

A highly unsuitable candidate: New Zealand government is not fit to sit on UN Human Rights Council

The New Zealand Government must be stopped. At home and abroad.

On 14 September this year, the New Zealand government and three other governments (Canada, USA and Australia) shared the dubious distinction as the only states to vote against the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. On Friday, it announced its candidacy for the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, for the period 2009-2012. The announcement came at the end of a shocking week where Maori sovereignty campaigners, environmentalists, and other activists had been arrested in a major series of Police raids throughout the country, under the post-9/11 Suppression of Terrorism Act, and where armed paramilitary police besieged and terrorized the Tuhoe Maori communities of Ruatoki and Taneatua, in the "Bay of Plenty" region in the east of the North Island. Some 15% of Aotearoa/New Zealand's population of just over 4 million are Maori. Ruatoki Maori charge that among many other outrages, armed police in black commando gear traumatized children by searching school buses.

Clearly Helen Clark's supposedly centre-left Labour Party-led social democratic government has no shame. The Maori Party Minister of Parliament and co-leader Dr Pita Sharples said that the raids had taken race relations in New Zealand back 100 years. Many agreed, while a torrent of racist anti-Maori sentiment flowed forth in the nation's media. Meanwhile, prominent Tuhoe Maori sovereignty campaigner, community worker, and artist, Tame Iti, his nephew Rawiri, and 15 others have been arrested. Most have been denied bail and remain in jail. Activist homes and offices were raided, searched or visited by police in several centres, on a major fishing expedition against those who would challenge the status quo. Protests against the raids, and in support of those targeted, have been organized in a number of cities and towns throughout New Zealand, with an impressive 1500 people turning out in the small, largely Maori East Coast town of Whakatane where Tame Iti was arrested at gunpoint last Monday. Placards included: "He taonga te mokopuna [our children are treasures]", "We are not terrorists, we've been terrorised" and "Don't point the gun at me! I'm under 5". Solidarity protests have taken place in Australia, Germany and other countries. More are planned.

The New Zealand state, built as it is on the dispossession of Maori and the continued colonization of Maori lands, lives and resources has always inherently equated Maori resistance and decolonization initiatives with subversion, sedition and criminality. Perhaps especially so in Tuhoe territory, for whom this is yet another very real wave of armed invasion and occupation.

Almost a century ago, in 1916, the Tuhoe settlement of Maungapohatu in the bush-clad Urewera ranges, a pacifist, religious community, was raided by armed constabulary in the same way as Ruatoki was raided last Monday by what some are calling a "ninja army" of police. Back then, two men were shot dead and the remainder ended up in prison, "guilty of moral resistance". The government unsuccessfully tried to charge Tuhoe leader Rua Kenana with sedition.

Maungapohatu's crime was reluctance to engage in World War One. Back then, they called it "sedition" and "treason". Now, Maori resistance is being called 'terrorism'. As elsewhere, 9/11 has provided a whole new pretext for surveillance of domestic dissent. With the Cold War over, state security agencies in New Zealand and elsewhere, including police forces, have had to find new enemies within to justify their budgets and powers. Yet in colonial-settler states like New Zealand, Canada, Australia and the United States, the new enemies are often the old enemies - Indigenous Peoples who have survived generations of genocidal policies, and who continue to assert their fundamental rights to self-determination. Creating and sustaining a climate of fear is to the benefit of those in New Zealand who would rather conveniently forget some hometruths about the basis for New Zealand's much-vaunted democratic welfare state. Invasion and colonial occupation. We may well be living in the 21st century, but colonialism is alive and kicking.

An earlier Labour Party government imposed the most radical free market reforms in any OECD country in the 1980s, which transformed Aotearoa/New Zealand into an investment playground for transnational corporations which often bought up privatized former state-owned assets at firesale prices. The social costs were high, and the country's Maori and Pacific Island communities bore a disproportionate part of the negative impacts. But for many Maori this came as nothing new. Many Maori saw the commercialization, privatization and deregulation process as yet another wave of colonization; the further appropriation and commodification of their lands and resources. Prior to corporatisation and privatization, these had been stolen from Maori. Some of the strongest challenges to the economic reforms have come from Maori, through legal challenges, direct actions and other methods.

Commenting on the police offensive, a recent editorial in the country's largest circulation daily newspaper, the New Zealand Herald was critical:

"When police in other countries foil plans of apparent terrorism, they usually act quietly and invariably they quickly give the public a reasonable account of what they have discovered. The New Zealand police this week have done neither.

Their swoop on a suspicious camp in the Ureweras and the homes of activists in several causes was carried out so conspicuously that news cameras were able to catch some of it. But when it came to explaining the raids, Police Commissioner Howard Broad was circumspect in the extreme. Over ensuing days, when the arrested were brought to court, judges too have closed the door.

