

ADVISORY TO POLITICAL PARTIES ON THREAT OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN ELECTIONS AND PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES

1. Foreign interference in elections refers to attempts by foreign actors (countries, agencies, people) to assert influence over elections in a sovereign state. In the last few years, there have been many reports of foreign interference in the elections of other countries, e.g. US Presidential Elections (2016), French Presidential Elections (2017), German Federal Elections (2017), US Mid-Term Elections (2018), Italian General Elections (2018). Singapore is not immune, and we need to guard against such nefarious activity as we head towards our own General Election (GE), which must be held by April 2021. Singapore politics should be decided by Singaporeans alone.

2. This advisory provides information on some of the methods which foreign actors may employ to interfere in elections, and the steps that political parties can take to mitigate the risk of becoming vectors or victims. It should be read in conjunction with the advisory on cybersecurity risks and precautionary measures.

Some Methods of Foreign Interference in Elections

3. The objective of foreign actors interfering in elections is to shape the voting behaviour of the electorate in a manner consistent with the desired political outcomes of the foreign actor. It is often done through the coordinated use of covert and subversive means, including the following:

Disinformation

4. Disinformation is the deliberate distortion or fabrication of news content. In the context of an election, disinformation could involve: (a) the manipulation of public opinion through misleading narratives about electoral processes; (b) attempts to confuse the public about electoral regulations and their enforcement; and (c) narratives that undermine trust in politics and institutions. More broadly, disinformation could also target socially divisive issues or developments of significant public interest, in order to sway public opinion about a political party or candidate's electoral platform.

Sentiment Amplification

5. Sentiment amplification refers to the deliberate attempt to artificially inflate the spread and prominence of narratives which are useful for the foreign actor's agenda. Such amplification could involve the coordinated use of fake accounts, trolls and bots. In the context of an election, the narratives inflated to prominence could consist of disinformation or the creation of a false impression of public opinion about political parties, election candidates or campaign policies. The narratives could also contain inflammatory material which could result in social fragmentation and polarisation, or

public order and security incidents, to enhance or diminish a political party or candidate's electoral chances.

Identity Falsification

6. Identity falsification is the creation of a fake online identity for false-front interaction with target audiences. The objective is to create the impression of authentic behaviour and persona, in order to build a network of followers who could eventually become the vectors or targets of the foreign actor's influence campaign.

Party/Campaign Financing

7. The funding of a political party or candidate's election campaign by foreign actors, whether directly or through a proxy, is an attempt to support and increase the chances of the party/candidate, the election to power of whom the foreign actor assesses to be in its interests.

Cultivation of Political Entities

8. This refers to the covert cultivation of favourable relationships with the political party/candidate by the foreign actor. It could entail promises of business incentives, donations or titles, under the guise of avowedly legitimate platforms (e.g. academic titles, institutional linkages).

Precautionary Measures

9. It is important that all Singaporeans exercise individual vigilance, to safeguard the integrity of our GE. Political parties too, must play their part. They should enhance their understanding of the threat, improve the digital literacy of their members, and be alert to suspicious behaviours and hidden agendas. In addition, they should:

- Avoid re-tweeting/re-posting or forwarding articles, text messages, memes or social media posts without verifying their provenance and authenticity;
- Monitor their own social media platforms for suspicious or anomalous activity; and
- Abide by the Political Donations Act 2000 and its Regulations¹.

¹ Political parties may wish to refer to the Political Donations Handbook prepared by the Registry of Political Donations.

10. If political parties detect anything that could be indicative of foreign interference in the GE, they should lodge a Police report immediately, and also keep the Elections Department informed.

Additional Resources

11. Political parties may wish to familiarise themselves with reported instances of foreign electoral interference in other jurisdictions, and keep abreast of developments on this front. A list of open source material available on the Internet is provided at Annex.

**MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS
ELECTIONS DEPARTMENT
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Annex – Open Source Materials on Foreign Interference in Elections

- Article by the Council on Foreign Relations on “When Election Interference Fails” (Jan 2020)
- Report by Graphika titled “UK Trade Leaks” (Dec 2019)
- Article by First Draft titled “How to spot a bot (or not): The main indicators of online automation, co-ordination and inauthentic activity” (Nov 2019)
- ChannelNews Asia Documentary on “Fighting Foreign Interference” (Oct 2019)
- Report by the Oxford Internet Institute titled “The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation” (Sep 2019)
- Report by the French Institute for Strategic Research of the Ministry for the Armed Forces (IRSEM) and the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) titled “The ‘Macron Leaks’ Operation: A Post-Mortem” (Jun 2019)
- Report by the US Department of Justice titled “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election” (Mar 2019)
- Report by the Institute of Global Affairs at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) titled “Smearing Sweden: International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election” (Sep 2018)
- Report by IRSEM and Centre for Analysis, Forecasting and Strategy of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (CAPS) titled “Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies” (Sep 2018)
- “EUvsDisinfo” website by the European External Action Service’s East Stratcom Task Force