

The Netherlands: Islamophobia Sets the Terms

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THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT didn't fall in February over involvement in Afghanistan, the unstable governing coalition stumbled over it. But the Islamophobic right wing might be the beneficiary.

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Until the 20th of February the Netherlands were ruled by a coalition of the Labor party (PvdA), the Christian-democratic CDA and a smaller Christian party. The Dutch system of proportional parliamentary representation means that the largest party in parliament has to enter into coalition with other parties to form a government.

The relationship between the PvdA and the CDA has been an especially difficult one. What caused the eventual rupture was the PvdA's determination to pull Dutch troops out of Afghanistan after the end of the current mission. The CDA wanted to keep open the possibility of Dutch military involvement, perhaps in the form of instructors for the new Afghan army.

Ironically, one of the reasons why the PvdA refused to make a new compromise with the CDA — after making compromises over an investigation into Dutch support for the war in Iraq and cuts to social spending— was that during the previous election campaign the Christian Democrats had painted them as unreliable. With municipal elections only a few days away, this seemed like a good opportunity to show some backbone.

Ending Dutch military involvement in Afghanistan was one of the promises the PvdA made during its election campaign. A majority of the population supports withdrawal, and the party had seen its support continuously decline while taking part in an increasingly unpopular coalition government. Political calculations like this were what determined the PvdA's approach; there's no anti-war movement in the Netherlands to influence the debate.

The break between the Labor Party and the Christian Democrats means that there will be new national elections for parliament in June. All parties of the previous governing coalition appear likely to lose seats.

Voters' discontent with the previous right-wing government coalition largely benefited the left social-democratic Socialist Party. In 2006 the SP increased its parliamentary seats from 9 to 25 (out of a total 150). This time around it looks as if the big winner will be Geert Wilders' Party of Freedom (PVV).

Over the last few years, Geert Wilders has had a major impact on Dutch politics. He's a career politician who started out with the right-wing, secular and pro-business VVD party but in 2004 left the party to form his own. In the 4th of March municipal elections the PVV, which concentrated its resources on campaigning in only two cities, won in Almere and came in second in The Hague, the seat of government.

According to polls the PVV could win as many as 25-26 seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections, maybe even becoming the country's largest party. Only the VVD and the CDA — traditionally one of the large ruling parties in the country — leave open the option of forming a coalition with Wilders.

Racist Populism Rising

The PVV's main position is easy to summarize: Islamophobia, an anti-Islamic racism that conflates religious, cultural and ethnic identities. Especially since forming his party, Geert Wilders has been making more and more extreme statements about Dutch Muslims and people with a background in the "Muslim countries." He targets a group that forms about one million out of the country's population of 16 million.

Some of Wilders' proposals include scrapping the first article in the Dutch constitution, which forbids discrimination on basis of race or religion. He is for closing the borders to Muslims, banning the Koran (just as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is already banned in the Netherlands), imposing a special tax on anyone who wears an Islamic head covering and banning Islamic-identified clothing from public buildings.

True to his background in the VVD, Wilders and the other eight PVV parliamentarians have supported the neoliberal economic policies of this and the previous government. But while at first the PVV was vocal in support of plans like abolishing the legal minimum wage and weakening the rights of workers, in the last period the party has cultivated an increasingly populist image, especially since the outbreak of the economic crisis. The PVV objected to the government's crisis measures and, when the ruling coalition proposed to raise the pension age from 65 to 67, threatened to organize street protests.

The PVV's opposition to involvement in Afghanistan — skillfully exploiting the sentiments in the country about an unpopular war — is also contradictory. Geert Wilders is not so much against war and occupation — he is in favor of attacking Iran and is a supporter of the Israeli government — but he opposes the kind of mission the Dutch army was involved in; too much re-building, not enough fighting the "Islamic fascists" who are out to "colonize Europe."

A Larger Trend

With his mixture of anti-Muslim racism and populist appeals against "traditional politics," Wilders is part of a West-European trend that includes the British National Party, the Danish People's Party and the Belgian Vlaams Belang. Since the meteoric rise of Dutch right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn — murdered in May 2002 by Volkert van der Graaf in order to stop him from gaining power through scapegoating Muslims — Muslims in the Netherlands have been continuously targeted.

The tradition that Dutch society should have space for several different cultures is under heavy attack. As in other European countries, the scapegoating has become more intense, giving birth to a new kind of Dutch (and "European") nationalism based on a mythical, "superior Judeo-Christian civilization."

A large part of the Wilders' appeal is his clear presentation of friends ("the common man in the street") and enemies ("Muslims and the left-wing elite that support them"). Wilders is one of the few Dutch politicians who is committed to politics, to changing society, not just to managing the current state of affairs. This has allowed him to dominate the public debate — other politicians shape their positions in reaction to Wilders' statements.

Even when news about the financial meltdown was on the front page, a large part of the public debate revolved around what is euphemistically called "the integration question." Wilders has built on feelings of resentment and xenophobia that have been developing for years in Dutch society.

Silence of the Left

The Dutch left has been largely unable to respond to Wilders. By far the largest left force is the SP, but this party has done very little to resist the rise of anti-Muslim racism. Traditionally, it neglected anti-racism in favor of more direct economic policies, arguing that racism will mostly disappear by itself when the discontent that is assumed to generate it disappears.

The party lost heavily in the municipal elections and it looks like it might lose more than half of its seats in national elections. But so far it seems unlikely that it will change its course. Since the outbreak of the economic crisis, the SP has refrained from organizing protests or taking a radical stance against neoliberalism.

After years of the SP's continuous growth, there was an assumption that further growth was inevitable and that the party had to present itself first of all as a "responsible candidate for government." The crisis, the SP leadership thought, would force the other parties to renounce neoliberalism and move closer to its positions.

What is happening instead is that working people are made to pay for anti-crisis measures, and the SP lost its profile as the opposition party. A left-wing perspective in the debate about the causes and solutions for the crisis was barely heard.

An anti-racist movement hardly exists. Whereas in some other west-European countries mobilizations against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan formed a counterweight against rising Islamophobia, the Dutch ant-war movement has been moribund for years.

Traditionally, anti-racism in the Netherlands has been based not so much on demands for equal social and economic rights but on appeals to "decency" and an ideology of a "tolerant, multicultural Netherlands." But since the rise of Fortuyn, the idea of what it means to be Dutch has changed, taking shape more and more in opposition to the Muslim "Other." The tasks of Dutch anti-racists and leftist activists are many, compared to their small number.

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P.S.

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