

Geert Wilders—kingmaker in the Dutch political crisis

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Talks aimed at forming a new Dutch government broke down last week following the withdrawal from coalition negotiations of Geert Wilders, leader of the far-right, anti-Islamist Party for Freedom (PVV). The Netherlands has lacked a government since elections took place three months ago, and now the country's monarch has been given the task of making a new proposal to overcome the political paralysis prevailing in Holland.

The national elections held on June 9 witnessed a narrow victory for the right-wing, pro-business People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) led by Mark Rutte, which won 31 seats. One seat behind was the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), with 30. Placing third with 24 seats was Wilders' PVV, which was able to nearly triple its total of deputies compared to the previous election. Trailing fourth in the election was the conservative Christian Democratic Action CDA (21 seats).

The CDA had led the last Dutch government but had encountered increasing popular opposition due to its harsh economic measures and its foreign policy—in particular its failure to abide by a promise to withdraw Dutch troops from Afghanistan. In the June 9 election the CDA received a drubbing and lost nearly half of its parliamentary seats.

Following the election VVD leader Mark Rutte had declared he was open to negotiations with all parties but favoured an alliance with Wilders' PVV. Following opposition from inside the CDA, Rutte then commenced talks aimed at forming a coalition with the Dutch Labour Party, GroenLinks (Green-Left) and the radical-democrat Democracy 66.

Rutte's chief objective was to win support for his proposed economic measures. In the summer election campaign Rutte made clear he intends to adopt a strictly neo-liberal economic policy. Rutte had called for a "small and compact state" and severe austerity measures based

on cutting €18 billion from the federal budget in the next legislative period. This is to be done primarily in the areas of health and social policy, culture and development aid.

Some members of the Labour Party and Green-Left balked at supporting such policies, and talks broke down at the start of August. Then on August 9 the VVD commenced discussions with the CDA and Wilder's PVV on an alternative coalition.

The VVD and CDA had a combined total of just 52 seats in the 150-member Dutch parliament. In order to secure a viable coalition Rutte sought to secure the support of Wilder's PVV for a so-called "minority coalition" of the VVD and CDA with the toleration of the PVV, thereby providing the coalition with the majority required to pass decisions through parliament. In return, the PVV was promised a voice in policy formation, in particular the adoption of parts of the vicious anti-immigrant, anti-Islamist program of Wilders.

At a point when a deal appeared to have been struck, talks between the right-wing parties and the PVV then collapsed last week when three CDA deputies declared that they were not prepared to accept Wilders' demands on the future coalition. One CDA deputy, senior party member and former Health Minister Ab Klink, wrote a letter to the party leadership insisting that he would not support a coalition relying on the political support of the PVV.

Subsequent events reveal that Wilders is emerging as the kingmaker in Dutch politics. First of all, Wilders demanded that three CDA members, including Klink, give a written pledge to support a coalition supported by his party. When the CDA leadership turned down these terms, Wilders then withdrew from talks.

The leaders of the VVD and CDA immediately expressed their regret at his decision. Rutte told the press, "I regret the outcome", and he added that his party believed that a right-wing coalition would have done

“justice to the election result”. Similar remarks were made by CDA parliamentary leader Maxime Verhagen.

For his part, Wilders also expressed his regret at the breakdown in talks and stressed last Friday that his criticism of the CDA parliamentary group was not directed at Verhagen—someone with whom “he could negotiate well”.

On Monday the VVD leader reported on the state of the negotiations to the Dutch monarch. Emerging from talks with Queen Beatrix, Rutte stressed that the initiative for the formation of a new government rested with Geert Wilders.

On the same day, CDA leader Ab Klink capitulated to pressure inside his party and announced he would be standing down from parliament. With the leading figure inside the CDA who had opposed his participation in a future Dutch government removed, Wilders announced on Tuesday that he would resume talks with the CDA and VVD over a future coalition.

The sighs of regret and the appeals directed toward Wilders by VVD leader Mark Rutte are not surprising. The two men know one another well from their period as leading members of the VVD. Wilders held leading positions in the party until resigning in 2004 in opposition to proposals in the VVD to support Turkish membership of the European Union. Since then, Wilders has sought to make a reputation as a far right rabble-rouser.

Wilders’ party is largely a creation of the media and is expressly supported by sections of the establishment. The PVV has no real active membership. Geert Wilders determines its policies and candidates, and organizes the party’s public relations. Earlier this year the Dutch News website wrote of the PVV, “Its only purpose is to serve as a platform for Geert Wilders and his trademark—anti-Islamic, populist nationalism”. The state finances Wilders’ political activities and provides him with police protection around the clock.

During the last election campaign Wilders combined vicious attacks against Islamic refugees with promises to defend social gains and the rights of homosexuals. A firm supporter of the Israeli state, his political demands include a ban on the construction of minarets, as well as hefty fines for the wearing of headscarves. He maligns refugees in general for being “terrorists”. He seeks to whip up hatred against the alleged “Islamisation of the country” and “criminal scum: terrorists from Morocco and the Antilles”.

In an interview broadcast recently on Australian television Wilders ranted, “Our culture, which is based on

Christianity, Judaism and humanism, is better than the retarded Islamic culture”. He went onto declare that Islam cannot be compared with Christianity. “It is a violent ideology, like communism and fascism”.

Wilders seeks to use every opportunity to stage his provocations abroad. Wilders has declared his intention to appear alongside American right-winger and former US ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, this Saturday at an anti-Islamist provocation planned in New York for the anniversary of 9/11.

This is the man who is now increasingly determining the political agenda in Holland. Wilders can play for time assured that he can push the entire political establishment to the right—including the social democratic PvdA and Greens. Following the federal elections in June both the Labour party led by Job Cohen and the Green-Left expressed their readiness to work together in a coalition with the right wing, neo-liberal VVD.

Now, following the latest crisis the *Rhein-Zeitung* speculates that Wilders could be brought directly into government: “The queen must decide in the next days how to proceed with forming a government. Election victor Mark Rutte has announced a draft for a government program. If the right wing neo-liberal does not water down his severe consolidation course based on harsh social cuts, then it will be difficult to get the social democrats on board. In that case, insiders fear that Wilders could then once again come into play, this time as a fully fledged coalition partner. The trained insurance salesman can afford to play for time”.

The inclusion of Wilders in a future Dutch government would represent a turning point in European politics. In recent years openly racist parties such as the Northern League and the Freedom Party were able to participate respectively in governments in Italy and Austria. In broad stretches of central Europe, however, such parties were regarded with suspicion and contempt. Now influential layers of the bourgeoisie are seeking to open the road to power for a man whose racist tirades and demagoguery exceed even those of an Umberto Bossi or Jörg Haider.



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