

Netherlands : Meet the first Black woman to found a political party in Europe

Sunday 3 January 2021, by [SEAWEL Sophia](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2021).

Sylvana Simons' party will stand in the 2021 Dutch general election. 'We're activating people who've never felt politicians speaking to them.' #12DaysofResistance

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“The Dutch have perfected their facade. They are the definition of ‘facade!’” Sylvana Simons tells me, laughing, on a video call from her home in the Netherlands. “Things look great from the outside. We have told ourselves that we’re tolerant and we’re understanding and we’re progressive, and the rest of the world is so backwards.”

But you don’t have to look far to find plenty of examples to the contrary. Most famously, there’s Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), a Sinterklaas tradition involving blackface; in recent years, anti-Black Pete protesters have experienced violence at the hands of both [police](#) and [civilians](#). There’s a [Christan youth group](#) lobbying to criminalise sex work. There are the deaths of [Mitch Henriquez](#) and [Tomy Holten](#) in police custody in 2015 and 2020, respectively. In May, providing a clear example of institutional racism, the Dutch tax authority, the Belastingdienst, was found to have [systematically flagged people](#) with a second nationality for extra inspection.

And in politics, women, and especially women of colour, are underrepresented – particularly in parliament’s first chamber, the Senate. Of the 75 current members, [only 26 are women](#), including two women of colour. There are no men of colour.

Meanwhile, right-wing parties espousing racist and sexist values won a significant number of seats in the Netherlands’ last national elections in 2017. Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PVV) gained five more seats, the second highest number, while the Forum for Democracy (FvD) won two. The latter’s gains were especially significant since the party was formed just six months before the election – an anti-racism party, BIJ1, launched around the same time didn’t win any seats.

The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), a conservative-liberal party seen as more ‘moderate’, which currently holds the most seats in parliament, also [mobilised racism](#) in its electoral campaign. The party, led by Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, doubled down [in defence of Zwarte Piet](#), despite criticism and protests against the tradition.

That’s where BIJ1 comes in. Founded by Simons in 2016 – the first party in Europe to be founded by a Black woman – is [explicitly](#) feminist, intersectional and radical. Simons has been a well-known public figure since the mid-90s, when she presented Dutch MTV. She entered politics in 2016 by joining the political party DENK, but left in the same year to found BIJ1 (which means ‘together’ in Dutch pronunciation).

“We’re an activist party. It’s not that we’re a political party that sometimes joins a demonstration; it’s the other way around. We are activists who have joined forces to become political,” Simons says.



Sylvana Simons. | Photo courtesy of Sylvana Simons.

As for parties such as the PVV and FvD, “my fight is not primarily against them”, Simons explains. “My focus is first and foremost on uniting the people whose lives are endangered by these extreme-right movements and forming a strong force to counter them.”

Radical change

The clearest difference between BIJ1 and other parties - including groups on the left such as GreenLeft (GL) - is their radical approach to creating a more equal society. “We’re not advocating making this system better or fairer,” Simons says. “That’s not gonna happen! We’re advocating system change.”

‘We are activists who have joined forces to become political’

“This is Dutch politics,” she says, still incredulous. “We have this facade of reason, and as long as you’re reasonable - that’s the whole goal. And in the process of being reasonable, people’s lives are being sacrificed. And BIJ1 vows never to do that.”

It’s no coincidence that the first chapter in BIJ1’s 2021 manifesto promotes anti-racism. “Without that, every other idea will be one that’s not going to work for the people I want it to work for,” Simons explains. “We can do something about the cost of education, but if we don’t take into account that there’s a lot of racism and discrimination in that sphere, the people I care about are not going to benefit.”

Simons also takes a critical look at the government itself. “We want to install a Ministry of Equality, to make sure that the government itself applies all the rules and laws that they have established. We also advocate for a constitutional court, which we currently don’t have in the Netherlands - meaning we have all this legislation that might be unconstitutional. So protecting people from the government is very important to us.”

‘In the process of being reasonable, people’s lives are being sacrificed. We vow never to do that’

But for BIJ1, changing politics is not just about content but also form. The manifesto’s chapters, for example, are written by those actually affected. The chapter on the Netherlands’ former colonies which still belong to the Kingdom, for example, was written by members of the party living in the

region. To increase accessibility, the manifesto is also available as an audio recording; I have yet to come across any other parties that also do this.

“We are the first to have [sign language] interpreters at events. Because if you’re going to say you’re inclusive, you have to be inclusive,” Simons says. “It means we’re giving ourselves a very difficult task and a lot of work in trying to show people what we mean. The same goes for our list of political candidates: it’s about showing that – unless you live in a small town in Friesland, maybe – this is what reality looks like.”

Progress and backlash

Although BIJ1 received a substantial number of votes in 2017 – especially considering its newness and radical stance – it wasn’t enough for a seat in parliament. In 2018, the party gained a seat on Amsterdam’s city council, which until recently was occupied by Simons. In October, she announced she was giving up the seat (duties will be taken over by a fellow BIJ1 member) in order to focus on winning a seat in the general election in March next year.

The party has gained political experience, but Simons emphasises a cultural shift: “We’re having an impact: we’re changing the narrative, we’re changing language, we’re changing public opinion. We’re activating people who have never felt politicians are speaking to them.”

There are tangible examples of this progress: blackface is [no longer used](#) in the national Sinterklaas parade, and many cities have also done away with the practice for their local parades (even the prime minister has [changed his views](#)). The word *allochtoon* (meaning a foreigner) is no longer used as an official designation – which was another key issue for Simons.

There are more subtle changes too. “In 2016, when I used the word ‘radical’ as part of BIJ1’s politics, people said ‘you can’t do that, that’s too aggressive, that’s not done,’” says Simons.

“Now the ChristenUnie, which is one of the most conservative parties in the Netherlands, launched a tax plan and called it a radical tax plan.”

The Black Lives Matter movement, which also had an impact on the Netherlands this summer, marked a significant shift for Simons. “People really understand now that racism isn’t something far, far away. Racism has now definitely been put on the agenda in the Netherlands,” she says firmly. “It’s been on the agenda in the past, but I think we’ve given it a permanent place.”

But there is also, of course, a backlash. Not only against the anti-racism movement, but also against the rights of sex workers, trans people and women. “People are trying it!” Simons says with a chuckle. “They’re trying to reopen the conversation on abortion and self-determination for women, for example. They’ll try, but we have to make sure it’s not even a discussion. Abortion is not a debate. We had that debate.”

“You also see it in the promotion of traditional values. One party is proposing that we give financial bonuses to big families – basically, a financial incentive to have babies,” Simons says.

Simons has no illusions about the current state of affairs: “There’s still so much work to do when it comes to decolonising this whole country, its institutions, the way people think and view each other, the excuses they have for their racism and sexism and ableism.”

Although she’s hopeful about next year’s elections, Simons knows that structural change means

playing the long game. “The results are not about today and tomorrow. The results are about the next generation, or even the generation after that.”

Nor is the goal to simply increase BIJ1’s political power. “We are oppositional, and that’s where we should be. It’s not about getting twenty seats and taking over. The best thing would be if we’re no longer needed,” Simons says. “But for now, as a directive and disruptive force, we need to be here.”

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P.S.

• Open Democracy. 1 January 2021:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/meet-first-black-woman-found-political-party-europe/>