

Netherlands: Racist Geert Wilders increases his vote in municipal elections

By Dietmar Henning
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Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV) have strengthened their position following last Wednesday's municipal elections in the Netherlands. Polling 21.6 percent in Amsterdam's satellite town of Almere, the PVV emerged the strongest party. It took second place after the social democratic Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) in The Hague. It was only in these two conurbations that the PVV stood candidates.

Wilders founded the PVV in 2006, to some extent continuing the tradition of the murdered right-wing populist, Pim Fortuyn. Like Theo van Gogh, the film director assassinated in 2004, Wilders originally came to prominence in connection with an anti-Islamic film. Appearing under the Arabic title of "Fitna", a word literally translated as "quarrel" or "disagreement", the film insinuates that the Koran leads readers directly into terrorism. It is so provocative that Wilders is to face trial for inciting the public to violence.

During the recent election campaign, Wilders combined hostile attacks against Islamic refugees with promises to defend social gains and the rights of homosexuals. 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 stirs up hatred against "the Islamisation of the country" and "the criminal scum: terrorists from Morocco and the Antilles". Appearing at an election campaign meeting in Almere, he demanded that this "obstinate nuisance" should be forced into containers and set outside the city limits.

Wilders combines these racist outbursts with attacks on the government's social policies, particularly those of the social democrats, and demands a withdrawal of Dutch troops from Afghanistan. He describes Jan Peter Balkenende's government—a coalition of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), the social democratic Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) and the small Christian Union (CU)—as "a cabinet of high taxation and high bonuses for bankers". He rejects its plan to raise the age of retirement from 65 to 67 and calls for a reduction in taxation and public facility charges.

The municipal ballots were generally seen as a test run for the parliamentary elections, brought forward to June 9. These were scheduled, after the governing coalition collapsed over the question of the Dutch military deployment in Afghanistan. Immediately following announcement of the municipal election results, Wilders claimed a post in the next government's ministry with the words: "Today Almere and The Hague, tomorrow the whole of the Netherlands".

At a press conference, Prime Minister Balkenende (CDA) refrained from ruling out an alliance with the racist politician in principle. A wide section of the media also regards Wilders' participation in government as possible and even desirable. Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper claims that Wilders should be "incorporated" into the next government so that he can be "robbed of his magic". And it insists on this although, as the paper admits, he has "hardly anything to offer apart from hatred towards Islam".

It should here be noted that Wilders' election success is by no means as

impressive as the media contends. Even in the party's stronghold of Almere, only every eighth voter balloted for the PVV in a turnout of 56 percent. It is also highly questionable whether this result can be attributed to the whole country. The PVV received as much as 27 percent of the vote in the European election of 2009. However, voter participation at that time was only 30 percent.

Almere is typical of towns surrounding major cities. In the mid-1970s, the first wave of Amsterdam residents were resettled on land reclaimed from the sea. The town has grown faster than any other in the Netherlands to a population of almost 190,000 inhabitants. In 20 years' time, some 350,000 people will be living there. The residents come from 140 different countries, but the proportion of inhabitants with a recent migration background is smaller than in other towns. On the other hand, the poverty rate is higher than in many other places. About 15 percent of the inhabitants live at a subsistence level and are dependent on food support. In respect to the need for debt management counselling, the town ranks third in the Netherlands.

Although the crime rate is lower than elsewhere, the PVV exploits this issue to gain votes. Toon van Dijk, the PVV's second most prominent figure, had to admit that, "Relatively speaking, this is a safe town". However, he went on to write, "But we really want to keep it that way, too". Plenty of potential PVV voters live in the town. The German *Frankfurter Rundschau* national newspaper quoted the sociologist, Frits Spangenberg, as saying, "Its voters are white, male, rather deprived of academic education—but they see themselves as belonging to the middle class".

Wilders' success in the municipal elections was primarily due to two factors. Firstly, there is a deep divide between all the established political parties and the great majority of the population, which the PVV managed to penetrate by intentionally provoking fears and spouting social demagoguery. And secondly, the PVV is a media-created party, deliberately promoted and sustained by the ruling elite.

The biggest losers in the municipal election were Balkenende's CDA and the social democratic PvdA, as well as the Socialist Party (SP), which ran as a "left" alternative to the PvdA in the last election.

If the results of the municipal ballots were to be reflected in the coming parliamentary elections, the CDA would remain the strongest party, but it would retain only 29 of its 41 seats among the 150 members of parliament. The PvdA would decline from 33 to 27 seats. Wilders' PVV with 24 seats would be the third strongest party. At present it has only 9 deputies in parliament.

The right-wing liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)—which has for years combined with the CDA to form governments, and from which Geert Wilders originally emerged—would remain unchanged with 21 seats to be the fourth most powerful body. The Socialist Party, currently with 25 seats, the third strongest force, would have only 11 seats.

The losses incurred by the CDA and PvdA are the direct result of their

right-wing policies—social cutbacks for the wide population at a time of tax reductions for the wealthy and big business, anti-immigrant policies, and the Dutch army’s Afghanistan operation.

