

Far-right electoral victory in the Netherlands

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That the right-wing won the recent Dutch elections was no surprise. What was surprising was how decisive the share of the far-right was in the overall right-wing victory. For Geert Wilders, the leader of the far-right Freedom Party (PVV), years of patience paid off while the incumbent right-wing party gambled and lost.

The electoral advance of the far-right largely came at the expense of the (centre-)right. With 37 out of 150 parliamentary seats, the PVV is now well ahead of the second-ranking list, a joint social-democratic and Green ticket that won 25 seats. The total number of seats for left-wing parties remained constant, while the parties that were part of the centre-right government all lost seats, sometimes heavily. In other words, the right has recomposed and radicalized, while the left was unable to advance from its previous weak position. How can this be explained?

On a more immediate level, a tactical choice of the VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), the main party in the previous government, seems to have backfired badly for them. In July this year, prime minister Mark Rutte of the VVD provoked a crisis in the incumbent government by insisting on new restrictions on refugee rights. Rutte deliberately crossed a red line of one of the VVD's coalition partners, thereby triggering the collapse of his own government and new elections.

This was an attempt by the VVD to put the issue of refugees and migration at the centre of the electoral contest. The VVD hoped that by tacking further to the right on this issue, it would be able to cohere sufficient support to once again become the largest party of the country. Rutte stepped aside for a new party leader, Dilan Yeşilgöz. Yeşilgöz, minister of justice in the most recent cabinet, proceeded to sharpen the right-wing profile of the VVD, especially through exaggerated stories about the supposed ease with which migrants can enter the Netherlands.

The gamble of the VVD was that the elections would play out as a polarization between them and the centre-left on the issue of migration, and Yeşilgöz was presented as the successor of Rutte. This electoral tactic seemed to make sense: Rutte has been prime-minister since 2010, and maintained his popularity throughout. By focusing the electoral contest on migration, the VVD hoped to avoid that issues on which it is vulnerable, such as the country's housing crisis and the increasing cost of living. The VVD however ended up losing 10 seats, winning only 24 seats.

THE FAR-RIGHT ADVANCE

Paradoxically, the VVD's tactic worked too well. The emphasis on a supposed "refugee crisis" and restriction of migration benefited the party that since its foundation in 2006 has had anti-migrant politics at its core: Wilders' PVV. Not all credit for Wilders' victory can go to the VVD however. A journalistic trope in the last weeks was that Wilders had "moderated" his views, but the PVV programme remained as radically anti-migrant as ever. The party wants to completely close the borders for asylum-seekers and "no Islamic schools, Qurans or mosques" in the Netherlands. Such racist policies are combined with repressive rhetoric about "zero tolerance for street scum", including the deployment of the army, denaturalizing and deporting criminals with a double

nationality and preventive arrests of those deemed to be sympathizing with “jihadism”.

Wilders has not changed, what changed is the dynamic between the right and the far-right. Rutte chose an approach of side-lining Wilders, his main competition on the right, by dismissing the PVV’s positions as “unrealistic” and presenting his VVD as the party that could implement right-wing policies more efficiently. This approach increasingly normalized the positions of the PVV, positions that were rejected only because they were supposedly impossible to implement. Rather than attempting to position himself as a junior partner for the VVD, Wilders insisted on his posture as the right-wing opposition to Rutte and kept hammering away at his core issues. On 22 November, Wilders harvested the fruit of this long term approach. That another far-right party, the FvD, a party that achieved significant success a few years ago, had entered into a crisis, largely because of the megalomania of its leader Thierry Baudet, also benefited Wilders as he consolidated and expanded the far-right vote.

Wilders is a seasoned politician, one of the longest serving members of the Dutch parliament and able to look beyond the next electoral cycle. He began his career in the VVD in the late nineties, splitting from them to form the PVV in 2006. Initially, the PVV combined its racism and anti-migrant politics with a radical pro-market discourse, a radicalized version of the neoliberalism of the VVD. In the last decade or so, the PVV however shifted its rhetoric to a kind of “welfare chauvinism”, presenting itself as the protector of ordinary people and of the remains of the Dutch welfare system. For the PVV, the ultimate cause of the roll-back of the welfare-state is the presence of parasitic migrant communities, especially Muslims, in Dutch society and the wastage of money on “left-wing hobbies” such as measures to mitigate climate change. This money, the PVV suggests, would have been sufficient to protect the living standards of the “real” Dutch people. In its election programme, the PVV also presented “progressive” proposals such as abolishing VAT on daily necessities, decreasing healthcare costs and returning the retirement age from 67 to 65.

