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Dutch elections:

Right victorious as socialist illusions are shattered

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The right-wing, neoliberal VVD of prime-minister Mark Rutte won the parliamentary elections of 12 September. His party won 41 of 150 seats, beating the social democratic PvdA that won 38 seats. Among the losers is the christian democratic CDA - for decades the dominant party in Dutch politics, now reduced to 13 seats. The Greens lost 6 seats, falling to 4, and Geert Wilders right-wing, anti-Muslim, anti-European Union party retained only 15 of its 24 seats. The Socialist Party (SP) gained a disappointing 15 seats, the same number it already had.

The SP has its roots in Maoism but evolved into a party left of social democracy. A few weeks ago, this party seemed to be the main challenger of the incumbent prime-minister. Some polls from mid-August even gave the SP 37 seats, predicting it could become the largest party in parliament. But in the end the elections became a duel between Rutte and the new PvdA leader, Diederik Samson.

Emptying out the flanks

The VVD scored the biggest victory in its existence with its most right-wing campaign ever, a campaign that was hardly discernible in content and tone from Geert Wilders. In this way, the liberals succeeded in capturing a portion of Wilders' support.

Something similar happened on the left-end of the political spectrum. Under Samson's leadership, the PvdA adopted a left-wing profile, trying to tempt SP voters. The SP wavered and Samson won out. VVD and PvdA are now almost certainly forced to form a government together, maybe with the support of a smaller centrist party. Both parties will have major difficulties meeting their voters' expectations. This will especially be a problem for the PvdA: after all, many leftists voted PvdA in a failed attempt to prevent a new VVD-led government, not to enable one.

Socialist disillusionment

The elections were a major disappointment for the SP: its leadership had set out to win participation in government. In 2006 the party won 25 seats but was excluded from the government coalition and the leadership was determined not to let that happen again. Apart from a strong showing in the elections, this meant the party had to show it was ready to take part in government. Its election program adopted a moderate tone, and the socialists emphasized that in numerous cities and districts it took part in governing coalitions, together with the right. Their new leader, Emile Roemer, had shown as a councilor that he could cooperate effectively with the VVD in a coalition.

This approach seemed successful. In the period before the campaigns really gathered steam, the SP grew steadily in the polls. 'Rutte or Roemer', 'A liberal or a social exit from the crisis', that was the central message: 'you want to prevent a return of Rutte as prime-minister? Then vote SP.'

As could be expected, the bosses and the right viciously attacked the SP. But instead of retaliating, Roemer responded with complaints about the unfair character of the harsh attacks. When it also became known the SP had, in a rather back-handed way, withdrawn its rejection of an increase of the pension age, many potential voters turned

away in disappointment.

The approach of 'us or Rutte' didn't call for people to vote for a program but for a future prime minister and against the VVD. As the PvdA gathered more and more support, the SP's strategy backfired and with more than a week to go until the elections it became clear the elections became a fight between Samson and Rutte. For people whose priority was stopping Rutte, Samson became the logical option. The SP was more and more forced on the defensive.

The disillusionment of the SP was caused by more than a badly handled election campaign and a mistaken assessment of the possibilities. The fundamental question is what matters in left, socialist politics. The SP stands for a social exit from the crisis, for a break with neoliberalism. Such a break can not be realized by a combination of as many seats as possible plus concessions to the right to become an acceptable partner.

It was always unrealistic to think the SP had a good chance of joining the government and implementing a significant part of its program. The experience of the Danish Socialist People's Party shows to what a disaster such a strategy can lead. Their participation in a government under the social democratic prime minister Thoring-Schmidt led to a collapse of their popularity.

Of course the SP should aim to get into government. Politics is about power, power to determine policies and to implement a programme. But a serious left party also tells its supporters that this is not always possible. There are conditions that need to be met, participation in government depends on the relationship of forces. Left politics stresses the importance of changing the relationship of forces in society and the SP did this insufficiently.

Despite the recent disappointment, the SP is still one of the strongest parties left of social democracy in Europe. If it persists in its opposition to neoliberalism there is a great potential - maybe not for participating in government in the short term - but certainly for a strong movement against the neoliberal crisis management.