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Responses to Information Requests

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India: The Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) (SAD(A)) [Shiromani Akali Dal (Mann); SAD(M); SAD(Amritsar); Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) (Simranjit Singh Mann)], including origin, structure, leadership, objectives, and activities; requirements and procedures to become a member of the party, including membership cards; treatment of party members and supporters by authorities (2017–June 2020)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Origin and Objective

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an associate professor of political science at Hiram College in Ohio, who has conducted research on Sikh politics including the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), indicated that the SAD was the main political party of the Sikh community in the State of Punjab, which began to divide into separate factions in the 1960s and 1970s (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The Associate Professor stated that the SAD(A) began as a faction of the SAD in 1984 after Operation Blue Star (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The same source indicates that the party was known as Akali Dal Mann from 1988 to 1994, when its name was changed to Akali Dal Amritsar (Associate Professor 5 May

2020). Sources indicate that both names, Akali Dal Amritsar and Akali Dal Mann, are used interchangeably (Associate Professor 5 May 2020; WSO 20 May 2020). The Election Commission of India indicates that the SAD(A) was registered as Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) (Simranjit Singh Mann) for the election of 2019 (India 11 Oct. 2019, 10).

Sources describe Operation Blue Star as a government raid on the Golden Temple complex, [which represents the "holiest shrine" for the Sikhs (Associate Professor 5 May 2020)], to remove [Sikh "extremist" (Associate Professor 5 May 2020) or "separatist leader" (Australia 17 Oct. 2017, para. 3.17)] Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers, which resulted in serious damage to the temple complex (Australia 17 Oct. 2018, para. 3.17; Associate Professor 5 May 2020). Sources indicate that these events alienated the Sikh population (Associate Professor 5 May 2020; Van Dyke Nov. 2009, 986). The Associate Professor stated that the moderate SAD factions tended to be pro-India and non-separatist, and that the aftermath of Operation Blue Star led to their marginalization (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). A paper on the Khalistan movement by Virginia Van Dyke, a visiting lecturer of South Asian Studies at the University of Washington, indicates that the SAD government was weakened by in-fighting and was toppled in 1987, and power was shifted to militant groups (Van Dyke Nov. 2009, 975, 987).

According to the Associate Professor, the SAD(A) presented itself as a "revolutionary" party (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The same source indicated that Simranjit Singh Mann, the leader of SAD(A), was elected to parliament in November 1989 and his party won "nine or ten" seats out of the thirteen total parliamentary seats in Punjab, which was the "heyday" of SAD(A) (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The Election Commission of India indicates that SAD(A) won six seats in Punjab in 1989 (India 1990, 89). An article profiling Simranjit Singh Mann in *Hindustan Times*, an English-language newspaper based in India, reports that SAD(A) won seven seats in 1989, and Mann gave "his blessings" to three other members of parliament (*Hindustan Times* 1 Jan. 2017).

The Associate Professor indicated that while the SAD(A) was not violent, it had members who sympathized with armed Sikh separatists (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The same source further stated that when the armed movement was suppressed, support for SAD(A) declined (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). Van Dyke states that the Sikh militant period in Punjab was over by the early 1990s, after the killing and surrender of various militant leaders, and a decline in attendance at political rallies led by militant groups (Van Dyke Nov. 2009, 992).

In contrast, the *Political Handbook of the World 2018-2019* states that Simranjit Singh Mann reunited and led the SAD in 1987 after several leaders of the party formed a separate party in the year prior (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 23). The same source indicates that Mann formed the SAD(A) in the mid-1990s after claiming that other

SAD leaders did not follow the Amritsar declaration, which was an attempt to unify the SAD (*Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 23, 41). Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a legal counsel of the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO), an advocacy organization dedicated to Sikh interests in Canada that also acts in a "consultative capacity" to national and international governments on constitutional and human rights issues (WSO n.d.), explained that SAD(A) was officially formed on 1 May 1994, but that Simranjit Singh Mann was active in politics since 1984 and ran in elections prior to 1984 (WSO 20 May 2020).

Sources indicate that the objective of the SAD(A) is the creation of a separate Sikh country, called Khalistan (Associate Professor 5 May 2020; *Hindustan Times* 23 Mar. 2016; WSO 20 May 2020). The Legal Counsel stated that the SAD(A) participates in elections to achieve their objective (WSO 20 May 2020). The Associate Professor explained that while the terminology changes sometimes, including "Sikh sovereignty," "a sovereign Sikh homeland," or "Sikh self-determination," the objective remains the same (Associate Professor 5 May 2020).

The Associate Professor indicated that as of May 2020, SAD(A) is a "somewhat marginal" Sikh political party (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The *Hindustan Times* article about Mann states that public support for Khalistan has faded (*Hindustan Times* 1 Jan. 2017). Sources report that Mann ran as a candidate in the Sangrur district in Punjab in the 2019 general election (Zee News 18 May 2019; Sikh Siyasat News 23 May 2019). According to the Election Commission of India, two candidates unsuccessfully ran for SAD(A) in the general election of 2019 (India 11 Oct. 2019, 10). For additional information on the political agenda and political representation of the SAD(A) from 1999 to 2017, see Response to Information Request IND106096 of June 2018.

