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BELOW THE THRESHOLD: SOVEREIGNISM AND SECURITY RECALIBRATION IN NEW ZEALAND

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Sovereignist activity in New Zealand ranges from pseudolegal filings and administrative harassment to coercive encounters with officials and, on occasion, serious violence. Most manifestations occur below conventional criminal and violent-extremism thresholds, creating challenges for frameworks that principally activate around violence. Drawing upon analysis of 245 publicly available court documents and sixty Official Information Act submissions spanning 1988–2025, this article examines sovereignism as one manifestation of contemporary anti-government extremism and introduces *lorefare* as an exploratory concept describing the strategic deployment of sovereign doctrine, identities, pseudolegal practices and constructed institutional challenges. Situating New Zealand alongside recent recalibrations in Germany and particularly the Netherlands, the article demonstrates how graduated approaches can render persistent anti-institutional conduct analytically visible without collapsing lawful dissent into terrorism discourse. It advocates for a trajectory-aware assessment as a more proportionate means of differentiating sovereignist manifestations and identifying escalation risks before violence becomes the principal indicator of concern.

Keywords: Sovereignism; sovereign citizen, anti-government extremism; pseudolaw; anti-institutionalism; national security; New Zealand.

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1. Introduction

On 9 March 2016, a routine cannabis eradication operation in the Bay of Plenty escalated into a 22-hour siege when Rhys Warren fired upon police officers working near his rural property.¹ During the subsequent tactical breach, Warren discharged a firearm at close range, injuring multiple officers before surrendering the following day.² At trial, he challenged the judge's jurisdiction and asserted that the court has no legal right to govern him. When those arguments were again rejected at sentencing, Warren walked out of his own hearing.³ A court-appointed assessor noted Warren's belief that he was being illegally detained and that both the police and justice department were conspiring against him.⁴ Pre-sentencing reports documented a longstanding pattern of anti-authority behaviour, including a severe assault on an elderly dog control officer in 2009.⁵ Post-conviction, Warren has continued to file pseudolegal documents, illustrating that sovereign anti-authority beliefs and practices may persist well beyond a single violent episode.⁶

The deadly element was again visible in 2025, when long-term sovereign adherent Dezi Freeman fatally shot two police officers during the execution of a warrant in rural Australia.⁷ Yet Warren and Freeman are not representative of the broader sovereign milieu in either country. A 2025 New Zealand media profile of a couple identifying as sovereign adherents emphasised their self-described "non-dangerous" ordinariness.⁸ Their refusal to pay rates or fines and their practice of unlicensed driving were framed, not as conduct subject to legitimate state enforcement, but as morally-grounded lifestyle choices that downplays foreseeable friction with authorities.⁹ As Rathje observes, although sovereign actors may be externally classified as extremist, many adherents frame their conduct as lawful and restorative rather than criminal.¹⁰ Nonetheless, making sense out of these beliefs and practices is a complex task.

The analytical challenge lies in the space between these poles, where sovereignist escalation seldom occurs without antecedent signals. As Sarteschi observes, available evidence suggests that sovereign violence often emerges following repeated tactical failures and increasingly adversarial encounters with law-enforcement.¹¹ Most sovereign activity generates institutional friction well before it approaches physical violence, often through pseudolegal refusals to recognise authority, declarations of non-consent, non-payment of financial obligations, and coercive encounters with frontline workers and officials.¹² While criminal conduct can be addressed through existing mechanisms, New Zealand currently lacks a dedicated formal framework for systematically assessing sovereign conduct below the threshold of violence and understanding its broader significance. Practitioners therefore often have to treat such behavior as non-compliance, regard it as unlawful but rarely prosecutable, or reach for classifications developed for materially different sovereign manifestations and threat landscapes.

This article approaches the question from a security studies perspective, alert to recurrent critiques that authorities risk over-securitising fringe opinions, dissent or mislabelling adherents. It proposes that a graduated approach, one that tracks behaviour and trajectories rather than waiting for violence, better supports security and intelligence assessments through earlier identification of escalation risks. Equally important, such an approach reduces the possibility of disproportionate responses that may counterproductively reinforce sovereign adherents' grievances. Frameworks that rely on violence as their principal activation threshold struggle to capture coercive behaviour and cumulative institutional harms that remain below that threshold. These tensions are examined here by situating New Zealand's experience within recent European recalibrations, particularly the Netherlands' graduated approach to sustained anti-institutional conduct.

To further ground this analysis, pseudolaw-infused sovereignism is treated as one strand within the broader field of contemporary Anti-Government Extremism (AGE), an umbrella concept encompassing anti-authority, anti-institutional, and related manifestations. Jackson defines AGE as extremism that "primarily or consistently focuses on the government as a source or cause of perceived crisis,"¹³ while Bjorgo notes that anti-government actors may combine deep distrust of democratic institutions with support for, or tolerance of, violence against the democratic order.¹⁴ Positioning sovereignism within this rubric recognises its anti-state nature without presuming that all sovereign conduct is violent or reducible to a single ideological category, particularly right-wing extremism (XRW).

The United States (US) remains analytically informative as an originator of sovereignist doctrine and as a point of reference for understanding variations of sovereign activity. However, applying US official designations and threat typologies uncritically to New Zealand is problematic. Labels such as sovereign citizen (SovCit) and paper terrorism emerged within a distinct constitutional and security environment shaped by diverse tax protest milieus, racialised anti-federalism, militia-adjacent mobilisations, federal land standoffs, and comparatively permissive firearms access. Although SovCit has become a convenient shorthand for diverse international manifestations, US labels still carry implicit threat assumptions heavily shaped by their American settings. While these concepts illuminate sovereign repertoires, their application to New Zealand sovereign activity requires careful contextual adaptation and should not predetermine assessments.

