

Dutch government collapses over military deployment in Afghanistan

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22 February 2010

The Dutch government collapsed on Saturday when one member of the ruling coalition—the social democratic Dutch Labour Party (PvdA)—refused to support a further extension of the country’s military deployment in Afghanistan.

The Labour Party, which has shared power with the Christian Democrats and the Christian Union, argued in making its decision that the party’s credibility was at stake.

The Labour Party has lost considerable support in recent elections due in large measure to its continued support for Dutch military involvement in Afghanistan. Commenting on his party’s decision to oppose a new mandate, Labour Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Wouter Bos complained that the intervention was placing “a very heavy burden on the Dutch armed forces.”

He continued: “When we extended [the mandate for the Dutch military deployment in Afghanistan] two years ago, we made a promise to the Dutch population that this was the last time. So it wouldn’t have been very credible if we had changed the date again.”

The Netherlands currently has 1,400 troops stationed in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan. Its total troop numbers in Afghanistan are estimated at about 2,000.

Twenty-one Dutch soldiers have been killed since the government first sent troops to back the NATO mission in 2006. Opinion polls have repeatedly made clear that a majority of the population is opposed to the Afghan deployment and favours the immediate withdrawal of Dutch troops. Against this background, the Dutch government had set a deadline for the withdrawal of its troops by August of this year.

In the last few months, the US and Britain have increased their pressure on the Dutch government in The Hague to renew its military commitment in Uruzgan. The increased deployment of European troops is a cornerstone of the surge strategy decided upon by the Obama

administration, which has dispatched tens of thousands of additional US troops to Afghanistan.

The US originally sought up to 10,000 additional troops from Europe. In response, NATO pledged to provide around 7,000 troops, but this total includes some troops already in the country, and many European governments have failed to make firm commitments on the full contingents promised.

Public opposition to the military policy of the Dutch government and the involvement of Dutch troops in Afghanistan increased at the start of the year following the release of a report by a Dutch commission of inquiry into the 2003 Iraq war. The Davids Commission rejected the central arguments used to justify the actions of the US and British governments and concluded that the Iraq war was illegal under international law. The report was also critical of the role played in the Iraq war by the Dutch government led by the Christian Democratic prime minister, Peter Balkenende, who heads the now-collapsed coalition.

At the start of this month, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen held talks with Maxime Verhagen, the Christian Democratic foreign minister, and then pleaded in a letter to Balkenende for an extension of the Dutch mission.

In response to the NATO secretary general’s request, the Dutch Labour Party proffered an olive branch. Labour MP Martijn van Dam declared that his party would be prepared to support a continued intervention involving the training of Afghan engineers or medical personnel on a limited scale. Since Dutch troops would be necessary to ensure the security of such a mission, van Dam’s proposal was a backhanded way of permitting the Dutch deployment to continue.

However, after news broke last week of the NATO negotiations to extend the Dutch deployment, public anger swelled. Bos claimed not to have known about the

talks—a highly dubious assertion that was discounted by the Christian Democrats, who insisted Bos was fully informed, and widely disbelieved by the public.

This was the context in which the Labour Party broke ranks with its coalition partners. At the end of a 16-hour cabinet meeting that lasted into the early hours of Saturday, Balkenende declared the termination of his coalition with the Labour Party.

The Christian Democratic and Christian Union parties are expected to form a caretaker government until a fresh general election takes place, probably in early summer. Under conditions where all of the coalition parties have been discredited, it is believed that the ultra-right anti-immigrant Freedom Party of Geert Wilders could win or finish second in new legislative elections.

The collapse of the Dutch government represents a serious blow to the US administration's strategy in Afghanistan. While the number of Dutch troops in Afghanistan pales in comparison to the US deployment—set to reach nearly 100,000 by the end of the year—political pundits and foreign policy specialists fear that the Dutch decision could be the preamble to other countries deciding to quit.

The German parliament is due to decide on an extension of the mandate for its own troops in Afghanistan on Friday. In common with the Netherlands, there is massive public opposition to the involvement of German troops in the US-NATO mission.

According to Julian Lindley-French, professor of defense strategy at the Netherlands Defense Academy in Breda: "If the Dutch go, which is the implication of all this, that could open the floodgates for other Europeans to say, 'The Dutch are going, we can go, too.' The implications are that the US and the British are going to take on more of the load."

The collapse of the Dutch government and prospect of a withdrawal of Dutch troops also comes at a point when the US-NATO alliance is confronting increasing resistance in its operation against the Taliban in Helmand province, which neighbours the province of Uruzgan.

The comments by Labour Party leader Wouter Bos following the withdrawal of his party from the coalition government make clear that the social democrats have no differences regarding the use of Dutch troops for military interventions in the pursuit of Dutch interests. Bos represents a section of the ruling elite in the Netherlands which is increasingly concerned over the course of the Afghan campaign, chafes at the use of Dutch troops to pursue American interests in the region, and fears the

domestic social and political consequences of continued Dutch involvement in the war.

Popular opposition to the war is linking up with social discontent over the impact of the economic crisis and government austerity moves. Balkenende had announced plans to raise the retirement age and impose sweeping cuts in social programs in order to recoup the huge sums allocated by the government to rescue Dutch banks at the height of the economic crisis.

As in the case of military policy, the social democrats have no fundamental differences with such policies. Since the 1990s, the Labour Party has been regarded as the party of wealth redistribution—from the working class to those at the top of society.

In was during this time that the PvdA, under then-Prime Minister Wim Kok, undertook a drastic program of cuts in welfare state programs, thereby paving the way for the accession to power of the conservatives under Balkenende. Current Labour Party leader Bos is a former top manager of Shell Oil and has close connections to the Dutch business world.

Now, Bos and the leadership of the Labour Party have concluded that the measures necessary to restore the credit worthiness of the Netherlands in the eyes of international finance cannot be carried out by the discredited Balkenende coalition. Instead, the Labour Party will seek to exploit its close links to the trade unions to forge a new coalition pledged to implement the cuts demanded by the banks and Dutch corporate interests.



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