

The Netherlands: xenophobic campaign follows Theo van Gogh murder

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Social tensions have mounted in the Netherlands following the murder of the film director and journalist Theo van Gogh. Politicians, the media and some sections of the intelligentsia are responsible for encouraging xenophobia.

Van Gogh was brutally murdered in Amsterdam on November 2 by a Dutch male of Moroccan descent, who is alleged to be an Islamic fundamentalist. In the name of the “fight against terrorism,” the entire Muslim minority of Holland is now being subjected to a witch-hunt. Out of approximately 16 million inhabitants of the Netherlands, there are about 900,000 Muslims, of whom one third originate from Morocco. Many are now third-generation immigrants.

The hysterical reaction to the murder of van Gogh has revealed a deeply divided society. Politicians and journalists have called for an “end to tolerance” and have made the Muslim minority the scapegoats for increasingly explosive social tensions.

On November 5, three days after the assassination, Deputy Prime Minister Gerrit Zalm, a member of the right-wing People’s Party for Liberty and Democracy (VVD), “declared war” on Islamic fundamentalism in the name of the coalition government. It would be eradicated “root and branch,” with money being no object, Zalm said. His utterances did not garner any public criticism; rather, the coalition government of the CDA (Christian Democratic Appeal), the VVD and Democrats 66 was accused of not having been hard enough up to now.

Former VVD parliamentary deputy Geert Wilders demanded the passage of laws to remove any bureaucratic obstacles and allow the authorities to arrest and deport all Muslims that were under observation. Wilders—a well-known Islamophobe—only recently resigned from the VVD, saying it was not consistent in its opposition to Turkey joining the European Union. Last year, Wilders demanded the introduction of a five-year moratorium for immigrants from Turkey and Morocco.

Even before the assassination, Wilders had announced he wanted to create a new right-wing, anti-Islamic party. He targets the reactionary dregs of society, who feel encouraged by the government’s attitude and whose xenophobia has now found expression in arson attacks on mosques and Islamic schools.

The right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) has also resorted to the most appalling methods in order to stoke up anti-Islamic hysteria. Two weeks ago, a government legal spokesman revealed that the threatening letter from an “Islamic terrorist group” addressed to LPF chairman Sergej Moleveld was a forgery.

Moleveld had previously made great play in the media of this “threatening letter.” He finally admitted to the public prosecutor’s office in Rotterdam that he had written the letter, and then posted it to LPF parliamentary deputy Mat Harsh and himself.

At the funeral service for van Gogh, the Minister for Alien Affairs, Rita Verdonk (VVD), had referred to such threatening letters, and demanded an “end to tolerance,” adding, “We must raise our fists together against these kinds of terrorist acts.”

The generalised accusations with which the Dutch government reacted to the murder of van Gogh have encouraged violent right-wing extremists. Since Deputy Prime Minister Zalm’s “declared war” on Islamic fundamentalism, a wave of arson and bomb attacks has rolled over the country, aimed indiscriminately at Muslim institutions, encouraging a pogrom atmosphere.

So far, there have been approximately 20 such attacks on mosques and Islamic schools—including in Eindhoven, Huizen, Breda, Heerlen and Rotterdam—as well as an arson attack on the Moroccan consulate. It is pure luck that there have been no casualties so far.

In the small town of Uden, an Islamic primary school was burned down during the night of November 9. The culprits had previously daubed the building with slogans like “R.I.P. Theo” and “White Power.”

The security authorities are exerting far less energy pursuing those guilty of these racist offences than in tracking down and arresting supposed Islamic fundamentalists. In Uden, for example, before the attack on the Muslim primary school, representatives of the town authorities and the police had met and decided that staff shortages meant they were unable to offer greater security precautions to the Islamic minority.

Other sections of the population have reacted differently. Newspapers have reported that everywhere in the country, committees of Muslims and non-Muslims have formed to protect Islamic institutions.

Reports of counter-violence are also increasing, with several churches suffering arson attacks. The Islamic Tawhid Brigades has warned that the country “would pay a high price” if the state does not prevent the attacks on Muslim institutions. A spiral of violence threatens to develop, which in future could extend beyond the buildings belonging to the various religious communities.

The state has reacted by intensifying repressive measures, and by acting harshly against alleged Islamic extremists.