To illuminate the relevance of European recalibrations, this article first clarifies AGE typologies and key terminology, including pseudolaw and sovereign labelling. It then introduces *lorefare* as an exploratory analytical concept that captures the strategic deployment of sovereign doctrine, pseudolegal tactics, quasi-authoritative identity claims, and constructed institutional challenges without presupposing the violent absolutism often associated with US-derived labels. The article briefly traces doctrinal lineages and

pandemic-era resurgence that prompted the recalibrations in Europe before considering why New Zealand frameworks struggle to address the diversity and gradients of sovereign manifestations.

Placing New Zealand developments alongside these comparative models, the article advocates for approaches capable of navigating distinctions between dissent, delegitimisation, and escalation, while remaining attentive to the friction that may, under certain conditions, precede violence. Here, delegitimisation refers not to rhetorical policy opposition but to sustained practices that deny the legal authority of democratic governance and seek to operationalise that denial through administrative campaigns, jurisdictional refusal, or the construction of parallel structures of authority. This aligns with AGE definitions emphasising persistent and structural opposition rather than intermittent or issue-specific dissent.

Empirical illustrations draw upon sixty Official Information Act (OIA) requests and associated annotations submitted between late 2020 and February 2025 to twenty-six agencies, organisations, and six government ministers through the public platform FYI.org.nz, together with 245 publicly available New Zealand court documents spanning 1988 to early 2025. These materials were selected on the basis of containing explicit sovereign pseudolaw arguments, rather than general anti-authority sentiment.¹⁵ Collectively, these materials provide a longitudinal overview into sovereign behaviours, tactical repertoires, demographic patterns, and judicial responses across almost the full hierarchy of the New Zealand justice system. Although unlikely to capture every sovereign interaction with state institutions, the dataset provides meaningful insight into recurring practices, grievances, and patterns.

2. Terminological and Analytical Framing

Anti-Government Extremism (AGE) encompasses related typologies including anti-authority, anti-institutional, and anti-statist. The objective is not to displace these categories, but to integrate them within a coherent analytical rubric while retaining their distinctions. This usage aligns with contemporary AGE scholarship and reflects regional variation in terminology, with European analyses favouring anti-establishment or anti-institutional labels and North American official frameworks employing Anti-Government/Anti-Authority (AG/AA) classifications. These differences reflect divergent security paradigms rather than theoretical contradiction.

Additionally, AGE should not be conflated with anti-government sentiment which captures attitudinal disposition but does not denote ideological structure, behaviour thresholds, or normative intent.¹⁶ Conceptualising sovereignism within AGE does not automatically render it a security threat requiring exceptional measures rather, it expands analytical capacity to assess anti-state opposition of varying forms, intensity, and risk. The terms anti-government and anti-state are therefore used interchangeably here,

reflecting their functional equivalence in scholarly discourse. Within this rubric, sovereign adherents mobilise their preferred pseudolegal repertoires to contest state legitimacy through administrative, rhetorical, and often coercive strategies which are difficult for targets to counter. Part of the challenge is sovereigns' persistent wordplay which serves various strategic purposes; however, the most common feature is pseudolaw.

Rather than cataloguing its characteristics, this article clarifies that pseudolaw is a collection of false concepts presented as law and deployed to displace institutional authority, assert immunity, nullify debts, or pursue financial advantage through means including fraud or tax avoidance.¹⁷ In some contexts, pseudolaw has also served to rationalise hostile or criminal conduct. One New Zealand adherent, for example, invoked pseudolegal reasoning to assert a statutory right to destroy any dog attacking his own, using this claim to justify drawing a knife during an incident in which his dog was in fact the aggressor.¹⁸ More serious pseudolegal filings appear in cases involving serious criminal conduct, including murder, sexual offending, and as noted earlier, in Warren's rationalisation for shooting police officers.¹⁹

Lastly, this article adopts the European usage of sovereign, sovereignists, or sovereignism interchangeably rather than the US label 'Sovereign Citizen' (SovCit). The distinction matters for practical analytical reasons. The SovCit label emerged from a specific US context that included tax protesters, racialised militia-styled entities, federal land disputes, elected county Sheriffs, and a constitutional order distinct from New Zealand's, and carries official threat designations calibrated to that environment. Applied uncritically internationally, it imports those assumptions before any local analysis has been conducted.

The New Zealand milieu is more varied than any popularised label captures. A 2022 Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG) intelligence assessment identifies one strain within the New Zealand milieu; adherents proactively constructing parallel structures such as Common Law Assemblies.²⁰ CTAG describes this as "a new form of government based on common-law pseudolegal theories, rather than passive or reactive resistance."²¹ This characterisation has analytical value but requires qualification. The Common Law Assembly formation is one strand within a broader and more heterogeneous sovereign milieu in New Zealand, not representative of it as a whole.

Many adherents invoke 'common law' or "common lore" in ways that bear no relationship to the Assembly formations, drawing on pseudolegal doctrine assembled from diverse and often contradictory sources including country-specific court rulings, Admiralty law, and the Magna Carta. The CTAG framing illustrates why context-specific assessment matters and that even domestic intelligence analysis can inadvertently subsume variation under a recognised strain.²² Sovereignism is adopted here as the preferred term precisely because it preserves that heterogeneous space rather than flattening it.

