The Netherlands: A Political Snapshot

Allie Zuliani

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The government of Netherlands has been run by Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the VVD party since 2010 (*Netherlands Country Profile,* 2018, 8). Rutte’s party, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy, caters mainly to the business class of the Netherlands and they are considered ideologically center-right. His power has been challenged with each passing election however, and many analysts predicted a sure defeat of Rutte in the most recent 2017 elections as the far right party, the PVV, has been gaining traction. From Trump in America, to Brexit in the UK, many thought that a populist victory for the anti-Islam, anti-immigration PVV party run by Geert Wilders was inevitable. Wilder’s however, did not emerge victorious and so Rutte set out for the third time to negotiate a coalition and claim the position of Prime Minister. Talks lasted a record 225 days as the GreenLeft party lead by Jesse Klaver held them up, his views differing with the VVD gretaly on issues like climate change and immigration. The GreenLeft is center-left ideologically, economically socialist, and anti-capitalism (*Netherlands Country Profile,* 2018, para. 8). The party made record gains in the 2017 election going from just four seats to 14 *(A split over refugees has left the Dutch with no government,* 2017, para. 3).

 The mood in the Netherlands has been shifting, as it has in many other developed nations worldwide. Just as the Netherlands seemed to be falling into a political era dominated by far right leaders, a swift change enveloped the country and parties arguing for very liberal, even socialist beliefs seemed to be gaining the most traction. Similar to the rise of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US, Jesse Klaver has taken the Netherlands by storm and the political pendulum appears to be swinging in his favor. The politics of the Netherlands are becoming more intensified and concentrated at the two extreme ends of the political spectrum as the GreenLeft made record gains in the lower house and the Forum for Democracy (FvD), a far right party, has won big in the provincial elections at the end of March, which inadvertently determine the makeup of the upper house (Schaart, 2019, 2).

The FvD is a fresh new party lead by radical right leader Thierry Baudet who burst onto the scene, some say to replace former conservative poster boy Geert Wilders and his PVV party (Schaart, 2019, para. 2). Baudet aligns with many of Wilders stances like anti-immigration and Euro-Skepticism. Baudet himself has made statements doubting climate change exists as well as some wildly sexist statements. Baudet is different from Wilders in both presentation and demeanor. Wilders made his reputation on an anti-elitist platform, much like Donald Trump, trying to appeal to the everyday working man. Baudet however is a scholar, an academic, arguably the kind of elite that Wilders is rallying against (Schaart, 2019, para. 14). Baudet is less anti-Islam than Wilders, but his anti-immigration stance is fierce. He blamed the recent Utrecht terror attack in which three people died and seven were injured, on the immigration policies of the Netherlands. This claim was stunning to all the other established parties as they ceased campaigning in response to the attack (Schaart, 2019, para. 9).

The main political discussion in the Netherlands currently centers around in the issue of immigration, as seems to be the trend for much a the wealthy world. Even in 2006, “37% of Dutch voters identified ethnic minorities as the biggest national problem in the Netherlands” (Awad, 2012, 169). To put it into even greater context the debate centers around two terms. One being multiculturalism, which essentially allows immigrants to retain their culture, and the other being integration, which typically references calls for immigrants to assimilate into Dutch culture and lose their old culture completely (Awad, 2012, 170). From a modern American standpoint the idea of integration may seem shocking and racially charged, however, this is simply a part of Dutch way of thinking.

Thierry Baudet of the FvD spoke recently on immigration saying, “Successive Rutte governments have left our borders wide open, letting in hundreds of thousands of people with cultures completely different to ours” (Henley, 2019, para. 10). This comment combined with his earlier ones regarding the Utrecht shooting clearly demonstrate his platform and desire for a homogeneous Dutch culture free from any divergent lifestyles. The equally conservative PVV party and the VVD, party of PM Mark Rutte, align similarly on their views regarding immigration. While the PVV puts it more harshly, they both generally agree that taking in refugees is a poor decision for the Netherlands and specifically the VVD has concerns with differentiating them from “economic migrants” (MigrationVoter, 2017, para. 3). They believe the focus should be on stabilizing the regions that refugees originate from rather than creating a safe haven for them in Europe. Both parties strongly believe in the assimilation and integration of immigrants quickly into Dutch society.

While this anti-immigrant sentiment against non-natives exist within the culture, studies have shown that immigrants who identify as Dutch, most likely meaning they feel more accepted into the community, are more apt to participate economically and be employed (de Vroome, 2011, 629) . Having more relationships with native Dutch has also shown to cause immigrants to be more likely to identify as Dutch (de Vroome, 2017, 629). The far more liberal GreenLeft party disagrees with closing borders and stands strongly in favor of multiculturalism (MigrationVoter, 2017, para. 10). As far as refugees are concerned the GreenLeft believes they have a duty to provide people with protection and want to work towards an effective immigration policy.

The Dutch welfare state is another policy area that is always up for debate in the Netherlands. It was once one of the most generous systems in the world being built up greatly in the 1960’s and 1970’s. King Willem-Alexander stated in 2013 that the current system will be shifting towards a "participation society" because the existing criteria "are unsustainable in their current form.” (*Dutch King Willem-Alexander declares the end of the welfare state*, 2013, para. 2). The King has no real legislating power in the Dutch government and many believe it was Prime Minister Rutte’s hope that the popular royal family would make the news go over more smoothly (*Dutch King Willem-Alexander declares the end of the welfare state*, 2013, para. 5). More recently however, far right parties in the Netherlands and across Europe have preached “promises of lower taxes, state welfare protections and generally a return to the good old days” (O’Leary, 2017, para. 8). This language sounds eerily similar to statements heard in the 2016 American presidential election by now President Donald Trump. The overall feeling by far right wing parties on the state of welfare appears to be big promises but lower taxes at the same time - two ideas which appear to be incompatible with one another.

The political culture of the Netherlands is shifting to be hyperpolarized as Jesse Klaver and the GreenLeft face off against not only one ultra conservative party, but two. Both Geert Wilders of the PVV and Thierry Baudet of the FvD have major followings and are certainly keeping much of the political conversation centered on anti-Islam and anti-immigration rhetoric. Prime Minister Rutte’s coalition is as fragile as ever as he begins a third term as PM. He holds the majority by a single seat in the lower house and has just lost it in the upper house to the PVV. The phrase “populism will not win” which has been touted by Klaver remains a popular sentiment among Dutch voters however, and it is important to note his rallies drew massive crowds, more so than any of his opponents. The Dutch system is naturally setup for compromise as parties are forced to build coalitions in which they concede certain issues to one another in the spirit of making progres. This sentiment will hopefully hold up as Rutte appears to be facing an upper house of a different majority party rather than his own. Beginning in the 1990’s scholars have noted that “a Dutch political culture of consensus, compromise and mutual accommodation became a frame for conflicts over multicultural society” (Dudink, 2016, 1). This sentiment of consensus and compromise can hopefully be maintained in this new era of extreme views on becoming the new normal, not just in the Netherlands but worldwide.

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