

Amid a furore over immigration policy, Dutch government resigns

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5 July 2006

On June 30, Dutch Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende submitted his resignation after one of his coalition partners, the Democrats'66 (D66), withdrew from his government.

This is the second government led by Balkenende (Christian Democratic Alliance, CDA), which has failed to complete its full term of office. In October 2002, a coalition of the CDA, the right-wing free-market VVD (Peoples Party for Freedom and Democracy) and the xenophobic List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) also resigned early.

According to recent opinion polls, public support for the current CDA-led alliance reached the lowest level of any Dutch government since the Second World War. The government finally collapsed over its extremist immigration policy, which generated increasing public hostility.

The immediate trigger for the coalition's collapse was a dispute between Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk (VVD) and Somali immigrant Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was also a VVD parliamentarian. The minister withdrew Hirsi Ali's citizenship on the basis of a formal error during Hirsi Ali's entry into Holland. Following heated conflict, the decision to debar Hirsi Ali's citizenship was retracted. But D66 demanded the minister's dismissal and finally left the coalition when Balkenende refused to sack Verdonk.

The controversy erupted following a television program broadcast on the social-democratic television station VARA on May 11. It reported that Hirsi Ali, who was born in Somalia, had given a false name when making her application for asylum in the Netherlands in 1992. In addition, she had concealed the fact that she had already obtained refugee status in Kenya and traveled to Holland via Germany. According to the restrictive refugee legislation prevailing in the European Union and the Netherlands, supplying incorrect information is sufficient to bar Hirsi Ali from obtaining a residency permit in either the Netherlands or Germany.

In Somalia, her family belonged to a Muslim clan that had opposed Siad Barré. Her father was the leader of a group of guerillas and, following Barré's seizure of power, he fled with his family to Kenya where they received asylum. The

religious parents arranged a wedding for their daughter with a distant relative living in Canada. On her way to the arranged marriage, Hirsi Ali stopped over for a few days in Germany before traveling on to the Netherlands where she applied for asylum.

According to Hirsi Ali herself, (her real name is Ayaan Hirsi Magan) she gave a false name (that of her grandfather) in order to avoid reprisals from her own family and remained silent about her refugee status in Kenya in order to remain in the Netherlands. She was eventually awarded full Dutch citizenship in 1997, studied and worked for an institute run by the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA).

Her public criticisms of Islamism, which were published in a number of papers and magazines, soon made her into an icon of the right wing. She switched political allegiance from the PvdA to the right-wing VVD, and rapidly became a figurehead for her new party's intolerant, xenophobic and anti-Muslim propaganda.

Hirsi Ali made a distinction between refugees and foreigners who were of economic value to the Netherlands and those who were not, demanding the deportation of the latter. She called for those who were not prepared to integrate to be forced to leave the country. She branded those Muslims who refused to give up their culture and religion as incapable of integration, posing an intolerable burden, and responsible for dividing society.

These issues erupted following the murder of her acquaintance, the filmmaker Theo van Gogh. In November 2004, he was killed in broad daylight following the showing of his film *Submission*. Hirsi Ali had written the script for the film, which consciously attacked and violated the moral and ethical values of Muslims. Subsequently Hirsi Ali accused all Muslims in the Netherlands of being indirectly responsible for the death of Van Gogh.

Following the VARA television report on Hirsi Ali, the Dutch media demanded a statement from Immigration Minister Verdonk, whose staff advised her to go on the offensive and seek an open confrontation. Following her deportation of no less than 26,000 refugees, whose

applications for asylum had been summarily dismissed, Verdonk had become known as “Iron Rita”.

Under Verdonk, anyone giving false information or guilty of similar “offenses” was denied a Netherlands passport or residency permit. In April this year, despite public protests, she deported a young girl from Kosovo, Taida Pasic, who was preparing to take her school exams. On that occasion, Hirsi Ali had defended the young girl and in a telephone call with Verdonk referred to her own failure to provide correct information.

On May 15, four days after the broadcast on VARA television, Verdonk announced that Hirsi Ali’s naturalization was void and her Dutch nationality would be revoked. Supported by numerous politicians and the media, Verdonk (a former prison director) announced the withdrawal of Hirsi Ali’s citizenship just one day later.

On the same day, Hirsi Ali resigned her seat in parliament and declared her intention to go to the US where she had been offered work with the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—a prominent neo-conservative think tank, which has been instrumental in shaping the Bush administration’s foreign and military policy, in particular in the Iraq war. Hirsi Ali’s tirades against Islamism are seen by the AEI as a useful aid in its propaganda campaign to justify US aggression in the Middle East.

The fact that Verdonk had no qualms in targeting a fellow party member provoked public outrage. On May 17, a 14-hour debate took place in the Dutch parliament in The Hague. The session was broadcast live by television late into the night and watched up by 18 percent of the country (nearly three million people). It rapidly became clear that the vast majority of the population opposed Verdonk’s course of action, forcing the government onto the defensive.

Prime Minister Balkenende urged Verdonk to reverse her decision on Hirsi Ali’s citizenship. Under pressure from the media and inside her own party, the minister set up an enquiry and also asked Hirsi Ali to write to the ministry giving reasons why she should retain her Dutch nationality.

Hirsi Ali sent a letter absolving Verdonk and the government and assuming full responsibility for the incorrect statements in her asylum application and the consequences. She later told the Dutch media, however, that she had only written the letter under pressure to end the affair and to accelerate the process of obtaining a US visa.

On evening of June 27, Verdonk tried to save her scalp by announcing that Hirsi Ali could keep her passport and brandished the letter as proof that Hirsi Ali admitted blame. In another late night parliamentary session, watched by more than a million television viewers, Verdonk stubbornly refused to explain the circumstances surrounding Hirsi Ali’s letter.

At 2 a.m., an obviously exhausted Balkenende conceded that Verdonk had put pressure on Hirsi Ali. The Dutch Greens introduced a motion of no confidence against Verdonk. The D66 supported the Green motion but the government survived the vote with the help of the right-populist LPF (List Pim Fortuyn). After the vote, the D66 parliamentary faction head, Lousewies van de Laan, issued an ultimatum to the prime minister to choose “either the coalition or the minister”. The prime minister continued to back Verdonk and D66 withdrew from the government.

The government collapsed amid a deepening gulf between the ruling elite and the mass of the population. Its policies have been exclusively oriented toward the interests of big business and the wealthy. Its regressive tax policy, dismantling of social gains and participation in the Iraq war have been highly unpopular with working people. This was particularly evident when a large majority rejected government advice and voted down the proposed European Union constitution in June last year.

Balkenende’s resignation represents another setback for the political establishment. He will remain in power until a new government is formed. Last weekend Queen Beatrix requested Ruud Lubbers to begin negotiations with the CDA and the VVD over the formation of a minority government. Lubbers, a CDA member, was Dutch prime minister from 1982 to 1994 and United Nations commissioner for refugees from 2001 to 2005, until he was forced to resign following allegations of sexual misconduct.

A new minority government will have the job of deciding on a budget for 2007 and then pushing it through parliament with the help of smaller right-wing parties. There is no doubt that the budget will continue the process of income redistribution to the wealthy. There is also broad agreement between the parties that the controversial deployment of the Dutch army in Afghanistan will be continued. New elections are due in November—six months before the official end of the regular legislative period.



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