2. Structure and Leadership

The Associate Professor described Simranjit Singh Mann as the President and "undisputed" leader of SAD(A) (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The same source stated that the organizational structure of SAD(A) includes several vice presidents, general secretaries and spokespeople and that the party structure extends down to the district and local level (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). Sources name the following people among the leadership of SAD(A):

- Simranjit Singh Mann, President (SAD(A) n.d.; *Political Handbook of the World* 2019, 41);
- Iqbal Singh Tiwana, Spokesman (*The Tribune* 17 Dec. 2018) or Chief Spokesman, Political and Media Advisor (SAD(A) n.d.);
- S. Jaskaran Singh Kahansinghwala (SAD(A) n.d.) or S. Jaskaran Singh Kahan Singh Wala (Sikh24 6 Jan. 2017), General Secretary (SAD(A) n.d.; Sikh24 6 Jan. 2017);
- Amrik Singh Ballawal, General Secretary (SAD(A) n.d.; Sikh24 11 May 2017), previously President of SAD(A)'s Bahrain unit (Sikh24 29 Mar. 2017);

- Mohinderpal Singh, General Secretary (SAD(A) n.d.; Sikh24 25 May 2016);
- Karnail Singh Narike, General Secretary (SAD(A) n.d.; Sikh24 6 Jan. 2017);
- Rajinder Singh Fauji, National Executive Member (*The Tribune* 29 Dec. 2016) or Executive Committee (SAD(A) n.d.).

Information on the requirements and procedures to become a member of the party, including membership cards, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Activities

The Associate Professor indicated that the SAD(A) participates in local, state-level and national parliamentary elections in Punjab (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The same source stated that SAD(A) also holds pro-Khalistan rallies critical of the Indian government, generally on Sikh holidays or on the birth or death anniversaries of Sikh militants of the 1980s, mostly in Punjab and sometimes in New Delhi (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). Similarly, the Legal Counsel stated that SAD(A) members engage in activism, which includes participating in religious and political events and protests, as well as advocating for and attempting to garner support for Khalistan (WSO 20 May 2020). The Associate Professor noted that SAD(A) often works with other pro-Khalistan Sikh organizations (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The same source further indicated that SAD(A) does not participate in violent activities, while also stating that there have been local-level clashes between supporters of SAD(A) and members of mainstream Indian political parties, including the Indian National Congress (Congress Party) and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as between SAD(A) and the moderate SAD factions (Associate Professor 5 May 2020).

Sources indicate that SAD(A) and Dal Khalsa [1] called for a one-day Punjab-wide protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to take place on 25 January 2020, which received a "lukewarm" response in most of the state except for Amritsar, where protest marches took place and shops and businesses were closed (*Hindustan Times* 25 Jan. 2020; PTI 25 Jan. 2020). The *Hindustan Times* states that Malerkotla also held a protest march and shops and business were closed (*Hindustan Times* 25 Jan. 2020). The Press Trust of India (PTI), an Indian news agency, citing officials, reports that the protest was peaceful (PTI 25 Jan. 2020).

Sources state that Sikh organizations from Punjab marched in protest in New Delhi on 26 September 2019 in support of Kashmir, until they were stopped by the police due to lack of permission (*The New Indian Express* 26 Sept. 2019; Sikh Siyasat News 26 Sept. 2019). Sikh Siyasat News [2] indicates that Simranjit Singh Mann was a part of the protest and addressed the protesters (Sikh Siyasat News 26 Sept. 2019).

According to sources, Simranjit Singh Mann was scheduled to make a speech at the Golden Temple complex on 6 June 2019, the anniversary of Operation Blue Star, where a group of pro-Khalistan youths clashed with members of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) [3] (*The Times of India* 7 June 2019; *Hindustan Times* 7 June 2019). The *Hindustan Times* reports that no one was injured (*Hindustan Times* 7 June 2019).

A May 2019 article by the *Tribune*, an Indian English-language daily newspaper, states that SAD(A) members protested the demolition of the Darshni Deodhi, [the main entrance to a gurdwara of historic and cultural importance (*Hindustan Times* 30 Jan. 2020)], for "an indefinite period" (*The Tribune* 29 May 2019). A September 2019 article by Sikh24 [4] indicates that SAD(A) leader, Karam Singh Bhoian, had been protesting at the Darshni Deodhi since 31 March 2019 with large support initially, but support had since declined; Bhoian stopped his protest on 7 June 2019 (Sikh24 30 Sept. 2019). The same source states that SAD(A) filed a complaint with the High Courts against those alleged to be responsible for the destruction (Sikh24 30 Sept. 2019).