This terminological choice reflects a scholarly caution about importing classifications rooted in US jurisdictions and social contexts. Netolitzky cautions that conflating Commonwealth 'Freeman-of-the-Land' (FOTL) traditions with SovCit typologies misrepresents behavioural patterns, risk profiles, and threat trajectories, precisely the kind of flattening that CTAG framing risks with external audiences when applied beyond its specific cluster.²³ Roose likewise demonstrates that Australian sovereigns have emerged from distinct contextual conditions that diverge from their North American counterparts.²⁴ Together these cautions recognise applying US-derived classifications to New Zealand without contextual adaptation produces analytical distortion before a deeper analysis is done. The European approach examined later in this article mitigates this issue as they were developed to address contemporary sub-threshold, non-violent, conduct that characterises most sovereign activity in comparable democratic settings.

Regardless of terminology, it remains essential to distinguish pseudolaw-based sovereignism from Indigenous sovereignty activism. Scholars in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have raised concerns about sovereign adherents' (mis)appropriation of indigenous language and symbolism, noting implications for genuine activism.²⁵ A New Zealand Police (NZP) intelligence report documents continued misuse of the 1834 Confederation of United Tribes Flag (He Whakaputanga) by various sovereign formations, including the pre-pandemic quasi-“Te-Moana-Nui-A-Kiwa” embassy that commercialises pseudolegal doctrine and identities in ways that exploit rather than represent indigenous communities.²⁶ NZP internal guidance is explicit on this point, noting that there is “no real link between the SOVCITS and the Māori Sovereignty/Tino Rangatiratanga movement.”²⁷

Young & Hobbs further emphasise that when Indigenous individuals adopt pseudolegal reasoning, their claims become more vulnerable to dismissal by state actors, potentially undermining broader Indigenous gains made in the legal system.²⁸ They also warn that non-Indigenous appropriation of Indigenous cultures does not reflect genuine solidarity and can cause further harm to these communities.²⁹ These dynamics reinforce the importance of contextually grounded terminology and careful labelling. With these conceptual boundaries established, lorefare can now be introduced as an appropriate analytical mechanism for capturing the strategic dimension of sovereign practices in New Zealand.

3. From Paper Terrorism to Lorefare

Paper terrorism is narrowly defined as the use of falsified legal documents and frivolous lawsuits to cause disruption.³⁰ While this definition fits jurisdictions where formal designations exist and fraudulent liens or civil litigation are easily weaponised, it does not translate cleanly to New Zealand, where sovereign actors are treated as potential security concerns but not designated as security threats. In the US context, the FBI classified “sovereign citizen extremists” as domestic terrorists in 2010, a 2011 Department

of Homeland Security analysis explicitly warned of sovereign violence against police, and by 2015 law enforcement surveys ranked SovCits as their primary domestic threat.³¹

This article introduces ‘lorefare,’ a novel concept that builds on, and yet diverges from, Dunlap’s theory of lawfare. Lawfare describes the strategic use of legitimate legal processes to achieve objectives without resorting to violence.³² Dunlap notes that lawfare tactics can be utilised in various sub-threshold kinetic and non-kinetic confrontations with nation-states.³³ Sovereign actors do something structurally similar but distinct, however rather than deploying contemporary law, they weaponise a simulacrum drawn from sovereign doctrine, revisionist history, and anti-state traditions. Lorefare is the inversion of lawfare, where a parallel order is weaponised instead through similar tactics.

Lorefare encompasses a repertoire that includes, for example, vexatious filings, pseudolaw documents, quasi-official identities and sovereign micro-nation constructs. It does not replace pseudolaw, which retains utility for doctrinal analysis, but provides a broader analytical lens. Its practical value lies in prompting assessors to ask whether discrete incidents, a court filing here, an OIA request there, and a harassment campaign elsewhere, form part of a coordinated sovereign project or reflect isolated acts. If no pattern emerges, nothing is lost. If one emerges, conduct that would otherwise fall between institutional frameworks becomes visible without being labelled a form of terrorism. Lorefare does not presuppose a violent trajectory; it recognises patterns and friction points that occur, and that may, under certain conditions precede one.

Several New Zealand examples illustrate the range. In July 2022 pseudo-sheriff Kerre Brogden and three associates emailed hundreds of New Zealand schools decreeing an end to school lockdowns, prohibiting masks or vaccinations for children, and threatening arrests for anyone who “harms a child”, while claiming authority under the UK 1887 Sheriffs Act.³⁴ A coordinated variant appeared when sovereign influencer, Rach-Ruby incited a phone campaign that drew domestic and foreign adherents into targeting Nelson dog-control officers after her unregistered dogs were impounded.³⁵ The episode shows the transnational character of opposition to authority and how loosely-connected actors can amplify a single grievance into a coordinated pressure campaign.

Other manifestations can be defined by their pseudolaw form rather than their immediate disruptiveness, such as targeted email/letter campaigns, spurious allodial title claims, fabricated writs, and citizen’s-arrest declarations on elected officials at public council meetings, and unsolicited ‘human rights’ audits of state services. What marks each as lorefare is not pseudolaw itself, which remains one element of the repertoire, but the strategic deployment of pseudolegal claims, identities, and practices to contest institutional authority and generate coercive effects. These behaviours frequently sit below criminal, violent-extremist, and terrorism thresholds yet collectively impose real institutional costs, the analytical space this article emphasises needs to be made visible within New Zealand.

