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Netherlands

The Netherlands: a further shift to the right

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As expected, the Dutch elections of 15 March showed a shift to the right – but in a somewhat different way than foreseen. The fear that the far-right PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid, Party for Freedom) of Geert Wilders would become the largest party did not become reality. Wilders won 5 more seats, growing from 15 to 20 out of 150 seats. The right-wing VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) of incumbent prime-minister Mark Rutte lost 8 seats but with 33 seats remained the largest party.

The most remarkable development was the implosion of the center-left PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid, Labour Party) from 38 to 9 seats. This loss was larger than expected; the party broke its own 2002-record and suffered the largest electoral loss in Dutch political history. But that the PvdA would lose badly was foreseen. In the elections of 2012 the party had tacked left to stave of a left-wing challenge from the SP (Socialistische Partij) but afterwards chose to form a government coalition with the VVD and for four years implemented right-wing policies. That the Labour Party would be punished for this was to be expected and this is nothing to mourn.

More worrying is that the rest of the left has not profited from the implosion of the PvdA. Many former PvdA-voters instead went to rightwing parties or did not vote at all. The right-wing as a whole gained new seats.

For many progressives the news of the growth of GroenLinks (GreenLeft, GL) from 4 to 14 seats was a spark of light. Polls indicate a quarter of the disappointed PvdA-voters chose GL this time. GL had a campaign that was not only attractive in its style (gutsy and optimistic) but also put forward political points such as climate change, anti-racism and in general a rejection of the nationalism that has come to dominate Dutch politics.

GL was organized in the nineties as a fusion of different left-wing parties, among them the Communist Party. The party moved to the political center and after the turn of the century embraced a self-described 'progressive liberal' course. In 2012, GL supported a right wing coalition, enabling it to implement austerity measures and neoliberal reforms such as raising the retirement-age as well as the sending of Dutch police to Afghanistan. This orientation was punished in the following elections, which saw the party lose heavily, and since then GL has again adopted a leftist profile. But the party has not clearly said goodbye to the earlier orientation and during the elections, its leader Jesse Klaver attacked from the right people like Yanis Varoufakis and Jeremy Corbyn. He also didn't rule out the possibility of a coalition with the right.

It is disappointing that SP lost a seat, going from 15 to 14. This was the third election in a row that the SP lost votes in national elections. This time, the loss was especially severe because the PvdA, for many years the most important rival of the SP, lost dozens of seats as well. For over a decade and a half, the SP's strategy was aimed at capturing the base of the PvdA, but this strategy failed in the last elections. Politically, GL is considered to be in between PvdA and SP. It managed to attract many disappointed PvdA-voters with a campaign that had a relatively left-wing profile, so it is not very convincing to say the SP is simply too much to the left for these voters. Instead, GL appealed to them with themes that are neglected by the SP.

New parties and issues

One of these themes was racism. Correctly or not, GL has an image as the party of anti-racism and there is no doubt

this was part of their appeal, not only for disappointed PvdA-voters, but also for many young people who voted for them. The SP-campaign had tried to make healthcare, already for years an issue on which the party has a strong profile, a central issue in the elections but failed to do this and the party was unable to grow. The SP not only neglected anti-racism, but prominent SP-figures even went along with anti-immigration sentiments. One SP-parliamentarian declared the SP was in favor of 'our own workers first'. Such statements cost the party votes.

Another issue was ecology. Another leftist party that grew in the elections was the Partij voor de Dieren (Party for the Animals, PvdD). Founded in 2002, they started out as a single-issue party opposing cruelty to animals and the treatment of animals in agro-business. It has developed into an ecologist party. It grew from 2 to 5 seats, another example of a party with an idealist, and especially ecological profile, attracting new voters. A weak point of this party is that outside the parliament, it hardly exists and only plays a very limited role in (ecological) movements. In addition, although it is considered more radical than GL, this party as well does not link its ecological demands to social struggles or to the contestation of capital.

These elections also saw an unusually high number of new parties participating. One of them is Artikel 1, named after the first article in the Dutch constitution, which declares that everybody deserves equal treatment. Anti-racism, feminism and opposition to the discrimination of LGBTIQ people are the central issues of this party. Artikel 1 is also remarkable for the prominent role of people of color and women in it. Its head of the elections list and spokesperson, Sylvana Simmons, is a Black Surinamese-Dutch woman known for her anti-racist activism.

