

The next stage of Dutch populism?

The sentiments expressed in uprisings in the Netherlands — and fuelled by right-wing populists — strikingly resemble those from the Capitol riots

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The Netherlands is known worldwide for its ‘polder-democracy’, the deep social and political tradition of consultations with all stakeholders before policies are implemented, making opposition constructive and peaceful. So it was all the more surprising when, at the end of January 2021, riots broke out in eleven Dutch cities after the right-wing Rutte government introduced a curfew to curb high levels of Covid-19 infections in the Netherlands.

The first violence occurred in small religious communities like Urk, a traditional fisher-village in the East of the country. Due to a tight-knit community, large families, a manual-labour oriented economy with much social contact and their refusal to stop church gatherings, its population was hit hard by the pandemic. In particular young ‘Urkers’, known for less pious behaviour during weekends, set fire to the local Covid-testing facility and got into a fight with the police.

In smaller communities in the South – such as Stein, Limburg – intoxicated youngsters also found ‘Dutch courage’ and started to riot against the ‘dictatorship’. Larger cities, like Amsterdam, Eindhoven and Enschede, then followed suit. In the latter, even the local hospital was attacked and riot police had to come out in full force to enforce the curfew. How could it come to this?

Dutch populism

In recent decades, the cultural and economic fabric of Dutch ‘consensus-democracy’ has been unravelling under populist rhetoric that eroded trust in traditional institutions and authorities. Like other populists across Europe, Geert Wilders (Freedom Party, PVV) and his even more extremist populist brethren Thierry Baudet (Forum for Democracy,

FvD) argue that preventive measures like a curfew ‘go against freedom’, which was ‘ignored’ by the ‘political cartel’ of government and constructive opposition parties.

On his Twitter account, Baudet fulminated that his party would continue to oppose this ‘absurd freedom-restricting measure’. Such anti-establishment messaging resonates well with the dark coalition of conspiracy believers, anti-vaxxers and the extreme-right that was forged during the corona pandemic. This coalition peddles their disinformation on social media, creating a toxic mix of discontent and distrust that fuelled the violent protests. While the political right, and even more the extremist populists often portray themselves as the parties of ‘law and order’, they frequently and consistently undermine democratic and constitutional rules, legal authority and freedom of the press.

Meanwhile, Wilders and Baudet in particular have been sowing doubt about the seriousness of the pandemic or outright denied the deadliness of the virus circulating suggestions that ‘the statistics cannot be trusted’ and the government is deliberately destroying people’s livelihood.

While condemning the violence in Urk and elsewhere, Baudet and Wilders portrayed the entire political elite as a uniform cartel of ‘traitors of the real interests of the people’ and depicted practical and proven measures such as mask-wearing, shop closures and limits on social interaction as unacceptable restrictions on freedoms and the first step to a ‘dictatorship’. While at other times the political right shouts loudest to have the police and even army strike down protests, they now portrayed the restoration of law and order by local authorities as authoritarian.

Meanwhile, Wilders and Baudet in particular have been sowing doubt about the seriousness of the pandemic or outright denied the deadliness of the virus circulating suggestions that ‘the statistics cannot be trusted’ and the government is deliberately destroying people’s livelihood. Needless to say, the populists also blame mainstream media for ‘consciously exaggerating the seriousness of the pandemic’, just like the ‘lies they tell about the climate crisis’. The state and public broadcasters like the NOS are portrayed as ‘state propaganda machines’ rather than a free and critical press.

The Covid-19 pandemic and populist discontent

In a study on compliance with the measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, my colleagues and I found a clear pattern of political orientations with the willingness to adhere to government regulations, trust in institutions and support for the policies to alleviate economic hardship. The more a Dutch person places her- or himself to the political right, the less likely they are to comply with the measures. While also on the extreme left there is opposition, the hard-core resistance to preventive measures and policies is found on the extreme conservative (and religious) right corner of the Dutch political spectrum.

People with more extremist right-wing and conservative orientations were more likely to think that the economic impact is too detrimental to justify policies aimed at reducing infection rates. In their opposition, extremists link deep-seated economic and political dissatisfaction to resentment against the pandemic measures. A (small) part of the population does not see these measures as a protection for others, but as a further restriction of rights and taking away of freedom. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic flows seamlessly into populist discontent.

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However, a deeper-lying cause for the rise in extremism, populism and polarisation in Western societies is found in economic and social tectonic shifts. Much of the anxieties and insecurities found among broad segments of society results from a power shift to a new, more multicultural generation. These young people are more tolerant towards multicultural society with more fluid and acquired identities.

A new stage of democratic decline?

At the same time, we see older generations – with more static and ascribed identities – experiencing feelings of the loss of status and power. Moreover, they fear there is no longer a solid floor and sense a profound loss of economic security and well-being – after decades of stagnant wages and pensions, cuts in healthcare and other social services.

This ‘squeezed class’ has become mentally trapped between the fear of a further economic collapse and that social progress is no longer possible for themselves and their children. Many of them link economic

insecurity – reinforced by the pandemic – with negative attitudes towards (labour) immigrants and refugees. It is a more complex state of mind, but it all boils down to an experience of society and the distribution of wealth as unjust, which is reinforced by a small, puissant and rich upper stratum.

These lower- and middle-class anxieties are politically expressed by extremist and populist anti-system movements such as those of Trump, Wilders and Baudet, who conjure up visions of a glorious past when the ‘white’ population was economically and culturally dominant. Amplified by hysterical and deceitful social media messaging – including micro-targeting of susceptible groups – populists do not formulate actual policies or implement their ideas into practical steps towards helping their followers: their political project exists solely of a constant and ever deepening cultural war against the ‘globalists’, ‘socialists’ and ‘traitors of the real people’. Clearly, this is a recipe for a violent uprising.

While the uprising in the Netherlands contrast sharply to what happened in Washington – very few Dutch people own guns – the sentiments are strikingly similar. Importantly, the group size of hardened opponents of pandemic measures in the Netherlands is still quite small, but the mentality and mind-set that there a ‘war’ is raging and that ‘the country is going in the wrong direction’ is much more wide-spread. Once violent extreme right-wing groups get involved and start organising the angry mobs, as the one that forced its way into the American Capitol on 6 January, we will enter new stage of democratic decline.



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