

Right-wing government collapses in the Netherlands

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On October 16, the Netherlands' Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende announced the end of the right-wing coalition of his Christian Democratic Party (CDA) and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) with the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). New elections are planned for next January. Until then government business will be conducted by the present cabinet. It is still undecided whether the head of state, Queen Beatrix, will accept the resignation of the government and thereby open the way for new elections.

This marks a dramatic escalation in the crisis of political rule in the Netherlands, which first boiled over in the wake of the murder of the right-wing populist, Pim Fortuyn, shortly before the parliamentary elections in May. The devastating defeat in these elections of the then governing social democratic Party of Labour (PvdA) and the meteoric rise of the political formation named after Pim Fortuyn (List Pim Fortuyn-LPF), led to the formation of a coalition between the CDA, LPF and VVD on an extreme right-wing programme. However, it was obvious from the beginning that such a government, torn by internal disputes, presented no solution to the difficulties facing the ruling elite.

After consulting Gerrit Zalm, the chairman of the VVD, Balkenende of the Christian Democrats announced the end of the coalition in order to drive the LPF out of the government. According to recent opinion polls the LPF has recently lost a large section of its voters and both of the major parties are counting on being able to form the next government without it. According to the polls, the LPF would win only four or five instead of its current 26 seats if elections were held today.

Balkenende and Zalm exploited the dispute between the two LPF ministers, Jan Eduard Bomhoff (Health) and Herman Heinsbroek (Economy), who allegedly refused to talk with each other and, according to Balkenende, "thereby destroyed the basis of trust in the conduct of government."

Although both ministers, on Balkenende's request, finally offered their resignations on the morning of October 16, the prime minister nevertheless stunned the LPF a short time later by proclaiming the end of the coalition. He stressed the fact that there had been no political differences over the government programme between the CDA and VVD, on the one hand, and the LPF on the other, and there were none at the moment. The sole issue was supposed to be about how members of a governing party and the cabinet should behave towards each other.

The ministerial dispute was really only an excuse for the premature break up of the coalition.

This was even admitted by Rinus van Schendelen, professor of political science in Rotterdam, appointed as mediator in the dispute between the two ministers. He said it was "a classical Roman drama," a case of "fratricide" involving a coalition partner. He was quoted in the Netherlands press as saying that he should have resigned from the post of mediator when he saw that the leaders of the VVD and CDA were going out of their way to destroy the coalition. Nothing had been done to dispel the argument. Instead it was specifically used to embarrass the LPF in

public.

Internecine strife within the LPF

The feud between the two ministers was the last of a series of conflicts inside the LPF over a number of weeks. Ostensibly, the disputes were always about the distribution of posts—chair of the parliamentary faction, deputy prime minister, party chair, etc. However, struggles concerning the party's political trajectory were also being fought out. These had begun even before coalition negotiations had been concluded and the government assumed office at the end of July.

Mat Herben, a former senior official in the ministry of defence, had negotiated and signed the coalition agreements on behalf of the LPF. In the view of many party members and parliamentary deputies, these agreements were too much in line with the policies of the traditional parties, the CDA and VVD, and deviated from the aggressively right-wing populist course and election campaign conducted by Pim Fortuyn.

Consequently, Herben renounced his position as parliamentary faction chairman in August. After a lot of wrangling, his post was taken over by Harry Wijnschenk, the editor of a motor sport magazine. Two LPF deputies then quit the faction in opposition to Wijnschenk. Finally Wijnschenk was forced to resign and Herben was once again elected faction leader a few hours before the break-up of the coalition.

Herben is close to many politicians, figures who were still members of the VVD, the CDA or the social democratic Party of Labour (PvdA) until a few weeks or months ago and often held senior positions. These include individuals closely associated with the traditional political establishment and leading business circles in the Netherlands. For example, Health and Deputy Prime Minister Bomhoff, who recently resigned, was a college lecturer in business and economics, a consultant for the International Monetary Fund and the Bank of Japan, as well as a long-standing columnist of the Netherlands *Handelsblatt* business magazine. He was a member of the (PvdA) for 30 years, until joining the LPF last May.

On the other side of the faction fight inside the party is to be found a mixed assortment of colourful figures who gathered around Pim Fortuyn and helped build up a myth about the man following his violent death. These are mainly nouveau riche upstarts, who want to pursue a brand of politics similar to that of their idol without any concern for style, tradition or political stability: a programme of persecution of asylum-seekers and foreigners without legal status, combined with a drastic dismantling of social welfare. Their undisguised aim is to smash all structures and mechanisms through which social compromises were negotiated in past decades.

Herman Heinsbroek, minister for the economy before his resignation, is one of these dubious figures. Within a few years, he amassed a personal fortune of around 150 million euros through his record and CD firm, Arcade, and the sale of this company to the Wegener business group.

The LPF's violent internal battles over political posts were exacerbated by numerous scandals. After Heinsbroek's entry into office, the press suddenly discovered that, as managing director and owner of Arcade, he

had illegally dictated the selling price of CDs to retailers in order to boost his own profits. Philomena Bijlhoout, the undersecretary for women's emancipation and family matters, had to resign eight hours after being sworn in. It had become known that she had served in the militia of the military regime in the former Dutch South American colony of Suriname in the 1980s, at a time when it was carrying out executions to liquidate its opponents. Ines Scheffers, the parliamentary spokesperson for the LPF, was forced to resign a few days later, after exploiting her short period in office for personal gain.

The feuds and scandals of the LPF are only the most dramatic expression of a phenomenon observable throughout the whole of Europe: the gulf between the ruling elite, on the one hand, and the rest of the population, on the other, is growing deeper and deeper. Whenever new governments receive an injection of "new blood," it comes from the narrow social layer that became enormously wealthy during the speculative stock market boom of the 1990s and now, in view of falling share prices and dividends, seek to defend their wealth at any price and at the expense of the rest of the population. The political figures stemming from this layer are correspondingly egotistical, short-sighted and morally degenerate.

A lever for a sharp turn to the right

Precisely because of this political and social profile, the LPF and its leaders in parliament and in the cabinet proved to be invaluable to the Netherlands ruling elite—at least temporarily. Notwithstanding all the well-known scandals, internal quarrels and other deficiencies, the CDA and the VVD had initially begun and gone ahead with governmental work with the LPF. Why? Because at the time they were completely dependent on the LPF to enforce a swing to the right unprecedented in the politics of the Netherlands.

They could not have achieved this by themselves. After two decades of continual social cutbacks, both parties were as hated and discredited as the social democratic PvdA, which had led a coalition with the VVD until last summer and then lost half of its voters and parliamentary seats in an electoral landslide. The VVD lost more than a third of its seats, while the CDA owed its election victory not to widespread support but to the fact that its then unknown leader, Balkenende, succeeded in directing the hatred of the voters principally against the PvdA and the VVD.

The LPF, on the other hand, surged forward on the wave of public anger and disappointment concerning the traditional parties and the established governmental system. Against a background of dramatically increasing unemployment and poverty, it was able to channel the mood of opposition in a reactionary direction by adopting xenophobic slogans and a populist call-to-arms "against the bureaucracy." In an atmosphere of general political disorientation and frustration, moral outrage over the murder of Pim Fortuyn then played its part in securing masses of votes for the LPF, making it into the second most powerful parliamentary faction and raising it to the highest positions in the state.

Cooperating with the CDA and VVD, the LPF set about drawing up and implementing a government programme heralding the end of the so-called politics of consensus—the politics of class compromise that had prevailed for decades and secured the stability of bourgeois rule.

Within a few weeks, the coalition launched a legislative programme that declared open season on immigrants and asylum-seekers and closed the borders against new refugees. The establishment of a centralised military unit and concentration camps has been undertaken to hunt down, arrest and deport asylum-seekers or illegal immigrants. A mandatory identity card and increased video monitoring of public places and streets are only two of the numerous measures decided on to tighten surveillance over all citizens.

Drastic cuts in social services are envisaged in the budget for 2003 drawn up by the cabinet. Within a few years, state or employer contributions to work disability insurance will be reduced to 40 percent of

the current amount; state health insurance benefits will be limited to a catalogue of basic services; and the income of those employed in the public services will come under renewed attack.

More so than in any other European country, industry and commerce in the Netherlands depends on trade between the European Union (EU) and the rest of the world. Consequently, it has been particularly badly hit by the world recession. Under these circumstances, the government programme, initiated by the LPF, heralds the approach of bitter class confrontations in the country.

At the same time, the ruling elite is making every effort in the field of foreign policy to strengthen the Netherlands' position in the struggle for the redistribution of the world's markets and raw materials by allowing its military to play a leading role in imperialist adventures. Troops from the Netherlands, together with German armed forces, will assume supreme command of the colonial occupation forces in Afghanistan from January next year.

In view of these internal and external challenges, the Netherlands' bourgeoisie requires an extremely disciplined, energetic and stable government. The LPF proved useful in paving the way for such a government, but too unstable and unpredictable to play a decisive role in building and leading it.

Balkenende and Zalm's resort to a surprise coup to dissolve the coalition is an attempt to quickly install a stronger government. However, whether or not they succeed is uncertain. A day after the announcement ending the coalition, Van As, the LPF's financial spokesman and former member of the VVD, threatened that his parliamentary faction could block the budget drawn up by the cabinet for next year. The budgetary crisis, growing from month to month due to the recession, would be deepened. It is not out of the question that this issue will be used by the LPF to pressure the CDA and VVD into reconstituting the original coalition.

The question of whether to support the eastward expansion of the European Union is also due to be resolved in parliament and this could be used by the LPF as a means of applying pressure. The news of the fall of the coalition caused immediate concern among all EU governments.

Acting Prime Minister Balkenende immediately declared that the cabinet would not block EU expansion, but since the break up of the coalition it is not certain whether the parliamentary deputies still feel bound to support the coalition programme and the resolutions of the cabinet. There are powerful forces, particularly in the VVD, who are against the admission of Poland into the EU, because of the accompanying high agricultural subsidies which would have to be paid for by a net contributing country like the Netherlands. If, apart from sections of the VVD, deputies from the LPF vote against the government bill and thereby bring down the acting cabinet, this would have widespread consequences for the EU.

It is also possible that the LPF will finally tear itself to pieces over the issue of loyalty to a coalition that has already been terminated. Talks about possibly re-founding the party have already been conducted by both the "loyalists," centring around Herben, and their opponents.



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