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Critical Election Incident Public Protocol Panel

Friday, June 18, 2021, 14:30 – 15:30pm, Secure number: 377-1230

Conference ID: 123058

Objectives

- The objective of this meeting is to convene the members of the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol Panel (Panel) to 1) discuss Panel operations during General Elections 43 (GE43) and 2) consider how the world has changed in the last two years and implications of running GE44 in the context of COVID.

Run of Show

- Participants will include: Janice Charette, Interim Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet; Vincent Rigby, National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister; and Rob Stewart, Deputy Minister of Public Safety.
- **Departmental Representative:** Dan Costello, Assistant Deputy Minister, International Security and Political Affairs, could accompany if required.

Key Messages

- During GE43, the Panel relied on different sources of classified and open source intelligence provided by the Privy Council Office and the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE). It would be useful for the Panel to highlight what was most useful heading into GE44, including meeting directly with SITE.
- The Panel's threshold for a public announcement is very high. Relevant departments, including through the Election Security Coordinating Committee, should be establishing a communications strategy to communicate with Canadians when an incident falls below the Panel's threshold but is in the public interest. Awareness builds resilience which is key to mitigating the effects of mis- and disinformation.
- The updated Protocol explicitly enables the Panel to consider incidents that have a domestic as opposed to foreign dimension. This change to the Protocol is important as COVID-19 related disinformation is often a mix of domestic and foreign messaging.
- There are many implications of COVID-19 for GE44. For example: the current infodemic, precipitated by the pandemic, has led to a huge increase in mis- and dis-information online; increased geopolitical competition has exacerbated foreign interference, including disinformation campaigns; increased mail-in voting may result in mis- or disinformation with respect to integrity of the process; and an increased volume of mail-in ballots could delay the release of election results.

Context

- **Previous Interactions:** This is the first meeting of the Panel in 2021.

Discussion of Operations during GE43

- **Panel Operations:** During GE43, the Panel met regularly and received information and threat briefings, including ongoing intelligence assessments from the SITE Task Force, which was composed of Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Communications Security Establishment (CSE), the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM/GAC) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The Panel's deliberations included scenarios, reflecting a variety of different instances of possible foreign interference. This approach ensured a broad understanding of the threat environment and the threshold for any announcement.
- **Intelligence Requirements:** The Panel relied on various sources of intelligence, classified and open source, provided directly by the Privy Council Office and the SITE Task Force. It would be

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useful for members of the SITE Task Force, including GAC/RRM, to meet with the P5 to better understand their requirements for GE44.

- **Public Communications:** The Panel did not make any public announcements during GE43. This means that it was not aware of incidents that met the threshold set by the Cabinet Directive. Since this threshold is very high and the Caretaker Convention restricts the government's public communications during the writ period, the Election Security Coordinating Committee is considering options for communicating incidents that are below the Protocol's threshold but in the public interest.

- **Update to 2021 Critical Election Protocol (Protocol):** The Protocol will be updated in the lead-up to GE44. s. 39 - Cabinet Confidence

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- The recent presidential elections in the US speak to the need to better understand the intersection of foreign and domestic disinformation activities. We know from public reporting that hostile foreign actors leveraged political divisions and domestic mis- and disinformation for their foreign interference activities. s. 39 - Cabinet Confidence

Implications of a COVID Election

- GE44 will take place in a changed global and domestic context. COVID-19 has taken a toll on physical and mental health; the global economy shrunk by 4.3% last year at the cost of trillions of dollars; disadvantaged communities, including women and racialized individuals, were disproportionately affected as unemployment and poverty skyrocketed; the rich, largely invested in digital tech, got richer; education was put on hold with a third of students worldwide were unable to access online learning; and the digitization of society, particularly in the global north, accelerated
- Elections Canada has been developing a new operational plan to deliver an accessible, safe and secure election in the context of the pandemic. The health and safety of electors, thousands of election workers, and candidates and their workers will be paramount.
- The Chief Electoral Officer has approved a series of administrative changes that Elections Canada is progressively implementing aimed at maintaining the safety and integrity of the electoral process, e.g., physical distancing at polling places and local Elections Canada offices; masks and single-use pencils; improved capacity and convenience of vote-by-mail system including prepaid postage; etc..
- The Panel will need to consider what COVID-19 might mean for the integrity of GE44. For example: the current infodemic, precipitated by the pandemic, has led to a huge increase in mis- and dis-information online; increased geopolitical competition has exacerbated foreign interference, including disinformation campaigns; increased mail-in voting may result in mis- or disinformation with respect to integrity of the process; and an increased volume of mail-in ballots could delay the release of election results.

Author's name/division/tel.:

Approving ADM: Dan Costello/IFM

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