

Regional elections in the Netherlands: Geert Wilders's PVV enters the Senate

Elisabeth Zimmermann
15 March 2011

Following its election success in parliamentary elections last summer, the anti-Islamic Party for Freedom (PVV) has now entered the Dutch Senate. In the regional elections on 2 March the party led by the right-wing populist Geert Wilders won around 12 percent of the votes cast and is expected to take 10 of the 75 seats in the Senate.

The Senate of the Dutch Parliament is elected by the members of regional parliaments and is comparable to the German Bundesrat or the US Senate. The second and more important chamber, the House of Representatives, is elected directly in a popular vote.

The main loser in the regional elections was the Christian Democrat CDA, which led the federal government from 2002 to 2010 under Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende. The CDA is presently sharing power with the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in a minority government. The CDA lost 10 of 21 seats, i.e., nearly half of its total in the Senate. The VVD was able to win two extra seats, taking its total to 16 senators.

In the House of Representatives the right-wing minority government led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD) is dependent on the support of Wilders's PVV, with which it formed a pact of toleration last year. Despite the recent gains of the PVV in the Senate, the three ruling federal parties lack an overall majority (by one vote), thereby intensifying the crisis of the government as a whole. The ruling coalition now hopes to gain the support of the only senator sitting for the conservative Christian SGP.

In general the regional elections were characterised by widespread indifference and hostility towards all parties. Almost half of eligible voters stayed away from the polls, with turnout of only about 56 percent.

Significantly, the opposition parties were unable to

benefit from the growing unpopularity of the government. The Netherlands' longtime leading bourgeois party, the social democratic PvdA, failed to make any gains and merely retained its existing 14 seats. Green-Left improved its total from four to five seats, while the former Maoist Socialist Party (SP) lost four seats and now has just eight seats in the Senate.

Even Wilders's PVV fell well behind its result of last summer. On that occasion it had received 15 percent of the vote, while now it gained just 12 percent.

Wilders's political strategy has been to fuse Islamophobia with social demagoguery. Last year, for example, he categorically rejected any increase in the retirement age, a measure that has since been agreed by the government. Through such promises Wilders has been able to channel oppositional social forces that had been thoroughly disillusioned by the right-wing agenda of the Social Democrats. Beginning in the 1990s the social democrats implemented massive cuts and austerity programs, and only finally left the coalition government last year following differences with the Christian Democrats over the war in Afghanistan.

Since declaring his toleration for the Mark Rutte government, Wilders has had increasing difficulty in maintaining his social demagoguery. The government has implemented a severe program of cuts and savings aimed at transferring the costs of the economic crisis and the bailout of the banks onto the working class.

According to the coalition program 18 billion euros are to be saved annually. Much of this sum is to be achieved by cutting jobs in the public sector. Development aid and state subsidies for health insurance are to be reduced by one billion euros respectively, as are the transfers by the Netherlands to the European Union. The government has already increased the retirement age from 65 to 66 years.

The scheduled withdrawal of Dutch troops from Afghanistan is largely complete, but the government is now embroiled in a new military adventure. On 27 February, three Dutch soldiers conducting a secret commando mission in Libya were arrested by government forces. The soldiers had landed their helicopter in the Libyan city of Sirte where they were due to evacuate two people. They had no diplomatic permission for their mission, which represented a clear violation of Libyan sovereignty.

In order to channel existing social tensions in a reactionary path, the government has largely adopted Wilders's anti-immigrant program. In particular the immigration and domestic policy of the coalition agreement bears his stamp.

As is already the case in France, the wearing of the Islamic burqa and other face-covering garments is to be prohibited. Headscarves are also to be banned in public buildings, and immigrants failing a citizenship test will automatically be denied a permit. Refugees from specific regions will not be permitted residency rights, as was previously the case, and limits are to be placed restricting the reunification of families. The government has declared it plans to halve immigration levels.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact