

Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok announces resignation of government

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On Wednesday, Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok announced the resignation of his government. This had been a coalition comprised of the Labour Party (PvdA), Liberal Party (VVD) and Democrats 66 (D66). Kok informed Queen Beatrix that all efforts to solve the crisis of his cabinet had failed. The coalition had only ruled for one year—one of the shortest-lived Dutch governments since the Second World War.

The resignation followed the loss, in the upper house of Parliament, of a bill implementing constitutional changes. D66 had proposed that voters should be able to veto legislation through referendums. Under the new measures, a referendum could be called if 40,000 people signed a petition and another 600,000 then ratified this. Issues of taxation and defence were to be excluded.

The Bill was a central plank of D66's election platform and had been agreed by the other coalition parties following the elections last year. D66, which holds 14 of the coalition's 97 seats in the 150-member lower house, had already made clear that it would leave the coalition if the legislation did not pass.

In the event, it was the vote of VVD Senator Hans Wiegel that left the bill one short of the necessary two-thirds majority. Wiegel, a former interior minister, argued that the Bill would give the electorate too much control over government policy, specifically, in the area of the European Union and international affairs. On questions of foreign policy, the intervention of the people had to be limited, he said.

Thom de Graaf, the D66 parliamentary party leader, reacted by declaring, "The coalition is beyond repair". D66 immediately resigned their three cabinet posts. A five-hour crisis meeting of the remaining government members resolved nothing and ministers from both parties resigned, leaving Kok no choice but to quit

himself. In his letter to the Queen, Kok said, "In view of the situation, the ministers ... decided to jointly resign." In a televised address to Parliament broadcast later, he called the collapse of the coalition "a bitter pill and a terrible loss".

Three options are now possible. Theoretically, Queen Beatrix has the power to instruct ministers to try to form a new government. On Thursday she began consulting speakers of both houses and the parliamentary party leaders, but several of the latter had already ruled out any possibility of keeping the outgoing coalition together.

A new government comprising just the VVD and Labour could be formed instead. Even with D66's departure the two maintain a parliamentary majority. However, they are reluctant to agree to a coalition without D66. Ad Melkert, Labour House leader, said that his party would not accept a continuation of a "purple" coalition (comprised of "red" Labour and "blue" VVD), without D66. "That falls outside the scope of the mandate given us by the electorate (in 1998)", he said.

The most likely alternative is that fresh elections will be called, but these cannot take place before September, leaving the "purple" coalition as a caretaker government in the meantime.

This crisis takes place in the midst of crucial political events, most notably NATO's war against Yugoslavia, in which the Dutch government has been participating, and the upcoming European elections. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, leader of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), the leading opposition party, said, "The Netherlands is maybe not formally at war, but practically speaking it is at war, and many will ask: Is this the right moment for a cabinet crisis? I would answer no."

Alfred Pijpers, a senior lecturer in political science at Leiden University, pointed out that the government's weakness would now impact on international issues. In the event that NATO decided to deploy ground troops in Kosovo, for example, Kok's caretaker administration would find this very difficult to strongly endorse.

Coalition governments have ruled in the Netherlands for the past 80 years, but Wednesday's events are the first time since 1907 that a vote in the upper house has caused a government to fall.



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