Last week, the public prosecutor’s office conducted arrests in

The Hague. According to Attorney General Haan Moraal, the action took place in the Laak district, inhabited overwhelmingly by immigrants, as part of an “ongoing terrorist investigation.”

When the police special units encountered resistance, the district became more like a war zone. The entire area was blockaded by the police, and all those wanting to leave had to show identification papers. Those who were unable to produce ID were taken away for cross-examination. Special military commandos using tanks entered the district, and helicopters carried out surveillance overhead; the air space was closed down for a radius of 7 kilometres. The deployment was coordinated by an emergency task force comprising the highest level of the security services. Later, the arrests of two Dutch males, aged 19 and 22, were announced.

The fear of “Islamic violence” is being fuelled by all levels of the state. Whereas the secret service had only spoken previously of the Netherlands being a possible “target for terrorist attacks,” the Dutch secret service AVID has now published a report that calls Holland the “most important recruiting ground” for new Al Qaeda fighters. According to the report, among the second-generation Muslim immigrants in the mosques, cafes or prisons, there are dozens of “rootless young people” who can be recruited. “The recruitment of these young people shows that a violent radical Islamic current is secretly spreading its roots in Dutch society.” These tendencies form terrorist cells throughout the country, which are ready to strike “at any moment,” the report claims.

Media reports in the Netherlands play on the supposed inability of many Muslims to integrate. The writer Leon de Winter claims that these people are not “mature enough to live in Dutch society.” However, hardly any mention is made of the role of the right-wing extremists, the links between Christian fundamentalist organisations and the government and the increasing social crisis.

A well-organised right-wing extremist scene has existed in the Netherlands for several years, which now feels encouraged by the policies of Jan Peter Balkenende’s government and is behaving ever more aggressively. Muslim representatives have drawn attention to the fact that attacks on mosques and Muslim schools or community centres have been taking place for years, but were always hushed up.

Prime Minister Balkenende comes from a Christian fundamentalist tradition and heads the arch-conservative Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). This party arose in the 1960s from the amalgamation of three religious groupings—the Catholic People’s Party (KVP), the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) and the Christian-Historical Union (CHU). According to the official document “Welcome to the Netherlands,” “The ideology of the party is based on religious convictions.”

In recent years, the Dutch population has faced an enormous social decline. While wages have stagnated and lost their purchasing power, business taxes have been cut. To plug the resulting budget gap, social security benefits have been slashed drastically. Without receiving what remains of social security benefits, more than a fifth of all Dutch people would fall below the poverty line. The recent austerity measures announced by the government make clear that these benefits will not exist for much longer.

This has already produced an enormous social polarisation. Poverty is increasingly concentrated in the suburbs, where the unemployment rate and the numbers of those without a high school diploma lie far above the national average.

Immigrants have been particularly affected. While the official unemployment rate is 4.5 percent, among all immigrants it is 14 percent, with the figure for Turks and Moroccans topping 16 percent. The real number of unemployed is substantially higher, since the government statisticians employ computer models that exclude various jobless groups from the figures.

While the well-off residential districts in many larger Dutch cities have become foreigner-free zones, in other areas ghettos are forming plagued by hopelessness and social misery. In these areas, the government’s constant cuts in social spending have created a desperate situation in which drugs, prostitution and criminality can flourish. The despair of many people in such districts then provides fertile soil for religious fanaticism.

The government has reacted with increasing state repression, reflected amongst other things in a rising prison population. At the beginning of the 1980s, there were approximately 4,000 prisoners in the Netherlands. Today, this number has risen to 16,500. Apart from eastern Europe, only Britain, Spain and Portugal have a higher percentage of prisoners. More than half of the prisoners in Holland are immigrants. Thus, the proportion of jailed immigrants is far higher than the proportion of immigrants in the total population.

At the beginning of October, 200,000 people demonstrated against the government’s attacks on social spending, the largest protest action in the history of the Dutch trade unions. Many foreigners also took part in this demonstration. Yet, neither the unions nor the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) has an answer to the social crisis. They are collaborating with a government that is trying to use the murder of Theo van Gogh to make scapegoats of all Muslims in the Netherlands, and seeking to divert social anger into racist channels.



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