives
Congressman James McGovern, U.S. Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Adam Cooper, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom