

The Netherlands: Anti-immigrant List Pim Fortyn loses heavily in parliamentary elections

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Parliamentary elections on January 22 in the Netherlands resulted in the conservative Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) emerging as the strongest parties. The List Pim Fortyn (LPM), which enjoyed spectacular success in the last election eight months ago, shortly after the assassination of its founder and chairman, Pim Fortyn, lost over two thirds of its vote. Its representation has dropped from 26 to 8 seats in the 150-seat Dutch parliament.

The LPF losses were mirrored by PvdA gains. With 27.3 percent of the vote, and 42 seats, the social democrats have almost recovered from their dramatic losses in last year's election, when the party lost nearly half of its 45 seats. That debacle for the PvdA reflected popular anger over its tenure as a governing party over the previous 12 years.

With 28.6 percent of the vote, the CDA under incumbent Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende made only slight gains compared to the previous election, increasing its seats from 43 to 44. The neo-liberal "People's Party for Liberty and Democracy" (VVD) also increased its share of the vote by only a small amount—from 15.5 to 17.9 percent—bringing an additional 4 seats on top of the 24 it already held.

As a result of the election, Balkenende and the CDA will likely lead the next government. However, it is undecided with whom the party will form a coalition—whether it will renew its coalition with the VVD and the LPF, or form a grand coalition with the PvdA. On January 27, Balkenende announced he would launch coalition negotiations with the PvdA.

In precipitating the new elections, Balkenende and VVD Chairman Gerrit Zalm had hoped to emerge with a ruling coalition of their two parties. This plan, however, has failed.

Last October, after only 100 days in office, Balkenende and Zalm had used disputes within the LPF as the pretext to break up the previous coalition, which included the LPF. That government had initiated a sharp rightward turn, with a program calling for drastic welfare cuts, a repressive law-and-order policy and harsh laws against immigrants and refugees.

But within a few weeks fierce arguments erupted within the LPF over the party's political course and the personnel who would occupy top government positions. This quickly sapped popular support and led to internal splits in the LPF. Having used Fortuyn's organisation to introduce a right-wing agenda, Balkenende and Zalm hoped they could ditch the LPF and govern in a CDA-VVD coalition.

Analysis of the election results shows that the PvdA picked up votes from many who previously had not gone to the polls, but also from former CDA and VVD voters who wanted to prevent a right-wing

coalition under Balkenende and Zalm.

Regarded superficially, the election result and, in particular, the increased vote for the PvdA could lead to the conclusion that politics in the Netherlands had returned to "normal." Eight months after the political storm unleashed by Fortuyn's right-wing populist election campaign, his murder and posthumous election victory, the old government coalition and methods of rule might appear to have returned. But this appearance is deceptive.

Against a background of deep economic crisis and sharp social tensions, the entire political establishment has moved far to the right. Neither the PvdA nor the other parties of the left bourgeois political spectrum—GroenLinks and D'66—want to return to traditional consensus politics.

While industrial and commercial activity is sinking (by no less than 2 percent over the past year), unemployment and homelessness are growing from month to month. Over 500,000 people—approximately 7.5 percent of all those of working age—are registered as unemployed. In addition, there are hundreds of thousands who keep their heads above water with part-time or "mini-jobs". Even if they only work 15 hours a week, they do not appear in the official statistics as "unemployed". Nevertheless, they and their families are sinking ever deeper into poverty.

In mid-January, Finance Minister Hans Hoogervorst (VVD) announced that 2002 tax receipts were €2.5 billion less than anticipated. New budget cuts, and thus further increases in poverty and unemployment, will follow in due course.

In the election campaign, PvdA Chairman Wouter Bos competed with the other party leaders for the mantle of Pim Fortuyn, imitating his political utterances, his language and his media appearances. Just like Fortuyn, the 39-year-old Bos—in chorus with the other leading politicians—fulminated against the "bureaucracy in the public service" and the "useless activities" and idleness of civil servants in order to justify sharper cuts in jobs and salaries.

The PvdA wants to continue the cut in the Disability Working Allowance (WAO) to 40 percent of the present level that was introduced by the outgoing right-wing coalition. As for the privatisation of the state-backed health insurance scheme and the restriction of its services, the PvdA's disagreements with the right-wing parties are limited to the speed with which such "reforms" should be introduced. Health insurance contribution rates were doubled at the beginning of the year—without any opposition from the PvdA.

There are hardly any differences in the other areas of financial and

social policy between the PvdA, CDA, VVD, the Greens (GroenLinks) and the left liberals.

Wouter Bos already served as a state secretary in the Finance Ministry under long-serving PvdA government head Wim Kok, and was responsible for introducing tax cuts for the rich combined with consumer tax hikes and increased energy prices for the broad mass of the population, resulting in an enormous transfer of wealth to the most privileged layers of society. This process was accelerated by the outgoing right-wing coalition.

The similarity in election campaign agitation against foreigners and refugees was also clearly visible. Bos never tired of demanding harsher treatment for all immigrants who did not want to integrate themselves into Dutch society. He insisted, for example, that those who failed to successfully complete a mandatory Dutch language course should be punished with a reduction in welfare benefits.

In the event of a PvdA victory, Bos had Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen in mind for the premiership. As a state secretary in the Wim Kok government until May of last year, Cohen had shut the country's borders to refugees and overseen the first deportations of immigrants. As a result of his measures, the number of refugees who succeeded in crossing the Dutch border and requesting asylum fell by more than half between 2000 and 2002, to around 19,000.

In Amsterdam, Cohen introduced new laws designating some districts as "danger zones," in which the routine searching of individuals and homes was permitted without any concrete suspicion of criminal activity. Such laws have since been introduced in Rotterdam. In the near future, similar laws will be enacted in all large cities.

The PvdA and its chairman have no objection to introducing a requirement for all inhabitants over 12 to carry identification papers. At most, the social democrats conceive that such a provision, which previously existed in Holland only during the Nazi occupation, should apply from the age of 14. As under the Nazis, the necessity to carry ID papers serves to identify unwanted inhabitants. At that time it was the Jews, now it is refugees coming into the country without papers.

Those who do not comply with the ID requirement and cannot produce papers will be subject to immediate deportation. The outgoing right-wing coalition developed a special military unit to hunt down immigrants without papers and deport them. The PvdA intends to maintain this unit, which is unique in Europe.

In view of the large measure of agreement between political programmes, it is no wonder that right up to polling day over a third of the voters were undecided. When the ballots were counted, there were enormous fluctuations in all directions. More than 230,000 voters switched from the CDA to the PvdA, while just as many moved from the LPF to the CDA. Some 290,000 VVD voters who changed to the LPF eight months ago returned to the VVD. Approximately 180,000 former VVD voters switched to the CDA—and just as many moved in the reverse direction, from the CDA to the VVD.

In view of these figures, most election analyses and polling institutes found that voting behaviour was marked by political instability, the loss of any firm connection to a particular party, indecision and disorientation. In the Netherlands, as in other European countries, the gulf between the ruling elite and the great majority of the population has widened to an unprecedented level.

In this respect, a special role is played by the Socialist Party (SP), which emerged in the 1970s from a Stalinist tendency oriented to Mao Zedong. Pre-election polling forecasts predicted large gains for the SP, but the party only increased its vote from 560,000 to 608,000,

winning a 6.3 percent share of the total vote. It retained its nine seats in parliament.

While the SP, whose party name contains the word "socialist," endeavours to give the appearance of a left-wing alternative, complaining about social misery and making vague demands for "social reconstruction", on the essential questions it too has adapted to the general rightward shift.

The SP's support for the police and military witch-hunt against immigrants without papers and its agitation against "foreigners who are unwilling to integrate" is particularly abhorrent. Even before Fortuyn, the CDA or the PvdA, the SP demanded the "consistent application of the existing laws against illegal immigrants". According to its spokesmen, leniency and clemency would only attract more refugees, "many more than Dutch society could ordinarily integrate."

Following the September 11 attacks in New York, and after the murder of Fortuyn, when the government sought to encourage anti-Muslim sentiments, the SP tabled a bill obliging Muslim clergyman to attend classes on integration into Dutch culture. Otherwise they would lose their legal status.

Only recently, SP parliamentary deputy Ali Lazrak demanded Minister for Integration Hilbrand Nawijin (LPF) investigate all Muslim schools, and close them down if they did not satisfactorily promote integration into Dutch culture. For example, it would not be permissible for boys and girls to be taught separately in such schools. Such methods represented the "rule of the Taliban in Amsterdam," Lazrak proclaimed. He accused Muslim schools of abusing state subsidies by spreading political ideas that contradicted "the values of Dutch democracy."

How highly the SP regards the "values" and institutions of the "Dutch democracy" can be seen from the party's web site. Immediately following the elections, the SP's leading candidate, Party Chairman Jan Marijnissen, paid his respects to the Queen. In the most obsequious manner, he offered his personal recommendation as to whom she should call on to form a government: the CDA and the head of the previous right-wing coalition government, Jan Peter Balkenende, as well as the PvdA and its chairman, Wouter Bos.



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