4. Treatment of Party Members and Supporters by the Authorities

The Legal Counsel stated that individuals who support or advocate for Khalistan are monitored, "often included on police lists for heightened scrutiny," and "often" charged in terrorism-related cases, which can result in being detained for years before being released due to lack of evidence (WSO 20 May 2020). Sources indicate that three Sikhs associated with Babbar Khalsa [Babbar Khalsa International (BKI)], [a "terrorist" organization (*Hindustan Times* 8 Feb. 2019)], were convicted and sentenced to life in prison for "waging war against the state" for possessing pro-Khalistan books (*Hindustan Times* 8 Feb. 2019; Sikh Siyasat News 6 Feb. 2019). The *Hindustan Times* quotes member of parliament Dharamvira Gandhi as stating that "[w]hen no weapon was found from possession of the three and no criminal offence was committed by them, construing possession of literature as waging war against the state is suppression of freedom of expression" (*Hindustan Times* 8 Feb. 2019). For additional information on the treatment of perceived supporters of Khalistan in Punjab and outside of Punjab, see Responses to Information Requests IND106097 of June 2018 and IND106294 of December 2019.

According to the Legal Counsel, active members of SAD(A) have been taken into custody or preventative detention prior to major events, rallies or important anniversaries, such as the anniversary of Operation Blue Star, and held for various lengths of time, ranging from one to several days (WSO 20 May 2020). The Associate Professor indicated that SAD(A) members may be harassed and sometimes temporarily arrested by the authorities, but that it is not "systematic or constant mistreatment"; rather, it is individuals that can be targeted at the

local level (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). The same source further explained that within India, and Punjab in particular, politics is often personality-based and can lead to personal animosity; since the police tend to be linked to political parties in power, members of the SAD(A), which is not in power, are "comparatively more vulnerable to state authorities," than members and supporters of mainstream national parties and of the moderate Akali Dal factions (Associate Professor 5 May 2020). According to an Associated Press (AP) article, mainstream political parties in India object to barring people with criminal charges from becoming candidates in elections unless they have been convicted, since political "rivalries often lead to false accusations" (AP 16 June 2019).

Sources indicate a commission of inquiry led by Justice Mehtab Singh Gill was set up in Punjab to investigate false cases registered during the SAD-BJP administration (*The Times of India* 21 Sept. 2018; *The Tribune* 30 July 2019). A September 2018 article published by the *Times of India*, an Indian English-language daily newspaper, states that most cases reviewed by the commission of inquiry involve citizens, but some involve politicians (*The Times of India* 21 Sept. 2018). A December 2019 *Tribune* article, citing the eighteenth report from the commission of inquiry, indicates that the commission has cancelled 260 First Information Reports (FIRs) as false cases (*The Tribune* 4 Dec. 2019). For information on FIRs, see Response to Information Requests IND105779 of May 2017.

Sources describe the following incidents involving members of the SAD(A):

- An 11 December 2019 press release by SAD(A) states that more than 150 party members, including senior leader Emaan Singh Mann [5], were arrested after the SAD(A) called for protest at the Indian School of Business for hosting a memorial seminar for K.P.S. Gill [6], whom the SAD(A) said was responsible for human rights violations (SAD(A) 11 Dec. 2019);
- Protesters, including members of SAD(A), who were planning to observe International Human Rights Day in Jammu and Kashmir, were prevented from entering the state by the police under the order of the Magistrate of Kathua on 9 December 2019 (Sikh Siyasat News 10 Dec. 2019; *The Tribune* 10 Dec. 2019);
- United News of India (UNI), an Indian news agency, states that SAD(A) members were taken to the police station when protesting against the president of SAD with black flags close to a SAD-BJP rally (UNI 6 May 2019);
- Charges of sedition against Simranjit Singh Mann were dropped at the recommendation of the commission of inquiry (*Hindustan Times* 27 May 2018; *The Times of India* 21 Sept. 2018). For further information about this case, see Response to Information Request IND106096 of June 2018.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.


Notes

- [1] Dal Khalsa is a Punjab-based pro-Khalistan organization (Sikh Siyasat News 9 Aug. 2018).
- [2] Sikh Siyasat News is a Punjab-based news website (Sikh Siyasat News 31 Mar. 2018).
- [3] The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) is an elected body that manages Gurdwaras (SGPC n.d.).
- [4] Sikh24 is a news website, which focuses on the Sikh community, with offices in Asia, US and UK (Sikh24 n.d.).
- [5] Emaan Singh Mann is the son of Simranjit Singh Mann (*Hindustan Times* 1 Jan. 2017).
- [6] K.P.S. Gill was the Punjab Director-General of Police who restored order through "draconian policing measures" after Sikh militancy in the late 1980s (Van Dyke Nov. 2009, 990).

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Internet sites, including: Association for Democratic Reforms; *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*; ecoi.net; *The Economic Times*; *The Guardian*; *Modern Asian Studies*; New Delhi Television (NDTV); Reuters; Times Network; UN – Refworld; US – Department of State; The World Sikh News.

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