

Hostility to immigrants dominates major parties in Dutch election

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According to recent polls, the two governing parties taking part in the Dutch parliamentary elections on March 15 will be punished for their drastic austerity policies.

Poised to benefit the most from the losses of the free-market, liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), whose leader is Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and its coalition partner, the social-democratic Labour Party (PvdA), is Geert Wilders' anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim Party for Freedom (PVV). Current polls place the latter in the lead, just ahead of the VVD.

The elections in the Netherlands are significant. This country of approximately 17 million people has often been the harbinger of trends affecting Europe as a whole. In May there will be presidential elections in France, and parliamentary elections will take place in Germany this September. Here, too, the far right hopes to profit from the politics of the established parties.

Wilders is basing his campaign on a concoction of social demagoguery and xenophobia years in the making. In a televised interview he compared mosques to "Nazi temples" and the Koran with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Wilders calls Moroccans "vermin" and "scum."

In its election program, the PVV calls for a ban of the Koran, the banning of construction of new mosques, a halt to immigration from Islamic countries, the abolition of the right to asylum, the sealing of the borders, an exit from the European Union (EU) and the ending of all state funding for developmental aid, wind energy, art and public broadcasting.

At the same time, Wilders engages in certain social demagoguery. He promises to reverse the raising of the retirement age, as well as cuts to elder care. In addition to this, he promises that obligatory deductibles for health insurance would be rescinded.

Above all, however, the PVV has been successful because no one has seriously opposed its radical right-wing course. In the last 10 years, various coalitions of all the established parties have set the stage for the ultra-right with an unprecedented orgy of social cuts and the scapegoating of refugees and migrants as responsible for declining social conditions.

According to official economic and social data, the Netherlands is doing well by international standards. In the last

year, its economic performance rose by 2.1 percent while the unemployment rate decreased to 5.4 percent. But concealed behind these numbers are enormous social tensions.

During the 2008 global financial crisis, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and PvdA government pumped more than €85 billion [\$US 90 billion] into the financial sector to rescue failing Dutch banks.

Prime Minister Rutte, whose VVD governed from 2010 to 2012 in an alliance with the CDA and since the September 2012 general election with the PvdA, set out to recover the cost of bailing out the banks through extreme social cuts.

The labour market was radically liberalized, the retirement age and sales tax increased, the health care system effectively privatized and basic social security slashed. Subsidies for students and the disabled were cut. The housing market collapsed and many families lost a large proportion of their assets through the decline in the value of their homes.

The supposed economic upturn has done nothing for the poor and working class. The number of people living in poverty has increased sharply since the crisis of 2008. Some 1.2 million people, or nearly 8 percent of the population, are still considered poor. In the big cities—Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague—the unemployment rate is between 13.4 and 14.4 percent.

Particularly affected by the rise in poverty are children and immigrants. Approximately 22 percent of Dutch residents originating in Morocco live beneath the poverty line. Some 12 percent of all children suffer in poverty. Among children with immigrant backgrounds, that figure rises to 28 percent.

At the same time, the portion of workers with a "secure job" fell from nearly 57 percent in 2008 to 30 percent in 2014. The increase in low-wage work ensures that the official unemployment rate remains relatively low. But the underemployed, who work part-time or are often self-employed, and the so-called "discouraged workers" who have given up searching for a job, are not included in the numbers. According to calculations made by the Dutch central bank, if one were to include these figures, the unemployment rate would stand at 16 percent.

In the eradication of social benefits, the social democratic PvdA distinguished itself in particular. In 2008, then party

chairman Wouter Bos organized the bank bailout. And as the minority government of the VVD and CDA came apart in 2012 over a further austerity program, because Wilders refused to support them in parliament, the PvdA threw itself into the breach.

Six PvdA ministers hold positions in the current government, including the party's leader and top candidate, Lodewijk Asscher, who serves as minister of social affairs and employment and deputy prime minister. Minister of Finance Jeroen Dijsselbloem also comes from the PvdA. Since January 2013, he has been the president of the Eurogroup (the informal meetings of the finance ministers of the eurozone) and in this capacity he oversees the brutal austerity policies in Greece and other countries burdened by extreme debt.

