

Kim Dotcom's party poised to win New Zealand seats (Update)

September 15 2014, by Nick Perry



In this Monday, Aug. 4, 2014 photo, indicted Internet entrepreneur Kim Dotcom speaks at a political rally, in Wellington, New Zealand. The Internet Mana Party that Dotcom is funding appears likely to win two or three seats in New Zealand's Parliament when the nation goes to the polls Saturday, Sept. 20, 2014. (AP Photo/Nick Perry)

At a recent political rally in Wellington, indicted Internet entrepreneur Kim Dotcom jokingly asked members of New Zealand's spy agency to raise their hands.

"Please don't worry," he said, to rising laughter and applause. "Even though we are going to shut you down, we will find you guys new jobs."

Dotcom has been drawing large, enthusiastic crowds on the campaign trail, even as he fights extradition attempts by the U.S. on racketeering charges over his now-shuttered file-sharing site Megaupload. He can't run for office because he's not a New Zealand citizen, but he has poured more than 3 million New Zealand dollars (\$2.44 million) into a small party that is on target to win two or three of the 120 seats in Parliament when the nation goes to the polls Saturday.

The Internet Mana party is attracting younger voters by promising to deliver free higher education, cut the price of Internet access, fight mass surveillance, decriminalize marijuana and protect native dolphins. But Dotcom may fall short of one of his main goals: getting center-right Prime Minister John Key voted out of office.

Polls indicate that Key remains popular and is likely to win a third three-year term, though that would be in jeopardy if opposition parties such as Dotcom's gain more than half the parliamentary seats and form a coalition.

Megaupload was a popular file-hosting site before the federal government shut it down in 2012. Dotcom, who spent a month in jail in New Zealand before being released on bail, has since created another service called Mega.



In this Monday, Aug. 4, 2014 photo, indicted Internet entrepreneur Kim Dotcom, center, speaks at a political rally, in Wellington, New Zealand. The Internet Mana Party that Dotcom is funding appears likely to win two or three seats in New Zealand's Parliament when the nation goes to the polls Saturday, Sept. 20, 2014. (AP Photo/Nick Perry)

U.S. prosecutors accuse Dotcom, 40, of facilitating the widespread piracy of songs and movies. Dotcom, who was born Kim Schmitz in Germany, argues that he can't be held responsible for those who chose to use his site to illegally download material.

On Monday, five days before the election, Dotcom promised a theatrical finale: an expose on New Zealand's spying activities, the truthfulness of Key, and "the sordid workings of Hollywood." He booked Auckland's Town Hall and was joined by American journalist Glenn Greenwald, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and former National Security Agency systems analyst turned leaker Edward Snowden. Assange, in

London, and Snowden, in Russia, appeared via video link.

But while Dotcom said he would produce proof that Key had misled the public about his case, he did not mention anything about that at the event.

Key has said Dotcom's political aspirations are a cynical attempt to thwart the justice system and avoid extradition. A political appointee, the justice minister, is required to give final approval to any extradition proceeding.

Dotcom says he has not become politically active for his own sake, but in response to the New Zealanders who have supported him since his dramatic 2012 arrest, in which dozens of armed officers stormed his mansion.

"Since I'm here anyway, and I can't go anywhere," he said at the Wellington rally last month, "I might as well use this for something to give back."

Dotcom founded the Internet Party, which in May joined forces with the Mana Movement, a party rooted in giving indigenous Maori a political voice and fighting for the rights of the poor.

The merger between a wealthy entrepreneur and grassroots activists appeared odd to many, but from a purely pragmatic viewpoint, it made sense: Dotcom had the money to bankroll a big campaign, while Mana had the support to win seats in Parliament, thanks to the popularity of leader Hone Harawira.

At the rally, Victoria University of Wellington student Estelle Geach, 21, said she and a friend saw the event promoted on Facebook. She said she found Internet Party leader Laila Harre inspirational after hearing her on

the radio.

"And I was drawn by the huge personality of Kim Dotcom," Geach said. "I wanted to see him in the flesh after seeing him on the news so many times."

But some say Dotcom's unusual campaign has backfired by helping Key consolidate support among moderate voters.

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Citation: Kim Dotcom's party poised to win New Zealand seats (Update) (2014, September 15) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-kim-dotcom-party-poised-zealand.html>

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