

# Far-right party emerges as power broker behind new Netherlands government

Sven Heymann  
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Two months after the Dutch parliamentary elections, a minority government appears to be forming based on the support of the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by the far-right anti-immigrant politician Gert Wilders. In The Hague, negotiations have begun on a coalition agreement and the terms by which the PVV will support the government. The agreement is expected to be completed in three weeks.

Wilders' PVV will not be represented in the new government. However, as the two governing parties—the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Christian Democratic CDA—together with the PVV will have a combined majority of only one vote in the 150-seat parliament, the fate of the government will largely rest with the extreme-right PVV.

Wilders will be able to use the threat of withdrawing support to effectively veto government policies and impose his own political line. “Although Wilders is not a minister, he will be the country's de facto prime minister in this coalition government,” Sharon Dijksma, a Social Democratic member of parliament, told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

Dijksma's criticism cannot hide the fact that the Social Democratic Labour Party (PvdA) bears the central responsibility for Wilders' political rise. Since the Social Democrats under their then-leader Wim Kok joined a Christian Democrat-led government in 1989, they have attacked past social reforms in the interests of the Dutch corporations and banks.

The last government—a coalition of the Christian Democrats (CDA), the Christian Union (CU) and the Social Democrats (PvdA)—broke apart in February over differences regarding the extension of the Afghanistan mandate. In the subsequent elections, the Social Democrats received only 19.6 percent of the vote. The

Christian Democrats under Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende were decimated, polling just 13.6 percent and coming in fourth place. The election winner was the right-wing VVD, with just over 20 percent. Wilders' PVV came in third with 15.5 percent.

The election result reflected the deep political unease within the Dutch population. Increasingly, people have turned away from the Social Democrats as a result of their support for austerity measures. This dissatisfaction, however, lacks a progressive political expression in the absence of a party defending the interests of working people.

Large sections of the working class have responded by abstaining. Turnout declined in the recent election, compared to 2006, by five percentage points.

However, lower middle-class layers—dissatisfied and fearing social ruin—have responded with a sharp turn to the right. This explains the rapid rise of the right-wing neo-liberals and the far-right PVV. The latter's tirades against Islam are linked with social demagoguery and rhetorical attacks on finance capital.

After the elections, 42 percent of PvdA voters indicated they had voted for the Social Democrats only for tactical reasons, and had actually preferred another party. This shows that the PvdA's core vote has shrunk to 10 percent.

Contrary to media claims that there has been a general shift to the right in the Dutch population, most of those who voted for the Social Democrats for tactical reasons did so to prevent the emergence of a government including the far-right PVV. The Social Democrats also owe many of their votes to their promise to end the unpopular Afghanistan mission.

Three days after the election, Queen Beatrix called on the chair of the first chamber of parliament, right-wing neo-liberal Uri Rosenthal, to explore the possibility of a

coalition, in the first instance between his neo-liberal party, the Christian Democrats, and Wilders' PVV.

Initially, the plan failed due to widespread resistance among the Christian Democratic rank and file. Several branches of the CDA threatened to leave the party in the event of a coalition with Wilders. Consequently, the possibility of a so-called "purple-plus" coalition was explored, consisting of right-wing liberals, social democrats, the left-liberal D66 and the Greens. But after initial talks, this effort was scuttled.

Rosenthal then suggested the formation of a centre-right coalition of the right-wing liberals, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. But these talks also failed, as well as a further attempt to form a "purple-plus" coalition.

The situation was resolved when, on July 22, Ruud Lubbers was appointed as a mediator. Lubbers is a member of the Christian Democratic CDA and was Dutch prime minister from 1982 to 1994, including seven years in a coalition with the right-wing liberals and five years in a coalition with the Social Democrats.

Within days, Lubbers was able to silence the critical voices within his own party and invited the right-wing liberals, Christian Democrats and Wilders' PVV to hold exploratory talks. After a week, he was able to announce the breakthrough. Since then, negotiations have proceeded on the concrete make-up of a right-wing minority government, supported by the PVV.

The general outlines of a possible agreement can now be seen. It is clear that the government will cut €18 billion from the budget in the next legislative period. This will be done primarily in the areas of health and social policy, culture and development aid. In the election campaign, the prime minister-designate Mark Rutte (VVD) argued for a strictly neo-liberal course. He called for a "small and compact state" and severe austerity measures.

Wilders, who campaigned against social cuts, will have no problems endorsing such a course. Before he founded his own party he was in the leadership of the VVD.

In return, Wilders will be looking to shift internal security and immigration policy to the right. All three parties agree that the existing laws should be applied more harshly, with longer prison sentences, higher immigration hurdles for unskilled workers, and the rapid deportation of asylum seekers. In the agreement

formalising Wilders' support, such commitments are said to have been made.

At the same time, Wilders will have a free hand to continue stirring up hatred against Islam, which he describes not as a religion but as an extremist ideology. The agreement on coalition talks states: "The parties accept their different views on this subject and they should act based on their own views."

Negotiations on the government programme will take place largely shielded from the public. Last Tuesday, Prime Minister-Designate Rutte said in a radio interview that the parties had agreed not to disclose the contents of the coalition agreement, on the grounds that not everything should be fought out in the media.

Rutte knows that his government's austerity measures will meet with growing resistance among working people. He is seeking to counter this by increasing the powers of the state and stirring up racial tensions.

The prospect of a minority government in the Netherlands supported by the extreme-right PVV is in line with a rise in the political fortunes of a number of right-wing parties in Europe. Right-wing governments have come to power in recent months in Britain and Hungary. These election results are primarily due to the right-wing course of the social democratic parties, whose years of cutbacks have alienated workers and driven petty-bourgeois layers into the arms of the right.

What happens when a minority government is supported by the extreme right can be seen in the experience of Denmark since 2001. There, the minority government of Liberals and conservatives is supported by the right-wing "populist" Danish People's Party (DF). The DF has agreed to austerity budgets in return for deep cuts in immigration and the repression of asylum seekers. In ten years Danish refugee policy has gone from being the most liberal in Europe to becoming one of the most intolerant.



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