Through its ties to the Dutch Federation of Trade Unions (FNV), the PvdA also made sure that the 2013 labour protests against the austerity measures of the government did not get out of control.

While social spending decreases, spending on the military and security apparatus is rising. The budget for the police force and judiciary has increased by €700 million in the last two years. By the year 2020, the defence budget will climb by €1 billion. Dutch troops are participating in the US-led war in Syria, supposedly training Iraqi and Kurdish forces to fight ISIS, and alongside German troops in their mission in Mali.

The building up of the Dutch state apparatus goes hand-in-hand with sharp attacks on democratic rights, above all those of refugees and immigrants. As early as 2010, the once-liberal asylum laws were severely tightened. The human rights organization Human Rights Watch has since called them the strictest in the EU.

Asylum seekers receive only minimal provisions, commonly referred to as “bed, bath and bread.” Rejected refugees are given 28 days to leave the country. Even if deportation is impossible for legal reasons, the refugees no longer have the right to support from the state and are condemned to homelessness.

The wearing of burqas and niqabs is banned in state buildings, on public transportation, in hospitals and schools, although there are only 100 Muslim women in the Netherlands who wear veils covering their faces. In its latest annual report, Amnesty International criticized the fact that in the future the Dutch police and secret service will be allowed to carry out far-reaching surveillance measures while alleged “terror threats” are robbed of their rights.

The Dutch government confronts the population with open hostility and arrogance. When the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine was rejected last year in a referendum, Rutte flouted the decision and ratified the agreement anyway.

To open the election campaign, Rutte imitated Wilders' xenophobic tirades. On January 23, he published an open letter in the seven largest daily papers in the country, calling on

immigrants to adapt to “Dutch norms and values.” The prime minister said, “We feel ill at ease when people abuse our freedom to disturb the country though they came here because of this freedom.” He threatened: “Conduct yourselves in a normal manner or go.”

PvdA leader Asscher has adopted the same course. He calls for stricter regulations on immigration, a defence of Dutch “identity” and “progressive patriotism.”

Rutte and Asscher are playing directly into the hands of Wilders' anti-immigrant agitation. Prior to 2005, Wilders was a member of the VVD faction in parliament and was considered Rutte's mentor. He broke with the VVD over the question of Turkey's entry into the EU and launched the extreme right PVV.

Three weeks prior to the election, Wilders' PVV is neck and neck with Rutte's VVD in the polls. Both parties would each have 23 to 28 seats in the 150-seat parliament.

The PvdA is threatened with a plunge from 38 to less than 10 seats. Their share of the vote in the polls has dwindled from 25.3 percent to 8 percent.

The Socialist Party (SP), which was founded in 1971 as a Maoist organization (the Communist Party of the Netherlands/Marxist-Leninist), has proven itself unable to profit from the collapse of the PvdA. After winning 25 seats in 2010 and 15 seats in 2012, it is now predicted to get only 11 to 13 seats despite the social crisis.

The SP, “socialist” in name only, advances a strictly nationalist programme and attempts to cover it up with hollow promises of reform. Their lead candidate Emile Roemer is in agreement with the law-and-order campaign of the other parties and calls for an increase in police personnel and equipment.

In addition to Wilders' PVV, the CDA, the GreenLeft and the left-liberal Democrats 66 are expected to gain support. Each is counting on receiving around 11 percent of the vote, or 15 to 16 seats. The final election result, however, is far from certain. I&O Research reports that 77 percent of voters are still undecided.

Because no party is likely to achieve a majority of seats, the SP now speculates that it could build a coalition with the social democrats and GreenLeft. The SP is open to any coalition, according to its leader Roemer, “except with Wilders and Rutte.”

Rutte has also excluded the possibility of a coalition with Wilders, but according to polls, more than three-quarters of voters expect him to break his promise.



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