Participation in the Afghanistan war is extremely unpopular with the Dutch people. The majority are in favour of an immediate troop withdrawal. A study, carried out by the so-called Davids Commission, concluded that the Iraq war was illegal according to international law. Eventually, anti-war sentiment became so great that the PvdA found it was no longer able to extend the country’s Afghanistan mandate, and this in turn led to the government’s early demise.

With respect to social policy, all governments—regardless of whether they were led by conservatives or social democrats—have for decades tried to dismantle the welfare state with drastic cuts in expenditure. Since the 1980s, the so-called “Polder Model” led to savage attacks on the living standard of the working class. Public expenditure has been reduced step by step by governments in close cooperation with trade unions, wages have been frozen and jobs destroyed. In this year alone, €90 million are to be saved in education and the health system.

On the other hand, an orgy of self-enrichment has taken place at the top of society. Large companies and the wealthy pay hardly any taxes, while ever higher bonuses are dished out to business managers. Social inequality is continually increasing. In the wake of the international economic crisis, the CDA/PvdA coalition has also presented banks with lavish gifts amounting to billions of euro.

In the last parliamentary election, it was primarily the Socialist Party that profited from the population’s discontent. Having emerged from an insignificant Maoist grouping, it won support in the mid and late 1990s, owing to its verbal opposition to the attacks on social expenditure. It became a melting pot for all kinds of petty bourgeois organisations and individuals: religious do-gooders, trade unionists, feminists, members of Attac (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), ex-radicals, etc. In the parliamentary elections of 2006, it was able to increase its votes threefold and win 25 seats.

But the Socialist Party has no answer to the crisis. It rejects an independent mobilisation of the working class and sees itself first and foremost as a “left-wing” fig leaf for the trade unions and the PvdA/CDA government. The sharper the polarisation of society becomes, the readier it is to snuggle up to the government. The formation of coalitions, not only with the PvdA but also with the CDA, is candidly discussed within the SP. Agnes Kant, head of the SP parliamentary faction, said that no party, including Wilders’, should be ruled out a priori from such considerations.

Nationalism was from the very beginning a central component of this formerly Maoist party. In its 1989 document entitled “Guest workers and capital”, the SP declared that “guest workers” must integrate themselves into Dutch society and culture. It demanded that they should “make a worthy contribution to the struggle to be led by the working class against the capitalist system”, and anyone not ready to do this should leave the country.

When the government stirred up a pogrom atmosphere against Muslims after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and after the murder of Pim Fortuyn, the SP introduced a bill into parliament, obliging Islamic spiritual leaders to complete a course in integration into the Netherlands’ culture. Otherwise, they were to lose their legal residence status.

In other words, the SP adopted the position of the political establishment in relation to social, military and immigrant policy. This is why it has now been punished in the municipal elections. It lost its election support just as fast as it had won it.

Besides Wilders’ party, also able to profit from the elections was the small “progressive” Democratic 66 (D66), a party that had directed its election campaign against Wilders and the PVV. If it can reproduce its municipal election result in the parliamentary elections, it will increase its

seats fivefold from 3 to 15.

Wilders’ party is largely a creation of the media. It is expressly supported by sections of the establishment. It has no members. Geert Wilders determines the policies and candidates, and organises public relations by himself. The Dutch News website writes, “Its only purpose is to serve as a platform for Geert Wilders and his trademark—anti-Islamic, populist nationalism”. Exclusive focus on the person of Wilders is undertaken to prevent the extreme populist, racist organisation from breaking apart, as happened with the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) party. The state allows Wilders’ political activities to continue at its own financial expense. He lives in a secret location and is protected by the police around the clock.

The xenophobic and anti-Islamic atmosphere Wilders relies on is also deliberately fanned by leading political circles. The CDA and PvdA have long traded in racism and xenophobia in order to absorb and safely channel social tensions. In 2002, Balkenende accepted into government the Pim Fortuyn List, which—like the PVV—incited hatred against the Islamisation of the Netherlands and “criminals” from North Africa and the Caribbean Islands.

The LPF soon collapsed in a dispute about party and government posts, but the result was a sharp move to the right by the whole political landscape. In the parliamentary elections of 2004, Wouter Bos of the social democratic PvdA called for a hard line against immigrants who were unwilling to adapt to Netherlands society. He urged that whoever failed the obligatory language course should be punished, for example, with a cut in social benefits.

Since then, asylum seekers have been accepted into the country only if they can provide €6,600 for a language and integration course. Their right to be accompanied by wives and family members has also been greatly restricted. The deportation of immigrants is carried out by specially constituted divisions of the military.

Pim Fortuyn was a member of the CDA for a long time, and later of the right-wing liberal VVD, before establishing his own party. Similarly, Wilders belonged to the VVD for many years, until he founded his own party in 2006.

Wilders’ election success in Almere is the result of a carefully devised plan, executed by Wilders himself, other political parties and the media. The idea was to initiate a new trend towards right-wing politics. Wilders has said that the victory in Almere was the “springboard to success”, and he wants to become the strongest political force in the parliamentary elections on June 9.

Workers and youth in the Netherlands should take warning. The ruling class is grooming Wilders and his PVV in order to fill the political vacuum that has developed in recent years, and to enforce violent attacks on the whole of the working class.

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