

Setbacks for white-supremacist groups - Hale arrest roils leadership, and may spark more violence.

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Hate groups around the country are in turmoil, facing internal power struggles, deaths or incapacitation among founders and longtime leaders, and even criminal charges. It would seem a time when those dedicated to "racial holy war" against Jews, blacks, and other minorities are waning.

But this can also be a time, experts warn, when such groups can be most dangerous - lashing out at "enemies" and, by escalating their hateful rhetoric, inciting others to violence.

The latest setback for hate groups came in Chicago on Wednesday, when Matthew Hale, head of a white-supremacist church, was arrested for obstruction of justice and for trying to have someone murder a federal judge who'd ruled against him.

Among other recent setbacks:

* Last month, the Ku Klux Klan's David Duke pleaded guilty to mail fraud and federal tax charges. He faces up to 15 months in prison and \$10,000 in fines.

* William Pierce, leader of the National Alliance - the largest neo-Nazi group in the US - and author of a race-war novel said to have inspired Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, died last July. Since then, the 1,500-member group "is struggling to hold its organization together," says Mark Potok, editor of the Intelligence Report, published by the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala.

* Earlier, the Aryan Nations was virtually shut down in northern Idaho when the Southern Poverty Law Center won a civil judgment, taking the group's assets on behalf of a woman and her son who were assaulted by group members. This left members fighting over who should succeed the elderly leader, Richard Butler.

MR. HALE'S organization, which preaches virulent anti-Semitism and white supremacy over races referred to as "subhuman" or "mud people," had been involved in a trademark dispute with an Oregon church that claimed the same name. U.S. District Judge Joan Humphrey Lefkow recently ruled against Hale, ordering his group to stop using the name and turn over all printed materials reading "World Church of the Creator."

Hale refused to comply, and in an Internet broadcast last month, he railed at "the Jews and their lackeys" in the federal judiciary. He declared that "open warfare exists," and he urged followers to "take the law into [their] own hands ... meet force with force." When he appeared in federal court on a contempt charge Wednesday, FBI agents arrested him on charges of obstruction of justice and solicitation of murder. If convicted, Hale faces 30 years in prison.

His arrest this week, says Mr. Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, "may well spell the end of the World Church of the Creator."

"It is not the huge group he says it is," says someone who trains law-enforcement officials in the history and tactics of hate groups and antigovernment radicals. "But he has a core group of followers in Illinois, and various followers or small groups of followers in other sections of the country." This source and others put Hale's most devoted following at just 200 to 300 people.

BUT in a report issued this week by three human rights groups (the Center for New Community in Chicago, The Montana Human Rights Network in Helena, and the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity in Seattle), the World Church of the Creator is described as "one of the most violent white nationalist groups in the United States."

Over the past decade, those close to Hale's church have been involved in murder, firebombing, and assault. In 1999, onetime churchmember Benjamin Smith went on a three-day rampage in Illinois and Indiana, killing two people and wounding nine before taking his own life while being pursued by police. Observers note that Smith's violence came just two days after another legal setback for Hale. Though he'd passed the Illinois state bar exam, he was denied a license to practice law because of demonstrated bigotry.

In the wake of Hale's arrest this week, law-enforcement agencies in areas with World Church of the Creator activity have been warned against the possibility of violent retaliatory actions. Hale had scheduled a rally to be held in Lewiston, Maine, tomorrow to protest a growing population of Somali immigrants which town officials say has taxed local services. In similar past episodes, Hale and his small following drew much larger groups of protesters, and the potential for violent clashes.

Like the Aryan Nations and the National Alliance, the World Church of the Creator has a history of internal splits that have caused it to lose members, says Potok.

But recruitment by such groups, particularly in the Internet age - focusing on white prison gangs and young skinheads through the "racialist" rock music they favor - continues to be a major concern.

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