



New Zealand Joins the International Crackdown on COVID Mandate Protests

Disagreement over pandemic policy accelerates the slide toward authoritarianism in another country.

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Last week, with the world understandably distracted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, New Zealand authorities took advantage of the moment to disperse an inconvenient protest against pandemic mandates. Like Canada's Freedom Convoy, by which it was inspired, the protest was grounded in grassroots disagreement with authoritarian policies, mixed with a little nuttiness, and had outlived its welcome. Also like its inspiration, the protest in New Zealand was forcibly shut down to the surprise of those with preconceptions about peaceful, tolerant democracies. Governments are most peaceful, it turns out, when there's little dissent to test that tolerance and, under pandemic stresses, gloves are coming off in an increasingly illiberal world.

"Police in riot gear cleared a protest camp outside New Zealand's Parliament on Wednesday, sparking violent clashes that saw dozens arrested as protesters hurled bricks and set fire to their tents," Michael E. Miller wrote March 2 for *The Washington Post*. "In what Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said was a planned operation to remove the camp, hundreds of officers assembled at dawn and began towing the cars and trucks demonstrators have used to block streets for more than three weeks, in imitation of the 'Freedom Convoy' in Canada."

Weeks of protesters camped out in your city can fray the nerves even of people sympathetic to the cause—just ask Seattle residents who remember the degenerating condition of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ)/Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) from summer 2020. Sanitation deteriorates, noise disturbs people's sleep, and the situation can turn violent, testing everybody's limits. But, like their counterparts in Ottawa, the authorities in Wellington shocked many observers.

"Officers, many bearing riot shields, responded with pepper spray and rubber bullets. At least 60 people were arrested, and three officers were taken to hospitals," Natasha Frost noted for *The New York Times* of violence on the part of both cops and protesters. "Such scenes are rare in New Zealand, a country known for its relative remoteness, serenity and stability."

Unlike Canada, which imposed a financial police state and is still hunting wrong-thinkers who dared to donate to the Freedom Convoy, New Zealand officials have so far stuck with old-fashioned head-busting. But politicians in both nations seem united in disbelief that anybody could disagree with them.

"After all, when we are in the middle of a pandemic, and 400 people hospitalized and 20,000 people becoming sick in just one day, it's almost impossible to comprehend that people would stand opposed to efforts to slow that down," New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern huffed of protesters camped around Parliament. It echoed Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's slap at the Freedom Convoy for "unacceptable views."

It's not really obvious that protesters "stand opposed to efforts" to curb COVID-19. While decentralized movements represent a range of views, polls say many participants oppose vaccine mandates, travel restrictions, curfews, and other dictates that elevate public-health wisdom of the moment over personal freedom. If disagreeing with government is "unacceptable," that's a problem given that the powers-that-be in liberal societies are supposed to be open to challenge. But politicians around the world are increasingly overt about denying their fallibility.

"The world is becoming more authoritarian as non-democratic regimes become even more brazen in their repression and many democratic governments suffer from backsliding by adopting their tactics of restricting free speech and weakening the rule of law, exacerbated by what threatens to become a 'new normal' of Covid-19 restrictions," Sweden's International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) warned at the end of 2021.

"Canada's citizens feel that they have little control over their lives, a sentiment that has been compounded by pandemic-related restrictions on individual freedoms," *The Economist* commented in its Democracy Index 2021 even before the Freedom Convoy crackdown. New Zealand scored higher, but that was before the protest and in the context of a world in which liberal democracies' respect for individual liberty has long been deteriorating.

"Since 2008, freedom has declined for four in five people globally, the recently released 2021 Human Freedom Index (HFI) shows," Ian Vasquez of the Cato Institute and Fred McMahon of the Fraser Institute observed last month. "And that's the good news. The report, which we co-author, is based on 2019 data, the most recent comprehensive data. The skies have darkened since."

"The decline in freedom is wide-ranging. It affects countries large and small, dictatorships and democracies, and all regions of the planet," they added. "The freedoms that have declined most are speech, religion, and association and assembly."

New Zealand already had a checkered history with free speech, including a national censor. With France, the country co-sponsors a campaign against allegedly "terrorist and violent extremist" content that has, inevitably, bled over into restrictions on ideas that politicians find "unacceptable" or "impossible to comprehend." David Seymour, leader of the libertarian-leaning ACT party, toured New Zealand last year opposing a proposal to curb speech that some consider hateful. "I don't think it's going to help for the state to come in and put one side or another in jail depending on which side they think deserves it most," he told a reporter about threats to criminalize debate.

Unfortunately, headlines offer further evidence that the rot goes deep. In November, Dutch police fired on rioters opposing pandemic restrictions. French police used tear gas on anti-

lockdown protesters last month. Protests in many countries have turned violent, though you have to wonder what authorities expect when they shutter businesses, restrict people's movements, and issue dictates. Even in the U.S., officials voice hostility towards contradiction of official narratives.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy "asked tech companies to do their part by turning over data on 'COVID-19 misinformation,' including its sources and its propagation through search engines, social media platforms, instant messaging services, and e-commerce sites, by May 2," *Reason's* Jacob Sullum cautioned last week. "While Murthy himself has no power to compel disclosure of that information, the companies have strong incentives to cooperate, since the Biden administration can make life difficult for them by filing lawsuits, writing regulations, and supporting new legislation."

Already losing patience with populations that don't always do what they're told, governments found in the COVID-19 pandemic an excuse to become less tolerant and more draconian. New Zealand is just one among many democracies where it's unclear how free they'll be in the future.