

Lack of council nominees opens way for disinformation: Researcher

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New Zealand should be "very worried" about the lack of nominations for council seats because it opens the door for people with extreme beliefs that aren't grounded in reality, a disinformation researcher says.



Researcher: Council nominee shortages open way for disinformation actors

8:31

Sanjana Hattotuwa says Kiwis should be "very worried" about their local democracy.

(Source: Breakfast)

Nominations for local government elections closed at midday on Friday. But, there are worries some positions [won't be filled or go uncontested](#) because not enough people are interested in standing for election.

Once elected, nearly half of local representatives who took part in [a survey](#) reported [experiencing racism or gender discrimination in their role](#). Meanwhile, 43% said they experienced other harassment, prejudice, threats or derogatory behaviours.

Disinformation Project researcher Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa said some people are taking advantage of that fact.

"It is important people partake in democratic processes. What is, however, quite concerning... those putting their names in the ring are those who are responsible for leading Aotearoa into an information disorder. They are unequivocally linked with mis- and disinformation production," he told Breakfast.

"It's a Trojan horse moment... you can't debate Aotearoa getting citizens getting interested in democracy. That's a net gain, that's a net good for democracy.

"However, what is the tone, timbre and thrust of what they are saying?"

He said some of the people who considered standing had connections to those who, during the Parliament protest, explicitly and "openly called for the armed insurrection of the Beehive" on livestreams.

One had to ask why people who were asking for Parliament's insurrection were interested in entering politics themselves, Hattotuwa said.

He said Kiwis only had to look to the US to see what could happen - there were local representatives who were openly anti-mandate, anti-science and anti-government.

From there, there was an opportunity to spread those sorts of attitudes at a national level, he said.

Hattotuwa said these candidates, if elected, could shape political debates in New Zealand to become more abrasive and angry.

"It's very disturbing and dangerous the path that lies ahead if these individuals are successful in their respective wards."

In fact, disinformation actors were at the "good end of the spectrum", Hattotuwa added.

"We are seeing at The Disinformation Project individuals connected with neo-Nazis standing up for election. This is dangerous, violent ideology and extremism front-faced as democratic participation that is now entering the

democratic mainstream."

Hattotuwa said part of the issue was a general apathy towards local government. National voter turnout at the 2019 local election was 42%.

Reflecting on [Sri Lanka's recent political turmoil](#), he encouraged New Zealanders to be interested in local government and question those who were standing.

"[Kiwis should be] very worried. This is the start of a journey.

"I say this as a Sri Lankan. I say this coming from a failed state. I am the end state of what I don't want Aotearoa to go through. It is out of aroha I say these things.

"I come from failure. And when you come from failure you know the path and the journey that you took as a country, as a community, as a society.

"That's the worry I have because this is the starting point for that."