4. Doctrinal Variation and Differential Risk

Although pseudolaw-infused sovereignism pre-dated the Covid pandemic, the period generated what scholars describe as catalytic conditions for transnational sovereign resurgence and transformation, with documented intensification across North America, Europe, and Australasia.³⁶ Yet two assumptions frequently shape external perceptions of sovereignist activity in New Zealand. The first is that contemporary sovereignism descends straightforwardly from the *Posse Comitatus*, a US anti-federal movement associated with Christian Identity theology, racialised politics, and county level constitutionalism.² The second is that all manifestations are therefore inherently a form of white supremacist right-wing extremism. Both assumptions are contestable. While *Posse Comitatus* represents one influential historical strand within the development of all forms, it neither originated all sovereign strands nor adequately explains their contemporary manifestations.³⁷

Across the Commonwealth, sovereign milieus generally exhibit less attachment to racialised Christian Identity beliefs and other specific American traditions than their US predecessors.³⁸ Instead, they more frequently blend natural-rights claims with British common-law idioms, producing diverse formations over time, linked primarily by their rejection of state authority that a replicated ideological lineage.³⁹ For security purposes, these distinctions matter. Flattening contemporary Commonwealth manifestations into a singular *Posse*-derived lineage risks overstating coherence while obscuring important differences in motivations, demographics, and escalation. Developmental pathways are therefore more informative than presumed doctrinal origins alone.

Further contemporary shifts have also been observed. Sarteschi identifies emergent generational and strand-level changes in which newer cohorts appear less focused on pseudolegal documentation and more prone to confrontation during routine interactions, particularly with police.⁴⁰ The pandemic also saw a proliferation of sovereign courts or assemblies, and alternative authority formations.⁴¹ While some manifestations draw from constitutionalist politics and *Posse*-styled rhetoric regarding legal authority, others incorporated increasingly spiritual or esoteric belief systems.⁴² Local patterns within New Zealand court documents similarly indicate post-2020 shifts, including greater female participation and a broader range of disputes involving pandemic-related activities, family court, and employment disputes.

Critics may argue these distinctions are academic since all sovereign strands share an anti-government orientation and possess a latent potential for violence. Yet comparative assessments increasingly caution against treating anti-institutional milieus as ideologically uniform or inherently violent. Dutch intelligence assessments, for example, explicitly distinguish anti-institutional extremism from right-wing extremism and recognise

² *Posse Comitatus* (Latin for 'power of the county') emerged in the US during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its name derives from the *Posse Comitatus Act* 1878, which was reinterpreted wrongly as supporting county-level constitutional supremacy rather than limiting federal military involvement in civilian law enforcement.

that such milieus may simultaneously reject authority, promote parallel structures, and encompass diverse motivations. Violence may be legitimised by certain narratives, but it is neither explicit nor inevitable across the milieu. Accordingly, motivations and pathways to escalation are better understood as contingent and differentiated rather than inferred from traditional doctrinal labels alone.⁴³

5. International Approaches and Recalibration

Sovereign actors worldwide have attracted intermittent official attention for at least two decades, but formal designations outside the United States remained relatively limited until the COVID pandemic. Recent European responses, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands, illustrate how authorities recalibrated their assessments in response to intensified anti-democratic and anti-institutional mobilisation, including conspiratorial anti-elite worldviews and sovereign ideologies. Rather than signalling desecuritisation, these approaches recognised sustained anti-state and delegitimisation-orientated activity as security-relevant while being explicitly distinguished from lawful dissent.

Australia represents a close comparator to New Zealand in terms of both geographic proximity and sovereign milieu maturity, yet its approach serves as a cautionary contrast rather than a model. Following several sovereign-linked incidents, including police fatalities, Australian federal and state authorities have increasingly framed sovereign actors as a generalised domestic security concern, adopting a categorical approach closer to the US than to the European model.⁴⁴ The Australian approach addresses genuinely problematic behaviour but cannot formally distinguish between conduct warranting security attention and the broader heterogeneous sovereign population.

Germany

In Germany, sovereign adherents entered security discourse after violent incidents in 2016 involving Selbstverwalter (self-administrators). One prominent case involved a Selbstverwalter who proclaimed his property an independent state, illegally stockpiled weapons, and fatally shot one officer while injuring three others during the execution of a warrant.⁴⁵ Pandemic-era mobilisation then intensified concern, including the attempted Reichstag [parliament] breach in August 2020 by over 300 individuals, and the exposure of a Patriotic Union plot to overthrow the state in 2022.⁴⁶ Beyond episodic violence, adherents also engaged in orthodox tactics including administrative obstruction, traffic offences, and refusal to meet financial obligations, that generated friction with institutions.⁴⁷

Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) responded to this broader ecology by introducing a new threat category in 2021: "Anti-Constitutional-Delegitimisation of the State".⁴⁸ The designation captures actors assessed to be systematically undermining core constitutional principles and institutional operability through sustained delegitimisation and targeted disruption, rather than merely expressing dissatisfaction with policies.⁴⁹ By 2022-2023 authorities were tracking

approximately 23,000 individuals within this milieu, of whom around 2,300 were assessed as violence orientated.⁵⁰ The 2024 BfV report records 1,500 individuals within this spectrum, of whom 250 were considered violence orientated,⁵¹ potentially reflective of assessments of individuals from previous years being completed.

Importantly, the BfV clarified that intelligence relevance attaches only when delegitimisation efforts reach a significant threshold and demonstrate sustained systematic intent,⁵² an attempt to preserve a principled distinction between extremist activity and protected protest or dissent. Putting this recalibration into practice in May 2025, German authorities banned the sovereign “Kingdom of Germany” and its sub-organisations, citing the group’s purposes and activities as contrary to criminal law or directed against the democratic rule-of-law, and describing an affiliated membership in the thousands.

