

The following is summarised information from a Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) and New Zealand Police Threat Insight report. Where possible, excerpts of the original document have been used. Some details are withheld under section 6(a) of the Official Information Act 1982 as release would prejudice the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the New Zealand government.

Summary: Sovereign Citizens and Violent Extremism in New Zealand

Date Issued: 29 November 2021

Reference: 21-110-TI

Summary

This Threat Insight – prepared jointly with the Security Intelligence and Threats Group (SITG) of the New Zealand Police (NZP) – examines the Sovereign Citizen ('SovCit') movement in New Zealand and assesses its nexus to violent extremism¹.

CTAG and NZP have MODERATE confidence in our assessments, which are based on a range of reporting and our combined understanding of the New Zealand terrorism threat environment. This product was prepared in consultation with the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service and the National Assessments Bureau.

Key Judgements

1. SovCit is a highly diverse, decentralised movement that claims national governments are illegitimate and that individuals can legally withdraw their consent to be governed by national governments.
2. SovCit rhetoric has become increasingly prominent in New Zealand in connection to anti-authority movements opposed to COVID-19 mitigation programmes, as well as in groups claiming connection to the Māori community.
3. The SovCit movement is not inherently violent, but individual SovCit adherents have been responsible for incidents of Politically-Motivated Violent Extremism (PMVE) overseas, primarily against law enforcement.
4. There is a realistic possibility that a threat actor inspired by SovCit rhetoric will commit a spontaneous act of extremist violence in New Zealand.

Sovereign Citizen Movement – Overview

5. The Sovereign Citizen (SovCit) movement originated in the United States in the early 1970's from White Identity Extremism (WIE) movements. Broadly, SovCits claim to hold "common-law state citizen status" that supersedes and replaces the national government's legal authority. This allows the SovCit to 'legally' ignore laws that they deem to be 'oppressive' or otherwise infringing on their personal liberties.
6. SovCit theories have gone on to influence many anti-authority movements, particularly in the United States. These include the tax protester movement, the

¹ **Violent Extremism:** the justification of violence to achieve a change in government, religion or society. This violence is often targeted against groups seen to threaten violent extremists' success or survival or undermining their worldview (per *National Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*). [21-151-TI CTAG Glossary – 2021 Update refers]

Christian Patriot movement, and the redemption movement – the last of which claims that governments use the lives of their citizens as collateral against foreign debt.

Opposition to COVID-19 mitigation programmes

7. Both globally and in New Zealand, SovCit rhetoric and themes have manifested with increasing regularity in protests against COVID-19 mitigation programmes². As the pandemic has evolved, claims of “sovereign” exemptions from public health measures such as lockdowns and mask mandates have morphed into a wide-ranging resistance to mitigation programmes such as vaccination mandates and travel restrictions.

SovCits in New Zealand

8. SovCit beliefs have manifested in New Zealand repeatedly in recent years, both among individuals and groups. To date, CTAG and NZP are not aware of any act of extremist violence in New Zealand connected to SovCit ideologies. Likewise, CTAG and NZP are currently not aware of any information to indicate a credible, specific threat of extremist violence from SovCit individuals or groups in New Zealand or against New Zealand interests abroad.

Assessments

9. CTAG and NZP assess the SovCit movement to be an extreme³ system of belief, but not inherently violent. Individuals motivated by SovCit rhetoric, however, have advocated or committed violence in support of their ideology, and in these instances we assess they fall within Politically-Motivated Violent Extremism (PMVE). [20-229-TI refers].
10. It is highly likely that the narrative of anti-authority resistance – and the lack of legal accountability – also resonates with those in the White Identity-Motivated Violent Extremist (W-IMVE) sphere, particularly those aware of the SovCit movement’s origins.
11. We continue to observe increasing use of SovCit language in anti-authority violent extremist rhetoric related to COVID-19 mitigation programmes. We assess this is in large part due to the prevalence of narratives around resistance to ‘tyranny’ – where SovCit rhetoric provides ready-built solutions to a perceived government overreach into individuals’ rights and freedoms. We judge the use of SovCit rhetoric is likely opportunistic, and is unlikely to indicate a large-scale presence of genuine SovCit adherents in New Zealand.

Outlook

12. CTAG and NZP anticipate an increase in SovCit rhetoric in the anti-authority extremism space in New Zealand, especially online. We anticipate this will occur

² For the purposes of this assessment, “COVID-19 mitigation programmes” include vaccination mandates, proof-of-vaccination requirements, lockdowns, travel restrictions, associated facilities and those involved in the creation, delivery, promotion, and enforcement of related legislation and regulations.

³ **Extremism:** Religious, social or political ideologies that exist substantially outside of more broadly accepted belief systems in large parts of society, and are often seen as objectionable to large parts of society. Extreme ideologies may seek change in government, religion or society or to create a community based on their ideology (per *National Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*). [21-151-TI CTAG Glossary – 2021 Update refers]

particularly in response to COVID-19 mitigation programmes and environmental protection regulations. However, we judge this increase will remain largely opportunistic over the near term and is highly unlikely to signal a significant upsurge of committed, long-term SovCits in New Zealand.

13. We judge there is a realistic possibility that a violent extremist or group of violent extremists, motivated by SovCit beliefs, will commit a spontaneous act of violence in direct response to a perceived 'assault' by government agencies during a routine act of legal or regulatory enforcement.
14. Such a perceived 'assault' could include any attempt to force a SovCit to comply with laws they have deemed illegitimate or for which they believe they have legally withdrawn their consent. We judge this is almost certain to include elements COVID-19 mitigation programmes perceived as 'oppressive'.

Intelligence cut-off date: 22 November 2021

