

Europe's anti-immigration far right tested in Dutch polls

Mahmud el-Shafey

London

In what has been dubbed a “super election year” for Europe ahead of key votes in France and Germany, the Dutch head to the polls on March 15th following a campaign that has been heavy on anti-immigration, specifically anti-Muslim rhetoric.

A contentious campaign has seen Dutch far-right, anti-Muslim leader Geert Wilders pledge to de-Islamise The Netherlands by shutting all mosques, banning the Quran and halting immigration from majority Muslim countries. Wilders, who leads Holland's Party for Freedom and Democracy (PVV), kicked off his campaign by labelling Moroccan immigrants as “scum” and questions over Islam's place in Dutch society have dominated the campaign.

“They say Islam isn't normal. It doesn't belong in Dutch society and that being *hijabi* means I am an oppressed person,” Dutch Moroccan Hafsa Mahraoui told the BBC.

“It's tiring because we are always in the spotlight and you have to defend yourself. Amsterdam is a big city, there are 180 nationalities here. They talk about a (Dutch) culture but when I look around I don't see it,” she said.

Wilders' anti-Muslim rhetoric had found strong support in the early stages of campaigning and he was consistently polling as the front runner. However Prime Minister Mark Rutte managed to pull off a comeback by pivoting to the right and playing up his experience in government.

“What I sense is that people are

coming back to my party... At the moment in the Netherlands we are experiencing a revival of our economy, our housing market, people are finding jobs again. This is all good news,” Rutte said in an interview with Bloomberg Television.

Rutte, who leads the centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), wrote a controversial open letter in late January calling on immigrants to “act normal or go away”.

“People who don't want to adapt, [who are] attacking our habits and rejecting our values, who attack gay people, who shout at women in short skirts or call ordinary Dutch people racist... you have the choice, go away. You do not need to be here,” he said.

Wilders took to Twitter, where he has been increasingly active during the campaign, to slam Rutte's letter as disingenuous. “Mark Rutte, the man of the open borders, asylum tsunami, mass immigration, Islamisation, the lies and deceit,” he tweeted.

Holland's Muslim population is estimated at between 840,000-960,000 – about 5% of the country's population. Holland has well-established Turkish and Moroccan ethnic communities dating to the 1960s and 1970s.

There was no clear front runner in the final week of campaigning as analysts said a number of parties had a chance of coming in first, including Rutte's VVD and Wilders' PVV.

General elections in Holland take place via party-list proportional representations meaning that no party can expect to win an outright majority and so any government must govern by coalition. Twenty-eight



Fading out? Firebrand anti-Islam lawmaker Geert Wilders (L) and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte visit De Telegraaf newspaper in Amsterdam, Netherlands, on March 5th. (AP)

parties are set to contest the elections and as many as 14 could enter Holland's 150-seat parliament, meaning a ruling coalition could comprise as many as five parties.

Even if the ruling VVD does see its parliamentary share fall from its current 40 seats, and the PVV makes gains on its 12 seats, Wilders' hard-line anti-Islamic rhetoric has turned off potential coalition partners. Virtually all of Holland's mainstream political parties have said they would not enter into a coalition with Wilders' PVV.

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During a televised debate, Rutte said that “under no condition, irrespective of the outcome” would the VVD ally with the PVV. Wilders was a coalition partner in Rutte's 2010 government but withdrew his support over EU requirements regarding Holland's national deficit. Early elections in 2012 saw Rutte

retain the premiership with an even stronger coalition, not including the PVV, which lost nine seats.

However, at a time when crime and unemployment are down and the economy is going strong, many question why such strong anti-immigration sentiment is being evidenced in a country traditionally known for its liberal and tolerant outlook.

Hundreds of Dutch citizens met at an Amsterdam mosque in a show of solidarity with the country's Muslim population as news spread that crimes against Muslims have increased.

“It's very important that we make our voice heard. We as a Muslim community pose no danger whatsoever to society,” said Najem Ouladali, one of the meeting's organisers.

“Good news: Dutch #TrumpWannabe Wilders is losing support for his hate and fearmongering. People see where it leads,” tweeted Andrew Stroehlein, European media director for Human Rights Watch.

Dutch elections could set the tone for forthcoming ones in France and Germany where similar anti-immi-

gration and anti-Muslim sentiment is governing the election scene.

Far-right Marine Le Pen is expected to win the first round of French elections, scheduled for April 23rd, but not be able to secure an outright victory necessitating a run-off scheduled for May 7th.