Netherlands

Comparable post-pandemic recalibrations occurred in the Netherlands, where authorities adopted a conceptually aligned framework that likewise foregrounds threats to democratic governance while explicitly preserving space for lawful criticism and protest. Dutch security reporting situates “anti-institutional” extremism in relation to the democratic legal order, defined as both a political system structuring the relationship between citizens and government (the democratic constitutional state) and a social form of coexistence structuring relations among citizens (the open society).⁵³ In this framing, criticism and contradiction are treated as essential features of pluralist democracy, with security concern focused on behaviour that shifts into methodical undermining or threatening institutional functions, the rule-of-law, and/or state actors.

Within this Dutch designation, sovereign adherents are disaggregated across three behavioural gradations: 1) autonomous individuals who seek change within the system; 2) sovereigns who deny the legitimacy of the system and withdraw from legal and financial obligations; 3) a small subset anticipating or preparing for active resistance, including the possibility of violence.⁵⁴ The first category, typically pursues autonomy without absolute rejection of the state, often continuing to pay taxes and comply with laws, yet also maintaining a commercialised ecosystem of pseudolegal products (including purported ‘diplomatic’ documents and false number plates) that may constitute fraud or forgery but can function as an entry point to more isolating anti-state trajectories.⁵⁵

The second category is characterised by overt rejection of governmental legitimacy and a wider repertoire of non-compliance and obstruction, including pseudolegal claims, avoidance of debts, and practices that generate escalating encounters with bailiffs and police.⁵⁶ Dutch authorities also note increasing intimidation and threats directed at civil servants, local politicians, judges, journalists, and scientists, as well as minor physical confrontations which they predicted would rise as pressures accumulate around non-compliance, non-payments, and evictions.⁵⁷

The third category while small, is treated as the most acute from a security perspective as it frames the state and institutions as existential threats and anticipates a future violent struggle. This perspective is typically reinforced through escalating rhetoric (such as tribunals, genocide) and the circulation of personal data (doxxing) targeting officials. Authorities further describe a subset that prepares for confrontation, including weapons acquisition and training, which can lower thresholds for violence during enforcement encounters. In 2024, Dutch authorities made arrests under this category, detaining individuals, several of whom self-identified as sovereign adherents, on terrorism-related charges, including alleged plots targeting officials and police.⁵⁸

These European approaches are instructive because they bring cumulative but non-qualifying conduct into analytical focus. While not every act is extreme, repeated obstruction, intimidation, pseudolegal practices can cumulatively degrade institutional functioning and may signal escalations. In New Zealand, a similar thresholding appears, sovereign practices often sitting below criminal or extremist severity markers until patterns are connected, precisely the analytical work *lorefare* is intended to facilitate. The comparative value therefore lies not in doctrinal similarity or replication, but in the underlying analytical shift that renders more sovereign manifestations visible within democratic security constraints. *Lorefare* provides the descriptive vocabulary for this architectural logic, aligning with the *emic* sovereign repertoire that becomes assessable before formal thresholds are crossed.

6. New Zealand: Thresholds, Tactics, and Trajectories

While New Zealand has not adopted a US-styled designation, official assessments have incorporated elements of sovereign milieu within the broader category of Politically-Motivated Violent Extremism (PMVE); while explicitly emphasising that such actors constitute a small subset within a wider and more heterogeneous sovereign landscape.⁵⁹ In New Zealand, PMVE is officially defined as promoting the use of violence to achieve change to, or within, an existing political system.⁶⁰ This reflects a meaningful structural divergence from European recalibrations examined above.

Where the BfV's Anti-Constitutional category attaches security-relevance to sustained systematic undermining of constitutional principles below the violence threshold and the Dutch approach similarly focuses on the methodological undermining of the democratic legal order, PMVE only activates once a violence orientation is detectably approached. The majority of lower severity mobilisation remains largely outside the frame. At the same time, NZP reporting indicates sovereign adherents became more visible between 2020-2023 and, by 2024, shifted from pandemic grievances toward broader socio-political friction expressed through various encounters.⁶¹ This trajectory sharply mirrors the pandemic-era intensification that appears to have prompted European recalibrations, suggesting that New Zealand is navigating a similar contemporary landscape without equivalent assessment infrastructure and mitigations.

The principal distinction is not that European frameworks treat violence as a security concern. Rather, they provide analytical mechanisms for understanding conduct that sits below conventional violent-extremism thresholds. In both Germany and the Netherlands, sovereign actors need not be categorised as terrorists or imminent violent extremists before their activities become security-relevant. Instead, behaviours can be situated along a continuum that captures institutional friction, delegitimisation, intimidation, pseudolegal activity, and escalating non-compliance. This permits the identification of patterns across time, enabling differentiation between manifestations that remain primarily disruptive and those demonstrating movement toward more acute forms of confrontation.

The Dutch graduations are useful not because every New Zealand manifestation can be neatly categorised, but because they provide an immediate analytical register through which contemporary sovereign conduct can be differentiated, situated on developmental trajectories, and assessed before violence becomes the principal indicator for official responses. By contrast, New Zealand's PMVE framework remains principally orientated toward violence or violence-adjacent activity, limiting opportunities to systematically assess cumulative sovereign conduct before escalation concerns emerge.

Similarly, the BfV's 2024 report notes that following the lifting of pandemic containment measures in Spring 2023, actors within the delegitimisation spectrum actively sought new mobilising issues, including climate policy, the Ukraine conflict, digitisation and surveillance, but these failed to generate the same response levels that pandemic demonstrations produced.⁶² The parallel suggests a shared post-pandemic dynamic: a milieu that expanded rapidly under conditions of institutional crisis and is now navigating a more dispersed, lower-visibility phase without having contracted. For practitioners, the risk is that reduced visibility is mistaken for reduced presence.