Such ideas are undoubtedly popular but are secondary to the PVV’s core agenda. For Wilders, they are only means to achieving his end; closing the borders and attacking the rights of minorities, especially those of Muslims. Between 2010 and 2012, the first government led by Rutte was supported by the PVV who, in the words of Wilders, “accepted austerity measures in return for limits on immigration”. In parliament, the PVV proposed a bill that would undercut collective bargaining agreements, voted to further restrict access to social security and opposed attempts at tackling tax evasion. That the PVV’s “social policies” are largely empty rhetoric is however not consistently pointed out by the left parties.

THE LEFT STAGNATES

The total share of left-wing parties in the national parliament has remained roughly the same as before the elections. The number two in the election results was a joint list of the social-democratic PvdA and the Greens (Groenlinks). Together, these two parts gained eight new seats, a modest advance that came as a disappointment. The centre-left ran Frans Timmermans, a former European Commissioner, as their candidate, attempting to present him as future prime-minister, someone who was progressive but also a safe pair of hands for running the Dutch state. The approach of the PvdA and GroenLinks coalition to combine moderately progressive proposals with an air of technocratic expertise and an orientation to forming a government coalition with parties to its right had some success in attracting votes from the centre but not in attracting many new voters to the left.

The left-wing SP meanwhile lost four of its nine seats. The party has become fixated on combining an increasingly conservative profile on “cultural” issues (migration, but also climate change measures) with progressive social-economic positions. Continued setbacks have not been enough to convince the SP to change course. Its current leader Lilian Marijnissen has had this position since 2017:

November 2023 were for her the seventh time that the party saw electoral decline. The last time the party was able to advance in national elections was in 2006, and since then the party has lost tens of thousands of members. The SP's emphasis on restriction of labour migration in the electoral campaign strengthened the right-wing framework that migrants as such are a problem, while the party neglected to focus on its strong points such as housing and healthcare. The SP ended up losing a large number of votes to the right and far-right.

A bitter pill for the far-left was the disappearance from the parliament of the radical party BIJ1 (the Dutch pronunciation means "together"). Born from especially the anti-racist movement, BIJ1 was able to gather support from different parts of the activist and far-left but it has been wracked by internal fights. The ecologist Party for the Animals lost half of its seats and was reduced to three seats. The Party for the Animals had gradually attracted increasing support for its principled ecological positions, but the party is divided and unclear over how it should relate to left-wing issues in general, not only ecology. Recent months also saw an ugly fight over the leadership of the party and divisions.

PROSPECTS

A possibility for the Netherlands is the formation of a right-wing coalition led by Wilders. Another big winner in the November elections was a new party, NSC, a split from the Christian-Democratic CDA. The NSC entered the parliament with 20 seats. NSC is a conservative party, a version of Christian-Democracy without explicit religious references. The CDA meanwhile, once one of the major parties in the country, was degraded to a mere five seats. Together with VVD, the right-wing Farmer Citizen Movement (another recently formed party largely based on debris of the CDA's base) and NSC, the PVV would enjoy a majority. But NSC has said it is unwilling to form a coalition with a party like the PVV that wants to attack fundamental principles of equality before the law and the freedom of religion. And the VVD has said after its defeat in the elections, the party should go into opposition. But such objections might be simply manoeuvres to extract concessions from the PVV. The upcoming government will likely be quite unstable. What is sure, is that very little will remain of the PVV's "progressive" economic proposals.

The situation is bleak, but remains contradictory; recent weeks saw the largest climate change demonstration ever in Dutch history, but the winner of the elections was a party that ridicules climate change as nonsense. Likewise, Palestine solidarity has brought out many to the streets, but the PVV is proud of its unconditional support for Israel and wants to move the Dutch embassy to Jerusalem. In the coming period, the Dutch left as it exists will be on the defensive. Countering the anti-migrant policies and racism and defending minority civil rights, especially those of Muslims, will need to be central.

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P.S.

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