However, this party was organized only shortly before the elections and was unable to win a seat. This was disappointing for many people who see the need for its principled anti-racist positions, but not unexpected. Considering it only had a short time to prepare, the 0.3 per cent of the vote it took seems to indicate there is a potential for future growth.

Another new party is Denk; Dutch for 'Think'. This party was founded by two former PvdA-parliamentarians of Turkish descent and won three seats. This party combines a center-left social-economic program with opposition to Islamophobia. Simmons was associated with Denk, but left it, saying there was not enough room in the party for feminism and LGBTIQ issues. The party is often attacked in the Netherlands as a puppet of Turkish president Erdogan and supposed softness on Islamic fundamentalism. Clearly, many of these attacks are motivated by racism and Islamophobia, even though it is true the party is equivocating on issues such as the growing authoritarianism in Turkey and the Armenian genocide. Denk in particular attracted voters of Turkish descent who formerly supported the PvdA.

Gains for the right

Another clear winner of the elections is a party named D66, growing from 12 to 19 seats. This party is sometimes considered 'progressive' but is a strong supporter of neoliberal economic policies. However, it combines this with liberal feminism and anti-racist rhetoric. Like GL, the party attracted many who feel it can oppose the far-right.

The far-right did not do as well as was expected, but still made progress. The PVV increased its seats by a third, taking votes from the center-right VVD but also from the PvdA. Elections were a disappointment for Wilders only compared to the extremely high expectations created by the polls and it is far too early to conclude that the rise of the far-right has come to an end. In addition, a new far-right party, Forum voor Democratie, entered the parliament with two seats. This party's leader, Thierry Baudet, cultivates a respectable, intellectual image but he represents a sexist and racist current that is at least as far to the right as Wilders.

Not only did the far-right bloc in parliament grow, but two of the traditional center-right parties, the VVD and the Christian-democratic CDA, ran campaigns that were heavily based on nationalism, Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments. This is a dynamic that can be missed if the analysis only focuses on numbers of seats or on who forms the government coalition. Wilders' PVV was for the CDA and VVD the standard against which they measured themselves, and both tried to win over PVV-voters by presenting themselves as the 'respectable' version of Wilders' anti-immigration and Islamophobic agenda. Without being part of the government, the PVV is still one of the country's most influential parties. The diplomatic conflict VVD-Prime Minister Mark Rutte provoked with Turkey was a successful attempt to win over potential PVV-voters by posing as a strong Western leader opposing a Muslim country.

A reorganized center

For decades, the Dutch political center was based on three large parties; the PvdA, CDA and VVD. One of the traditional pillars of this center has now collapsed, and CDA and VVD are not as large as the political mainstream parties used to be. For 15 years, the political center has been under pressure from the left, by the SP, and from the right by the PVV and its predecessors. Because of the political system in the country (nationwide proportional representation) coalitions are necessary to form a government. However, the relative decline of support for the center-parties and the rise of new parties make this system unstable. The previous cabinet was the first since the turn of the century that completed its term.

The election results show the political center in the country is being reorganized. The center-right parties CDA and VVD have reinvented themselves by taking over elements from the far-right.

Forming a new coalition in this fragmented landscape will be difficult, at least four different parties are needed to form a majority coalition. Whatever its exact composition, the new government of the Netherlands will be rightwing. It will give more power to big corporations, social inequality and precarity will grow. This will be combined with anti-refugee and anti-immigrant policies and a continuation of the existing Islamophobic and nationalist political climate. This means, among other things, discrimination in the job market, police violence against people of color and other forms of social exclusion of minorities. The right and far-right will continue to benefit from this dynamic.

Despite the progress of some of them, none of the leftist parties have an adequate answer to this situation. The SP thinks that racism can be ignored, or even gives in to it. GroenLinks has not convincingly renounced its previous economic liberalism. It also lacks the social roots and links with trade-unionists that the SP has.

Given the decline of the parliamentary left, social struggles will become even more important. That there is potential for such movements has been shown in the last months, in mobilizations around climate change, racism, and TTIP. The Women's March in Amsterdam of March 11 was one of the largest demonstrations in recent years, with over 15,000 people. Combined with the building of such movements, the Dutch left urgently needs a process of collective discussion and political clarification.