NZP intelligence documents highlight obstructive and argumentative encounters with officers, fine evasion, fleeing drivers resulting in near-miss incidents involving officers, livestreamed traffic stops, and disruptive engagement with local councils.⁶³ Other tactics include fraudulent diplomatic immunity documents, fabricated decrees, bogus vehicle registrations, and allodial claims over public land. Taken together, these map closely onto two of the Dutch authorities behaviour descriptions: commercialised pseudolegal products and false registrations, identified in both countries as potential fraud functioning as entry points to more isolating anti-state trajectories, alongside the overt rejection of financial obligations. Activities that do not consistently meet criminal or national-security thresholds but impose administrative costs and test institutional security practice.

NZP intelligence also documents hostile, threatening, and coercive encounters directed at frontline workers and officials. Dutch authorities explicitly anticipated this trajectory, warning that intimidation of officials, civil servants, judges and local politicians would intensify as non-compliance pressures accumulated around debts. The OIA analysis in the following section illustrates this pattern in the New Zealand context, with submit-

ters directing condescending, rude, and at times, explicitly threatening language across state agencies, consistent with what Dutch authorities identified as a leading indicator of escalating conduct.

Read together, these official snapshots illustrate a constellation of conduct that the European frameworks were expressly designed to render legible. Sovereign activity in New Zealand presents largely as sub-threshold and is easily treated as isolated encounters: yet international experience demonstrates patterned institutional targeting across agencies and interfaces that carry cumulative significance independent of any single act's severity. One empirical window into this patterning is the strategic use of state administrative systems, including OIA requests, which can operate as vehicles for doctrinal assertion and institutional challenge rather than information access.

Official Information Act Requests

Analysis of sixty sovereignist OIA requests submitted between 2019-2024 via [fyi.org.nz](https://www.fyi.org.nz) reveals patterned engagement across twenty six agencies and departments, as well as six government ministers, with dozens of additional recipients copied into mass emails. The four most frequently targeted institutions were the Department of Internal Affairs, Inland Revenue, Ministry of Justice, and New Zealand Police. Topics ranged from birth certificates, identity documents to financial claims, taxation challenges, common-lore testing, judicial challenges, and threats to close agencies as a sovereign authority. Submitters frequently use language that is insolent, condescending, and explicitly threatening, consequently revealing a spectrum of hostile behaviour, ranging from personal insults and mockery to severe pseudolegal and physical threats.

In one submission an adherent accused the New Zealand Law Society of serious offences including conspiracy, racketeering and mail fraud.⁶⁴ A submission to the Treasury issued cease-and-desist instructions, claimed birth certificates made citizens secret financial collateral, demanded closure of such accounts, and concluded with the declaration - "Treasury your game is up."⁶⁵ Parallel notices were foreshadowed for the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice, and the Commissioner of Inland Revenue. In another instance, a female adherent submitted multiple requests to Police for tactical reports, any communications with international enforcement agencies, and intelligence assessments concerning the 2022 Wellington 'freedom' occupation.⁶⁶ A recurring standard sovereign claim across these adherents is that Police operate as a private, for profit business rather than a statutory enforcement agency.

Considered in isolation, such requests fall squarely within the legitimate purposes of the Official Information Act and would not, by themselves, ignite security concern. Their significance lies in how these interactions are incorporated into sovereign practice. Rather than serving solely as information mechanisms, responses often selectively reframed as evidential artefacts to authenticate sovereign beliefs, support pseudolegal claims, or sustain prolonged administrative campaigns against state institutions and individual officials.

A 2023 Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act (LGOIMA) release from the Tasman District Council illustrates how sovereign adherence is managed at the local level as a workplace safety and administrative burden issue.⁶⁷ The council maintains a “Managed Customer List” to ensure staff and contractor safety during interactions with individuals who may subscribe to sovereign beliefs, particularly during site visits or enforcement engagements.⁶⁸ Since 2020, the Council identified approximately 20 individuals who used templated sovereign forms to refuse payments of fines and fees, alongside serving pseudolegal invoices and notices asserting exemption from statutory authority.⁶⁹ The Council further noted that some information requests associated with sovereign correspondence was refused on the grounds that they were frivolous, vexatious, or trivial, reflecting the cumulative institutional friction produced by these engagements that often thwarts broader assessment of violence propensity.

Supplementing these records, a more acute documented example appeared in October 2023, when council chief executives nationwide received a letter from sovereign-aligned actors threatening arrest, imprisonment, and trial before a fictitious “Peoples Full High Court” if stated demands were not met.⁷⁰ Taituarā, the sector body representing chief executives, referred the letter to the Commissioner of Police, describing it as a threat to people’s safety and as an attempt to intimidate them from performing lawful duties.⁷¹ Subsequently, affected council staff began removing names from outgoing correspondence, withholding their details from public databases, and seeking inclusion on the confidential electoral roll. The case illustrates lorefare in operation: pseudo-judicial entity, institutional targets, and documented secondary effects sitting below legislative thresholds yet generating personal insecurity and institutional cost. Conduct of this character falls within the patterns Dutch authorities now address under their anti-institutional framework but currently sits outside any formal category in New Zealand.

The overall thematic trajectory suggests a shift from broad conspiratorial framing toward increasingly granular and personalised disputes during and since the pandemic. While OIA requests are legitimate democratic transparency mechanisms, within sovereign praxis they function as both posturing and tactical challenges rather than information access. Responses to the submissions typically become a validation resource for adherents, in which even procedurally correct responses are reinterpreted within sovereign doctrine and any bureaucratic ambiguity reframed as implicit confirmation of their beliefs. Given the limited foundational scholarship on sovereign activity in New Zealand, examination of submissions provides a terrain mapping exercise rather than a full representative audit. Individually, many requests would not warrant a security concern; collectively, they illustrate persistent institutional attrition through sustained administrative contestation. Lorefare captures this pattern with greater analytical precision without the threat-laden label of paper terrorism while equally recognising the potential for harm.

