

« Dutch politics: a three-dimensional Sudoku »

Par Arjen Berkvens*

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The elections in The Netherlands which took place on June 9th. have again drastically changed the political landscape. The results are a dramatic 50% loss of the Christian democrats (CDA), an unexpectedly big win (15,5%) of the anti-Islamic Party For Freedom (PVV) and a nerve wrecking neck to neck race between the Liberal VVD (20,5%) and the Social democratic PvdA (19,6%), resulting in a small (one seat) victory for the VVD. There are no mass peoples parties anymore in The Netherlands and the next government will be very difficult to form.

Traditionally The Netherlands has always been a coalition country where it takes at least three to four months to form a government. With amazement and respect the Dutch politicians took notice of the formation of the British government, which took less than a week. The Liberal VVD leader Mark Rutte, who most probably will become the next Prime Minister, even made it an issue in the election campaign and promised to form a government before July the first. This most definitely will be an illusion.

The issues during the campaign were all of an economic and financial nature, while in the past years cultural and religious issues like immigration and the role of Islam seem to be more important. In the months before the elections the Dutch Central Planning Bureau (CPB) stated that in the coming years the state budget has to be decreased with approximately 30 billion Euros. This figure was accepted by all the political parties and as a result the programmes of the parties all dealt with ways to cut down the budget and the pace (4 to 8 years) to do it. Obviously the rightwing parties want to do it quickly with an emphasis on cutting down welfare (especially unemployment benefits), privatising parts of the healthcare system and cutting down international development aid. The left wing parties are more careful and want to take more time. They were opposing the ideas to cut down welfare and were in favour of cutting down military expenditure and especially the system of tax reductions for the interest on mortgages, which favours the richest estate owners in The Netherlands.

The anti-Islamic PVV adopted a programme which is very tough on crime, wants to stop immigration from Muslim countries, abolish international development aid, cut down subsidies on culture and decrease the contribution to the EU. Besides these issues the social-economic programme of the PVV is of a rather leftwing nature; against raising the pensioners age from 65 to 67 (which has the support from almost all the parties including the PvdA), investing in healthcare for the elderly and against cutting unemployment benefits. The mixture of rightwing and leftwing issues proofed to be a winning combination in the end.

The social democratic PvdA lost three seats. This was perceived by the party as a relief given the fact that just before the government collapsed (February 20th.) over the refusal of the PvdA to accept a new Dutch military mission in the Uruzgan province of Afghanistan, the party was at an all-time low of 15 seats in the polls. Still there was also disappointment, because of the high

hopes for the new PvdA leader. Job Cohen, former Amsterdam mayor, surprisingly took over from Wouter Bos on March 12th. After he announced his candidacy for the social democratic leadership, the PvdA surged in the polls. His Obama-like reputation of a person being able to bring back decency in Dutch society, to connect the different groups and to oppose the radical right, made him the absolute favourite for becoming the next Prime Minister. The PvdA failed to recognize this phenomenon and due to 10 days of making mistakes (miscalculations in the financial plans and bad media performances) in the campaign the PvdA missed a chance to win the elections.

Now the question remains which coalition is likely to govern the lowlands? The first attempt to form a government with the Christian democratic CDA, Liberal VVD and anti-Islamic PVV, failed because CDA refused to come to the negotiation table. Now a second attempt is on its way to form a government with PvdA, VVD, the greens and the social Liberals (D66.) Given the enormous programmatic differences between these parties this attempt is also likely to fail. A third possibility is CDA, PvdA and VVD, although this will put the Social democrats in an impossible position to accept harsh social policy reforms. The whole process might take months and The Netherlands might end up with a CDA, VVD minority government supported by the PVV. This so-called Danish option has been mentioned a lot and might prevail in the end. The question will be then at what price the anti-Islamic PVV will allow this to happen.

* Arjen Berkvens est directeur de la fondation Alfred Mozer (Pays-Bas) et coordinateur du réseau de fondations politiques ENoP.