

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing  
on  
IMPRISONED WRITERS

Monday, November 14, 2022 – 1:30 p.m.  
2255 Rayburn House Office Building and Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Statement of Aatish Taseer

My name is Aatish Taseer. I grew up very much in India, 30 or 40 years spent there in school in India. I came to college in America and worked for Time Magazine. I've been published many times in America and England and in *The New York Times*. 2014 comes around and Narendra Modi comes to power in India and at the time of his reelection in 2019 I had written an essay for Time Magazine. It was a very general essay about the way that his regime had been, about the fact that there had been this creeping authoritarianism that had a kind of ethnonationalism related to the Hindu identity of the government. It was an essay that was akin to many that had been published at the time of the general election. It was run on the cover of Time Magazine under a provocative headline, "India's Divider in Chief." It landed like a kind of bomb in India. The prime minister led the charge. I had a Pakistani father who I was estranged from who I hadn't met until the age of 21. My mother's Indian. He basically said, "Well this essay was written by a Pakistani." Of course in India, which if you understand the geopolitical tensions, is one of the most incriminating damning things you could say. Within seconds, and this is sort of central to the way the writer Roberto Saviano talks about how the fascists in the past would kill you and today they destroy your reputation online, this massive troll army set to work calling me a Pakistani agent, calling me someone who cahoots with foreign governments to ruin the reputation of the prime minister. This went on for weeks and weeks. Time Magazine at one point was receiving something like 200 letters a minute. I was like, "Okay, this is part of the spirit of free speech, and people are allowed to have this reaction," and I stood by my essay. By the summer, I had received a letter from the home ministry threatening to take away my main citizenship document. India doesn't have dual nationality. The Overseas Indian Citizenship is basically the one way someone of Indian origin can live and work and return to their country. I began to appeal quietly to say, they were accusing me of having lied about my Pakistani father, I had written a famous memoir about my Pakistani father. Members of the Indian government knew my work, would often speak of it, and suddenly none of this mattered. By November, because somebody had leaked the story to the Indian press, they canceled my document on Twitter. Blacklisted me from returning to the country. People who in the past had been like, "Oh my gosh, of course we'll give you a visa," were suddenly in total silence. I have a 92 year old grandmother, a 72 year old mother. Everyone I know who's my family lives in India, and I

haven't been able to return to see them since 2019. To answer your question, I wish that my case was in some ways the case of a single individual. But they have used different forms, whether it's getting somebody on irregular finances or whether it's Irshad Mattoo who had won a Pulitzer Prize and was about to leave the country and was prevented from leaving the country, so they're using visas, they're using actual imprisonment, they're using the narcotics agency. This has a very strong ethno-religious tilt, which is that Muslims in India who constitute some massive minority of 200 million have been singled out. For instance, Mohammed Zubair, who is a part of a fact checking agency, he, with his colleague, Pratik Sinha who's Hindu, only he was arrested and put in jail for two weeks and then released. The son of perhaps the most famous Bollywood actor is in jail on a trumped up drug charge for a month. All of this is kind of to send the signal to India's Muslims that if Shah Rukh Khan's son can be in jail, who do you think you are? It's had an absolutely chilling effect on Netflix, all of the creative television field, the newspapers. Today, as we were speaking, the last of the free television channels has been bought by Narendra Modi's best friend. In there represents this very strange piece of the puzzle where President Biden is quoting India as part of an alliance in democracy. The fact is that if this situation occurs, similar to how it occurred in Turkey, where values are not given a primary press and only interests are given this importance, you kind of lose that country and you lose a friend. In the end, in my opinion, that relationship starts to fall apart. In India we've already seen during the Ukraine crisis, a rising Putinism, a rising even anti-Americanism. All of this in my view is a reaction to the fact that India's long held tradition of democracy has started to fall apart. It is appalling to see India on the list that you just mentioned.