New Zealand Judicial Records (1990-2025)

A review of 245 publicly available New Zealand court filings provides a longitudinal foundation for situating sovereign-pseudolegal contestation. Prior to 2020, sovereign litigation was present but appears predominantly reactive given the judicial settings. Three dominant thematic clusters emerge: taxation resistance; traffic and regulatory non-compliance; and constitutional challenges, particularly arguments asserting that parliamentary authority did not apply under pseudolegal interpretations of *He Whakaputanga* or *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. These filings frequently framed the state as legally invalid or contractually inapplicable. Although the public court records only capture disputes progressing to formal judgment and therefore represent a partial institutional archive; the longitudinal consistency of reasoning establishes a clear baseline. Against that baseline, post-2020 developments are best understood as intensification rather than rupture of beliefs.

Pre-2020 cases generally arose in response to enforcement action, debt recovery, licensing breaches, or regulatory penalties, indicating defensive resistance rather than proactive doctrinal expansion. Participation during this period was overwhelmingly male (122 men compared to 28 women), with male litigants concentrated in disputes concerning taxation, commerce, traffic violations, licensing matters, and animal registration requirements. While this pattern aligns with international literature documenting male predominance within extremist milieus, it also reflects the domains in which sovereign doctrine was most frequently operationalised.

From 2020 onward, both thematic scope and litigant profile shifted. While financial and regulatory claims persisted, new domains emerged, including bodily autonomy (vaccination mandates), employment disputes, family court matters, bail and custody challenges, schooling conflicts, and land use violations under the Resource Management Act. Three cases involved disputes between parents over covid vaccination of children in which one parent claimed “living sovereign” status and deployed pseudolegal concepts.⁷² However one 2023 case involved a couple who after their state firearm licenses were revoked, adopted sovereign-issued quasi “Aotearoa Firearms Licences” that were issued by a sovereign “Law/Lore Society.”⁷³ Regardless of case content, pseudolegal reasoning appeared with increasing assertiveness across criminal and family proceedings, suggesting not doctrinal rupture but expansion into socially intimate and regulatory-sensitive arenas.

Mapped against the Dutch behavioural gradations, the conduct sits squarely within their second tier: the overt rejection of governmental legitimacy combined with active non-compliance generating enforcement encounters. Dutch authorities have documented near-identical forms of conduct within this tier including sovereign actors developing parallel systems, issuing their own documents from quasi-authorities, appointing

their own sheriffs, calling for citizen's arrests, and asserting the state lacks contractual basis to exercise jurisdiction over them.⁷⁴ Comparable manifestations are evident in New Zealand. Under the current PMVE framework, however, such conduct generally falls outside the analytical frame, treated as discrete incidents of non-compliance or regulatory offending, without a graduated mechanism for assessing whether they form part of a broader sovereign campaign or indicate deepening doctrinal commitment.

Beyond individual cases, the demographic composition of the dataset itself signals diffusion patterns. For example, female litigant participation increased visibly in the post-2020 period. Whereas earlier female involvement was often as co-litigants or intertwined with pseudolegal indigenous discourse, post-pandemic filings show women advancing pseudolaw independently, particularly in disputes concerning schooling, medical treatment, protection orders, and vaccination mandates. This shift indicates diffusion of sovereign reasoning beyond financially driven male defendants into family governance and parental authority contexts. The underlying doctrinal architecture remains consistent, jurisdictional rejection, contractual reframing of authority, selective constitutional invocation, yet its social penetration and institutional reach broadened significantly after 2020.

Taken together, the judicial and OIA records indicate that sovereign engagement in New Zealand is rarely characterised by passive withdrawal from the state. Rather, it manifests as adaptive confrontation within formal adjudicative arenas. The new European categories closely encapsulate the sovereign ecology detailed throughout the court documents. Just as the BfV describes actors as systematically undermining core constitutional principles, the New Zealand sources are full of litigants explicitly rejecting the legitimacy of the state. The BfV's attempts to distinguish between protected protest and extremist activity mirrors New Zealand judiciary's approach as the courts frequently note while protests against the Crown's sovereignty are lawful democratic rights, attempting to use those beliefs to defy the criminal justice system, ignore state laws, or bypass regulatory authorities crosses the threshold into an illegal abuse of process.⁷⁵

7. Debates and Implications of Recalibration

The European frameworks examined above are not without potential controversy. From a securitisation perspective, the introduction of new threat categories, whether Germany's Anti-Constitutional-Delegitimation designation or the Dutch Anti-Institutional approach, inevitably invites scrutiny regarding net-widening and civil liberty concerns. Critiques would likely caution that expanding the perimeter of security-relevant conduct, even with principled intent, risks drawing robust dissent into surveillance architectures and normalising forms of political opposition as proto-extremism. These are not merely theoretical concerns as the infrastructure created to monitor cumulative low-severity patterns or mobilisation, could under different political conditions, be applied against actors it was never designed to reach.

These debates unfold within specific democratic settings. Liberal democracies need to balance the protection of ‘rule-of-law’ institutions with commitments to proportionality, civil liberties, and political pluralism. Securitisation pathways are therefore not uniform responses to duplicate manifestations, but contextually mediated decisions shaped by statutory architecture and historical experiences of political violence. The question is not simply whether sovereign conduct is disruptive but how democratic security and enforcement systems define and respond to sustained anti-institutional mobilisation without eroding the freedoms they seek to protect.

