

Dutch government facing likely defeat in upcoming referendum

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On June 1, just three days after the planned referendum in France, the Netherlands is holding its own national referendum on the new European Union (EU) constitution. Polls indicate that the government of Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende is facing a serious defeat. A recent opinion poll showed the majority of the population is against the draft constitution, opposing the position of all major political parties in the Dutch parliament.

Sixty-two percent of respondents said they would vote “no” on the constitution, just 12 percent said they would vote “yes” and 26 percent were undecided. These figures mark a complete reversal of national opinion compared to even less than six months ago. In December of last year, the *Eurobarometer* survey reported 73 percent in favour of the constitution. Since then, the number of supporters has decreased with each passing month.

The apparent strong support for the constitution was a considerable factor in the decision to hold the referendum in the first place—the first ever in Dutch modern history. Up until 2003, both of the major parties in the coalition government—the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the Freedom and Democracy Party (VVD)—were opposed to any kind of popular vote on the subject. The CDA and VVD both argued that a referendum would undermine the independence of parliament.

Their minor coalition partner, Democrats 66 (D66), however, was in favour of putting the issue to a popular vote. It was only after three D66 members of parliament introduced a bill for the holding of a non-binding referendum that the CDA and VVD backed off from their opposition. On the basis of what were then positive opinion polls, they decided it was a safe bet that the population would vote in line with the government.

Alongside the CDA, VVD and the self-styled liberals in the D66 party, support for the constitution also came from the opposition Social Democratic Labour Party (PvdA) and the Green Left (an organisation resulting from the merger of the Stalinist Communist Party and various Christian-pacifist parties). In all, 128 of the 150 Dutch parliamentary deputies support the draft EU constitution.

All the parties in favour are recycling right-wing arguments from previous election campaigns. They declare in unison that the constitution would strengthen the fight against terrorism

and crime. The PvdA extolled the potential “striking power” of the EU.

The PvdA, with 42 seats, is the second largest parliamentary party. It not only supports the policies of the coalition government on the question of the EU constitution, but is fully behind the government’s historically unprecedented program of cuts in social services. The social democrats helped formulate this program during negotiations in 2002 behind closed doors to form a new coalition government. The PvdA also backs the government in its political and military support for the Iraq war.

Those favouring the constitution also support the current realignment and tightening of European policy towards refugees and asylum-seekers. In recent years, the Dutch government has pursued a particularly harsh and inhumane stance on this issue. The minister responsible, Rita Verdonk (CDA), has ordered mass deportations of immigrants, even those whose cases had not even been heard. She has also initiated the erection of deportation centres and practically abolished the presumption of innocence for refugees, treating them as criminals.

The government parties also point out the importance of the European common market based on “the [euro] currency, secured by the stability pact” for stimulating economic activity. The prognoses for this year are for a growth in the Dutch economy. However, this growth will not lead to any benefits for ordinary people. Due to massive cuts in social services and wages, as well as a program of financial concessions to businesses, the degree of social polarisation in the country has sharply increased, unemployment has risen and the general standard of living has decreased.

Those opposed to the EU constitution include the right-wing Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) and Geert Wilders, a former member of the VVD and currently the most infamous right-wing populist in the land. Both base their arguments on nationalism and xenophobia. They argue that the constitution will curtail national sovereignty, create a bureaucratic monster and threaten the country with further waves of immigrants from new EU member countries, especially if Turkey were to be accepted into the EU.

Geert Wilders in particular is fanning the flames of anti-

Muslim sentiment against Turkey. He claims that if Turkey becomes a member state, “an Islamic country with millions of inhabitants will possess enormous influence over the federal state.” He further asserts that the EU constitution “would give Turkey more influence over Dutch legislation than the country itself.”

Wilders is being heavily promoted by the media. According to current opinion polls, his planned but not yet existing party would receive 26 seats in parliament, a similar result to that obtained by the Pim Fortuyn List in the 2002 elections. At that time, the LPF was able to profit from enormous media attention as well as popular frustration with official politics. After participating in a coalition government for 80 days, the LFP lost its influence just as quickly as it had gained it, and in the subsequent national elections was only able to keep eight seats.

The former Maoists in the Socialist Party (SP) also reject the EU constitution. They characterise the constitution as a neo-liberal project that would strengthen militarism and the “forces of destruction” that would smash living standards. They oppose the constitution from a right-wing, nationalist standpoint, spreading the illusion that with a “strong national state” living standards can be defended. In an article published in the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper in April, SP chairman Jan Marijnissen argued that the national rights of the Dutch government were being relinquished, bit by bit, to Brussels. “Before you vote ‘yes’ to the constitution,” wrote Marijnissen, “you must understand that if the constitution is adopted the Netherlands would turn into a powerless province.”

In contrast to France, the referendum in the Netherlands will not be binding. The parliament can still ratify the constitution even if this means going against the will of the people. D66, Green Left and the SP, however, have stated that they will abide by the decision of the population. The PvdA said it will recognise the result only if voter turnout is “large,” whatever this may mean. The CDA gave more exact criteria for the recognition of the referendum’s result: a voter turnout of at least 30 percent and a 60 percent majority either way.

The growth of the “no” sentiment is a result of opposition by broad layers of the population to the politics of the government. Above all, social cuts and the government’s support for the war in Iraq have met with massive opposition. With the referendum date drawing closer and public debate intensifying, the “no”-vote opinion has grown stronger and stronger. The referendum, which was initially conceived as giving a democratic cover to a decision that had already been made, has led instead to further political instability and a permanent crisis of the coalition government.

The self-proclaimed “left liberals” of D66 are especially affected by this crisis. They stand, in their own words, for a society based on social equality. However, in government they have been responsible for policies that have deepened social divisions. According to current opinion polls, D66 would not even gain representation in parliament if an election were held.

A few weeks ago, D66 introduced a bill into parliament that would have made mayors subject to popular election, but the bill was soon abandoned. The subsequent resignation of the main D66 minister behind it, Thom de Graaf, unleashed a crisis within the government. A D66 withdrawal from the coalition government was only averted by awarding the party various concessions: the CDA and VVD voted to increase the education budget and assured D66 of their support for future reform measures for the implementation of “direct democracy.”

A defeat for the EU constitution would be a heavy blow to the “left liberals” and could lead to the outbreak of another government crisis. Similarly, it would be fatal for D66 if the population voted against the constitution but was then overruled, with parliament ratifying it anyway. In its struggle for political survival, its only options would be to retreat from the coalition or sinking into political oblivion.

All these political considerations have only intensified the arguments over the constitution. The government has mounted a €1.5 million campaign to push for a majority “yes” vote.

The acting chairman of D66, Lousewies van der Laan, insulted the population when she remarked: “No one is taking any notes, no one knows what the constitution is about and no one feels responsible for the result. There is an unbelievable amount of apathy.” This is quite a comment from a leading member of a party which, in its own words, stands at the centre of the “direct democracy” movement, which seeks to bridge the chasm that exists between (capitalist) politics and the people.

In light of the increasing nervousness in the Dutch ruling elite, it is not surprising that they are keenly watching the referendum in France. Many in government circles have said that if the French population—three days before the referendum in the Netherlands—rejects the EU constitution, there will be no more point in urging people to vote.



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