Consequently the country is still in the dark at the end of a week in which its confidence in its internal security, and in its police and law, has been put to a test." (20 October 2007).

The Herald editorial pointed out that those who are arguing that this is a case of major police overkill can indeed derive support from the fact that thus far, charges laid against the 18 arrestees have all been under the Arms Act, not the Terrorism Suppression Act. But the headlines throughout New Zealand have been replicated uncritically throughout the world proclaiming the existence of "Maori terror camps" - although a growing number of people are now asking some harder questions about the operation, and the nature of police intelligence behind it all. Plenty of people in the Ureweras own firearms. Tuhoe consider the forest their food basket, and hunt for pigs and deer.

There is a disturbing mindset and operational culture within parts of the New Zealand police which frequently equates challenges to prevailing political and economic orthodoxies with criminal activity. While their operations relate partly to narcotics and vice, the police's Criminal Intelligence Service (CIS) also monitors political activities which the police consider may involve a breach of the criminal law, though how such activities are assessed is anybody's guess.

The service conducts similar surveillance operations to the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) and there is strong liaison between them. For many years, the CIS has clearly granted itself a broad mandate to collect information on people on the basis of their political beliefs and sympathies, and views formed by police intelligence officers. Their work in this area seems to have much in common with political elements in police forces elsewhere in the world which routinely monitor, harass and criminalize legitimate political organizers and activities.

By deeming many groups and individuals as having a sufficient propensity to commit criminal offences on the basis of their perceived political views and affiliations, the CIS is contributing towards the criminalization of dissent in New Zealand. Whatever data gets fed into a filter or frame such as that constructed by police intelligence in relation to political activism, inevitably gets twisted and manipulated every which way. In turn, this encourages front line police to exercise contempt and a

cavalier disregard towards people's rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. In May 2000, two dozen unions, academics, religious and political leaders called on the justice and electoral select committee to hold an inquiry into the CIS's role in targeting political organizations and activists. Predictably, this call went unanswered. Maybe it needs to be restated even more forcefully now.

Critics of successive expansions of Police and state security intelligence agency powers, both before and after 9/11, have pointed out that such laws are likely to target a wide range of organizations that are working for social change in Aotearoa/New Zealand. New technology in the hands of the New Zealand police is a bit of a worry. In 2003, it was revealed, embarrassingly, that the National Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, in its threat assessment of an Algerian refugee, Ahmed Zaoui, until recently detained on secret evidence under a security risk certificate issued by the NZSIS drew "evidence" from a cult website of convicted fraudster, cryptofascist and conspiracy theorist, Lyndon Larouche which claimed that Mr Zaoui had links with a terrorist organization.

So what would the New Zealand government have to gain by the stormtrooper tactics unleashed last week? The raids and accompanying "domestic terror" hysteria add extra impetus to a Terrorism Suppression Amendment Bill now before Parliament. They create both a climate of fear while modelling a strong "no-nonsense" government. Getting tough on "crime" is a tried and tested formula in the lead-up to an election.

So is racism. Not that New Zealand governments need much help in scapegoating Indigenous Peoples. But they seem to be taking a clear leaf from Australia's John Howard, who habitually campaigns on racist get-tough policies against Indigenous Australians (especially 1998 and this election - maybe his outrageous militarization of Indigenous communities in Northern Territory in the name of child welfare gave Helen Clark some ideas), refugees (2001) and the war on Iraq/"war on terror" (2004 and this year). The Clark government must hope that this macho demonstration of state power being unleashed against Indigenous Peoples who have the temerity to believe in rights to self-determination and decolonization will play out well for them in the polls. The chilling effect this operation will have on people who advocate for social justice, and healthy political debate in Aotearoa/New Zealand is of great concern.

There's nothing "postcolonial" about the era that we live in. This week's actions clearly illustrate that the governments of colonial settler states, like leopards, don't change their spots, but just stalk their prey in other ways, to paraphrase Maori lawyer Moana Jackson. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the non-Maori majority have a responsibility to challenge the New Zealand government's actions now and in the future, and resist a new wave of McCarthyism which threatens to cast a chilling spell on all who dissent against the status quo. If they do not know it already, non-Maori need to learn the real history of not only the Tuhoe people and their territory, but also the history of colonization in Aotearoa. And to understand that this process continues. Elsewhere, people would do well to see through the mythmaking prancing and posturing of the New Zealand government on the world stage as it boasts about how progressive it is. As a friend said to me yesterday, if this were happening in Burma, the story would have much more airtime. If Burma was applying for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, there would be outrage and protests around the world. Why should the New Zealand government be able to terrorize whole communities and criminalize Maori sovereignty activists and their supporters and not expect strong challenges to its colonial hypocrisy?

**Aziz Choudry,
20 October 2007**

**For more commentary on this topic, go to the NZ "terrorism" in perspective page
<http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/nzterror.htm>**