

Netherlands: Government suffers heavy losses in local election

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The federal government of prime minister Jan-Peter Balkenende was punished heavily in local elections held in the Netherlands on March 7. Following the failure to win a majority in the referendum on the European Constitution last summer, the local election result is the second defeat for the coalition government of the Christian Democrats (CDA), the right-wing liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the liberal D66 party. Behind the defeat is the widespread opposition to the government's social and immigration policies.

The Christian Democrats of Dutch Prime Minister Balkenende lost 3.4 percentage points compared to local elections four years ago, recording 16.9 percent of the vote, making it the second strongest party in the country. "If one excludes the results of local parties from the results, its losses are even greater, between 7 and 10 percent," explained André Krouwel, a sociologist and political scientist at the Free University of Amsterdam.

The CDA's coalition partners also experienced heavy losses. The VVD received 13.8 percent of the vote (a loss of 1.5 percentage points), while the smaller D66 obtained only 2.6 percent (a 1.2 percent loss).

Although Prime Minister Balkenende admitted his government suffered a defeat, he rejected claims that his coalition was in difficulties. "We had to implement lots of uncomfortable measures," he said.

The loss of votes is precisely due to these "uncomfortable measures," as Balkenende calls them: the dismantling of social welfare, rising unemployment and poverty, as well as the dismantling of democratic rights under the banner of the "war on terror." At the same time the government has cut social spending and has lowered taxes significantly for companies and the wealthy.

The local elections were used by the population to cast its vote on these anti-social policies and the resultant growing levels of social inequality. According to opinion polls, only 3 percent of the population supports the federal government, making Prime Minister Balkenende the most unpopular head of government since the end of the Second World War.

According to Eddy Habben Janssen, from the Amsterdam Institute for Politics and Political Participation, "for 60 to 70

percent of the electors, federal politics was the decider." Surveys conducted by *Nos Journaal* concluded that the central deciding issues were the employment situation (62 percent of those surveyed) and poverty (59 percent).

The reform of the public health sector was also a source of discontent. The Balkenende government has introduced a radical user-pays scheme. Since the beginning of this year, every one of the 16 million insured has to pay an average of €1,100 per year for health insurance. At the same time, the contribution paid by employers has been abolished. Low-income earners in particular have to pay substantially more. Their dissatisfaction was expressed in the elections.

During election night, Jozias van Aartsen, the parliamentary leader of the VVD, resigned. He explained that he had to take responsibility for the election debacle, thereby playing the role of the pawn in order to limit the damage to the government.

Immigration policy also became a casualty of the Balkenende coalition. In the months leading up to the election, the government, together with local right-wing populists and the xenophobic Pim Fortuyn List party, tightened immigration laws, which are directed above all against the Muslim population. Many Dutch people reject such policies.

The electoral turnout, at 58 percent, was slightly less than four years ago (by one percentage point). However, for the first time in 10 years, the majority of eligible immigrants went to the ballot boxes. A study by the University of Amsterdam estimated over 80 percent of immigrants voted for parties to the "left of centre." According to election analyses, these votes played the decisive role in deciding many of the outcomes, at least in the major cities.

The party of Pim Fortuyn, whose leader was assassinated four years ago on the streets of Hilversum in 2002, continued its electoral decline. Four years ago, it was able to channel social discontent in a xenophobic direction and won a record number of seats. In Fortuyn's home city of Rotterdam, the local branch *Leefbaar Rotterdam* (Liveable Rotterdam) had become the strongest party. This time around it lost three seats and with them its majority. In Eindhoven the Pim Fortuyn List received only 7 percent of the vote, in comparison to nearly 20 percent four years ago.

The winners in the elections were the opposition social

democratic Labour Party (PvdA) and the Socialist Party (SP), the latter a former Maoist grouping. A study of electoral patterns showed the greatest swing occurred among low-income earners who switched from the CDA to the SP.

The PvdA increased its vote by 7.6 percentage points, to 23.4 percent, thereby increasing its number of local councillor representatives by 50 percent. The SP received 5.7 percent of the vote, doubling its number of seats in the town halls and municipal councils.