The right-wing Alternative for Germany party is looking to unseat German Chancellor Angela Merkel in September. Facing major criticisms over her refugee policy, Merkel has pivoted to the right in a bid to make up ground against populist right-wing views.

Regardless of the outcome of the Dutch elections, few can deny Wilders' influence on the political climate in Holland and the general move European politics has taken to the right. Speaking in Amsterdam recently, Wilders said: “You can notice that we've basically already won the elections before they've started because everyone is moving towards us. The discussions are about our topics.”

Mahmud el-Shafey is an Arab Weekly correspondent in London.

Trump plans big cuts in US foreign aid, diplomacy

Viewpoint



Mark Habeeb

US President Donald Trump is reportedly planning massive cuts to the US foreign aid programme to free up funds for his proposed \$54 billion increase in defence spending.

Although the administration has not submitted its official budget request for the next fiscal year, sources close to the White House revealed that Trump plans a 37% reduction in funding for the US State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

For the current fiscal year, the State Department/USAID budget stands at about \$50 billion. A reduction of the size that Trump is said to be considering could not happen without staff cuts and reduced foreign aid payments.

Foreign aid never has been popular with the American public, except during humanitarian crises such as the Asia tsunami of 2004 or the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Tapping into growing populist trends, Trump campaigned on a theme of “America First”, opposing deep international engagement and pledging to make the immediate interests of the United States his priority.

Trump has uttered no more than a few words about foreign

economic assistance and his transition team did not visit USAID, leading observers to wonder whether the agency is on Trump's radar screen. Senior USAID officials who were appointed by former president Barack Obama left their jobs by January 20th without having an opportunity to brief the new administration.

USAID manages more than \$20 billion in development and economic aid projects and maintains more than 60 offices abroad. A substantial portion of US economic aid is allocated for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The State Department said that in fiscal year 2015 the United States budgeted more than \$1.6 billion in economic and development aid to MENA entities, including \$360 million to Jordan, \$370 million to the West Bank and Gaza and \$200 million to Egypt. Another \$367 million was allocated for region-wide development initiatives.

Various MENA countries also benefited from global USAID programmes supporting public health, education, agriculture, family planning, women's issues and water security.

Despite the unpopularity of foreign aid among the public, USAID has impressive bipartisan support. President George W. Bush dramatically increased US assistance to fight HIV and AIDS in Africa – an initiative that was widely lauded and has proven successful.

Indeed, pushback against large

cuts to foreign aid and diplomacy has started. US Senator Lindsay Graham, R-South Carolina, said a proposal for such reductions would be “dead on arrival” in Congress.

Even Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, said he doubted cuts of such magnitude would be accepted by Congress, which has the final word on government spending (the president's annual budget is merely a recommendation). Senator Marco Rubio, R-Florida, tweeted: “Foreign aid is not charity... and is critical to our national security.”

Some, however, expressed concern that bipartisan support for economic and development aid may erode under Trump. Aid professionals in Washington said they fear he may abolish USAID, shrinking its activities and rolling them into the State Department.

Blair Glencorse, founder of a non-governmental organisation that works closely with USAID on development projects, told Devex, a platform for the global development community, that Trump's election was “deeply troubling” for the community.

“It is going to be a very, very difficult period for American development efforts around the world,” Glencorse said. “Trump has repeatedly indicated he'd rather spend on domestic infrastructure than foreign aid and has demonstrated very little knowledge of poverty reduction and governance efforts. So I think we're looking at a deeply unhappy

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aid bureaucracy and an America that moves away from aid.”

Trump's proposed cuts to foreign aid and diplomacy also signal a reduced emphasis on so-called soft power in favour of a more muscular, military-led foreign policy. Ultimately, this could reduce the influence of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who already has been sidelined from several key foreign policy initiatives by the administration.

Four prominent Democratic senators on March 8th sent a letter to Tillerson warning that “the Department of State is experiencing significant management challenges, being cut out of important administration foreign policy decisions, and facing potentially devastating budget cuts.” They added that the department's stature is being “severely eroded”, which could have consequences for US foreign policy.

Ultimately, support for maintaining a robust diplomatic and foreign aid budget could come from an unlikely source: In March 2013, US Secretary of Defense John Mattis – at the time a Marine general – testified before Congress in support of funding for the State Department. “If you don't fund the State Department fully,” Mattis said, “I will need to buy more ammunition.”

Mark Habeeb is East-West editor of The Arab Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and Security at Georgetown University in Washington.

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