

Threats against Jacinda Ardern nearly triple amid rise in conspiracy groups

Prime minister has faced increasingly vociferous and explicit calls for violence against her since start of pandemic

[Tess McClure](#)

Threats against the New Zealand prime minister, [Jacinda Ardern](#), have almost tripled over three years, amid a rise in conspiracy movements and a backlash against vaccination.

New data, [released to Newshub](#) under the Official Information Act, shows police recorded 18 threats in 2019. In 2020 it increased to 32, and in 2021 police dealt with 50 threats against the prime minister.

Ardern became a lightning rod for abuse, suspicion and threats among anti-vaccination groups, particularly during the weeks-long anti-mandate protests in February. The [occupation of parliament](#) and the surrounding streets [descended into a violent riot](#), with multiple police officers assaulted and fires lit across parliament grounds. A number of protesters advocated for the public trial and execution of Ardern and other prominent politicians, public servants and scientists, alleging that their promotion of vaccination

amounted to “crimes against humanity”.

While police could not determine motives for every individual threat, the documents showed anti-vaccination sentiment was a driving force of a number of threats, and opposition to legislation to regulate firearms after the 15 March mass shooting was another factor.

At least two men, both of whom were incensed by the country’s vaccination drive, have been arrested this year for repeatedly threatening to assassinate Ardern. This year has also seen incidents [where protesters in a car chased the prime minister’s van](#), shouting obscenities, and at one point forcing it on to the footpath; and another where a group of shouting [protesters chased the prime minister’s van](#) down a driveway as she visited a primary school.



A loose coalition of anti-vaccine protesters camped outside New Zealand’s parliament in February. Photograph: Praveen Menon/Reuters

Researchers on the Te Pūnaha Matatini disinformation project, which monitors misinformation and online extremism, found that the level of violent rhetoric against the prime minister had risen exponentially in recent years, accompanying a parallel rise in [New Zealand](#) participation in online groups sharing misinformation, conspiracy theories and extremist language.

Researcher Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa said that this year the team had captured “the most significant increase in violent, vulgar, vicious, venomous commentary against the PM since the start of our study in mid-August 2021”.

“The vocabulary ... has migrated from implicit and elusive references to her murder, assassination and rape now to explicit calls for it.”

The most significant increase had been in 2021-2022, he said, suggesting that the upward trend captured by police data would continue.

The threats against Ardern also reflect increased threats toward New Zealand politicians more broadly. According to police data [released under the Official Information Act to 1News](#) in January, threats towards MPs reached a three-year high during one month in 2021. Threats to politicians serious enough to trigger a report to police are still relatively rare in New Zealand, reaching an average of about five a month towards the end of 2021, but sometimes spiking to 16 a month.

In late 2021, parliament stepped up security after reports from MPs that they were being targeted for harassment by anti-vaxxers.

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