Yet both frameworks demonstrate deliberate efforts to anticipate and constrain this risk. The BfV explicitly limits intelligence relevance to specific delegitimation efforts that reach a significant threshold and demonstrate sustained systematic intent, preserving a distinction between protected dissent and extremist conduct. The Dutch framework similarly treats criticism and contradiction as fundamental features of a pluralist democracy. The security concern attaching only when conduct shifts to methodical undermining of the rule-of-law or institutional function. The category architecture is therefore graduated not binary and does not collapse dissent and extremism together. This is precisely what a violence-threshold model like PMVE cannot do, it is either inclusion or exclusion, with no immediate register.

The risks of escalation within graduated approaches are nonetheless real and should not be understated. The Netherlands 2024 Threat Assessment, notes the eight sovereignists convicted of terrorist offences, specifically for participation in a plot to violently confront local officials and also carry out ‘citizen arrests’ of others.⁷⁶ The NCTV assessed despite these arrests, the remaining sovereign milieu retained capability and intent to commit violence. What this case may demonstrate is that a graduated approach provided assessment of escalation and actionable plots before a point of completion. A binary threshold with sovereigns appears more often to encounter this demographic at the point of intense friction, when early intervention options have closed.

This graduated and measured language carries a second, less commonly discussed sovereign factor, the potential for more viable pathways for adherent disengagement and early intervention. When sovereign conduct is only framed within domestic terrorism or violent extremism designation, the practical options available to exit narrow considerably. Meaning the individuals become subject to the full weight of the security apparatus, and the stigma of the designation may foreclose the bridges through which disengagement could occur. By contrast a framework that recognises tier one adherents, that are administrative disruptive but not doctrinally committed to violence, may provide space for graduated responses that intermix regulatory enforcement with community-level engagement before belief systems harden.

New Zealand’s empirical record reflects a comparable demographical structure as BfV notes, with the approximately 1,400 individuals influenced by sovereign beliefs. A Te Tari Pūreke (Firearms Safety Authority) release confirmed that of 254 individuals with

a “SovCit” alert on the National Intelligence Application, 96 held current firearms licences and a further 96 had licences revoked across a range of grounds including fitness and propriety, family harm, and association concerns.⁷⁷ That two jurisdictions using different analytical frameworks arrive at structurally similar population distributions strengthens the case these gradients likely reflect something about how sovereignist adherence distributes across a local population rather than solely being an artefact of European security culture.

The European experience so far suggests that analytically legible sub-threshold categories do not simply identify more people as potential security concerns but enable more informed proportionate effective responses across this demographic. For New Zealand, where PMVE’s binary threshold means most sovereign conduct remains formally unclassified, or outside unlawful domains, this dual function is especially relevant.

The empirical insights presented here such as OIA submissions, council disruption, and firearm licensing intersections, suggest a demographic that is not analytically invisible, nor uniformly dangerous, however, identifiable friction points and intensification risks exist. Lorefare offers the analytical vocabulary that gives this security recalibration its operational content, naming the strategic deployment of sovereign repertoires that a graduated framework would need to identify and address. A recalibrated framework would not pathologise this population wholesale, but it would provide the conceptual mechanisms to distinguish trajectories, identify local friction points, escalation signals, and potentially intervene before conditions conducive to serious confrontation emerge.

8. An Adaptive AGE Perspective

Recalibrating security frameworks does not diminish the importance of understanding adherents motivations, grievances, and underlying drivers as broader social phenomena. Nor does recognising sovereign belief systems as one milieu within the anti-government extremism landscape reduce all adherents to security threats or imply that all sovereign conduct warrants exceptional measures. Rather, local and international experience demonstrates that enforcement and security agencies require an analytically adequate framework and vocabulary for the conduct they actually encounter.

As discussed, current threshold-based frameworks, whether criminal, security, or threat assessment, are typically activated once behaviour reaches a defined legal or security benchmark. Sovereign practices rarely meet that benchmark immediately and consequently disperse across agencies as isolated incidents, matters of routine non-compliance, or nuisance behaviour. The analytical challenge is therefore not simply one of detection, but of designation. Without a framework capable of situating patterned conduct that falls below formal severity thresholds, practitioners have limited grounds on which to assess the cumulative significance of sovereign manifestations. In this respect, recent European security frameworks offer instructive reference points for democracies confronting persistent forms of sovereigns’ anti-institutional and anti-government opposition.

Lorefare and graduated frameworks are analytically complementary. Lorefare names the broader repertoire without fore-grounding terrorism connotations, while graduated frameworks provide a means of differentiating sovereign manifestations and situating them along behavioural trajectories. In New Zealand, most sovereign activity derives its significance not from isolated dramatic events but from cumulative institutional friction and the possibility of violent escalation. New Zealand already possesses frameworks for responding to criminal offending and violent extremism; what it lacks is a means of assessing these manifestations before violence becomes the principal indicator of concern.

By grounding this analysis in local empirical insights rather than anecdote, this article advocates for a security approach proportionate to the population it describes. Sovereignism in New Zealand is neither uniformly dangerous nor analytically invisible; most manifestations generate institutional friction and, at times, broader societal consequences. European experience demonstrates that this intermediary space can be assessed coherently without defaulting to terrorism discourse or collapsing civil dissent into extremism. The central question for New Zealand is therefore not whether to replicate foreign frameworks, but whether to adopt the underlying analytical shift from event-based reaction to pattern-based assessment. Such recalibration neither dilutes nor exaggerates risk. Rather, it clarifies risk in gradients, allowing pseudolegal sovereignism to be differentiated and assessed without conflating fringe belief, disruptive conduct, and terrorism. Violence may represent the most acute manifestation of sovereignism, but it is rarely where sovereign trajectories begin.

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