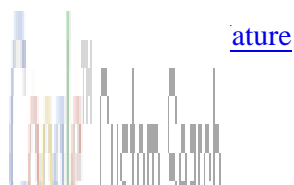


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Apr 13, 2007, 0:07 GMT

Wellington - Leaders of the Exclusive Brethren religious sect in New Zealand - whose members do not vote because they say God chooses rulers - said Friday they are considering waging another campaign against the Labour Party-led government at next year's general election.

Although the Brethren forbids its members from listening to the radio for fear they would be 'defiled,' one of them told Radio New Zealand in an interview that they opposed Labour's moves to restrict the activities and financial contributions of third parties in election campaigns.

This followed the estimated expenditure of 1.2 million New Zealand dollars (nearly 880,000 US dollars) by a group of seven Brethren leaders attacking Labour and the Green Party at the last election in 2005.

The campaign was launched covertly but the seven Brethren, who opposed Labour's move to legalize civil unions for homosexuals, were eventually forced into the open.

The seven emerged again this week with a statement condemning the government's proposals to limit third-party involvement in elections as 'arrogant, desperate and hypocritical.'

'We are very anxious to preserve the ability to be able to comment in the coming election,' the group's spokesman, Neville Simmons, told Radio New Zealand.

'We think they are really bullying the critics into silence and so you can't even spend your own money to have a voice. That's what we are concerned about,' he said.

Simmons said the seven had not yet decided to mount another campaign next year, but added, 'It's under consideration, so watch this space.'

His comments followed a statement by Australian businessman Tony McCorkell, the sect's first official spokesman, earlier this year claiming that the seven 'over-enthusiastic' New Zealanders had acted on their own behalf.

'It is very important to understand that there was no church-sponsored, organized involvement in anything political,' he said.

But former Brethren members said nobody in the sect spoke or acted publicly without the approval of its leaders.

The Brethren's re-emergence has embarrassed the conservative National Party, the main opposition in Parliament, which the sect wanted to win the 2005 election.

National deputy leader Bill English said the Brethren campaign had been a 'huge handicap' to his party.

'They're people whose stupidity is beyond estimation, really,' he told the New Zealand Herald. 'We don't want anything to do with them.'

The Exclusive Brethren claims 7,500 members in New Zealand but only 2,316 nominated it when giving their religious affiliation at a national census last year.

New Zealand is not the only country where the non-voting and secretive Exclusive Brethren have launched covert political campaigns to promote their conservative brand of Christianity.

They have also been involved in elections in the United States, Canada, Australia and Sweden.

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