The PvdA's increase was especially strong in the big cities, becoming the strongest party in every one. In Amsterdam it increased its vote by 11 points, winning 20 seats, 5 more than in 2002. The increase in Den Haag was 8 points (5 seats), and 9 points in Eindhoven. In Utrecht it doubled its representation from 7 to 14 seats, while the previously strongest party, the Pim Fortyun List Leefbaar Utrecht, went from 14 seats to only 3.

As for the SP, it increased its vote in all constituencies in which it stood candidates (around half of the 200 electorates). It also achieved a significant number of votes in the 38 constituencies where it stood for the first time. The SP now has a total of 333 representatives in local government. Like the PvdA, the SP increased its votes the most in the major cities.

In Amsterdam the SP went from 7.7 percent (4 seats) in 2002 to 13.3 percent (6 seats), in Arnhem from 7 (3 seats) to 15.4 percent (6 seats), in Den Haag from 5.1 (2 seats) to 7.7. percent (4 seats), in Eindhoven from 7.4 (3 seats) to 12.9 percent (6 seats), in Rotterdam from 4 (1 seat) to 6.6 percent (3 seats), and in Utrecht from 6 (3 seats) to 11 percent (5 seats). In some small local councils it even won the highest number of votes of any party, like in the city of Doesburg with a population of 11,400, and in the province of Gelderland, where the SP also picked up more votes, receiving 38.3 percent (an increase of 5.9 points).

If one were to transfer these results nationwide, a coalition of these two parties, together with the GroenLinks green party—whose election result remained more or less constant at 5.9 percent—would be possible. The government parties—the CDA, VVD and D66—would only be able to obtain 16 seats in the federal parliament and lose their majority. The PvdA, SP and GroenLinks would obtain 76 of the 150 seats and achieve a slim majority.

The possibilities for forming such a coalition are already being discussed for the parliamentary elections due to be held next year. Such a coalition already exists on the local level, such as in Nimwegen. The three parties have a clear majority of 50,000 votes counting 7 of the 12 biggest cities and 20 of the 60 local municipalities, including the CDA-dominated provinces of Limburg, Maastricht and Heerlen.

Shortly after the local elections, SP leader Jan Marijnissen declared his aim for the federal election. "This government is bankrupt," he said. "People want a change, they want stronger, socially oriented policies." The SP said it wants to obtain 17 or more seats in parliamentary elections next year and establish a

"broad left-wing majority" as well as a "progressive" cabinet that will roll back the current attacks on the welfare state, the public service and the vulnerable sections of Dutch society.

This is a promise that the SP will not keep under any circumstances. It has taken the same stance on immigrants as all the other parties, from the CDA to the PvdA, adopting the same "boat is full" argument as the Pim Fortyun List. Last year it was the only party that campaigned for a "no" vote in the referendum on the EU constitution. Alongside legitimate social criticisms, the SP campaign was infused with nationalist overtones. SP chief Marijnissen's main concern was the loss of power and influence of the Dutch state. The further expansion of the EU, as advocated by the EU Constitution, would make the country a "powerless province" in Europe, he said.

Once in office, the SP would not hold back from implementing social cuts in order to prevent the "fall from power of the Dutch state." The PvdA would demand it of them. Indeed, the Labour Party under former prime minister Wim Kok prepared the ground for the current Balkenende government with massive social cuts. Just as in every other European country, the social democrats differ only in shades from the conservative parties and agitate just as hard when it comes to forcing through social cutbacks or dismantling democratic rights. The SP would serve as its left fig leaf in a Labour Party-led coalition government and as a reliable prop for the Dutch establishment against the general population.

The popular opposition to increasing inequality and the destruction of democratic rights has been rising for a long time in the Netherlands. In October 2004, 200,000 people protested in the biggest trade union demonstration in the postwar period against the social cuts of the Balkenende government. Last year a clear majority of people voted against the EU Constitution and thereby against nearly every establishment party.

The fact that in the local elections, the last electoral test before the federal election in 2007, the PvdA was elected once again, after voters had kicked the social democratic Kok government out of office only four years ago, is not an expression of any confidence in this party under its current leader Wouter Bos. In the final analysis, it is a result of the lack of any political alternative.



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