
DUTCH DISARRAY: RUTTE CAN'T FORGE CABINET IN NETHERLANDS

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Four-party negotiations to form a government in the Netherlands have fallen apart a second time. The main point of contention is immigration policy - which had likewise been the hottest potato in the election campaign.

Coalition negotiations generally take three months in the Netherlands, which held its most recent elections on March 15. So, nothing would be out of place if the country's four top political parties were announcing a government right about now. But talks toward that end have fallen apart a second time.

With 208 days of negotiations required to form a cabinet in 1977, the Netherlands was Europe's record holder until 2010, when Belgium blew everyone else out of the water with 541 days of talks. But nobody really missed the lack of a government in Belgium: In fact, the previous remained in office in an administrative role.

It is a diverse bunch that has showed up to the negotiating table. There's Prime Minister Mark Rutte's right-wing liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66), the center-right Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and the environmentalist GreenLeft. The VVD continues to hold the most seats, but - having returned to parliament with just a 21 percent share of the vote - is hardly dominant. D66 and CDA, whose opinions could hardly be more diverse, each won a 12 percent share, and the GreenLeft has 9 percent.

'The major difference'

The parties have found enough ground for unity that only one sticking point has emerged: immigration policy - but that issue has caused the talks to fall apart twice now. Herman Tjeenk Willink, the mediator of the most recent round of exploratory talks, said discussion ended after members of the GreenLeft refused to advance an EU plan to keep displaced people from European soil through cooperation with North African countries. He told King Willem-Alexander that a coalition of these four parties would not be possible.

During the election campaign, GreenLeft leader Jesse Klaver had also intensely criticized Prime Minister Rutte's support for the European Union's controversial refugee deal with Turkey. "That is the major difference between us Greens and the right-wing liberals," Klaver had said. "I am not proud of the fact that 90 percent fewer Syrian refugees are reaching the European Union. They have to fear for their lives in Turkey. After the Second World War, we swore to never forsake another human being again."

Rutte's response? "In your opinion, we should have tens of thousands of additional refugees here in the Netherlands. On top of that, the Dutch society can't do it. The strains are big enough." Though the exchange of verbal blows occurred ahead of the election, it could just as easily summarize how the coalition negotiations have fallen apart.

An unholy alliance?

Rutte could choose the easy way and take Geert Wilders, the leader of the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV), up on the offer he made after the first round of talks had failed. "Every other possibility presents you with the same problems, Mr. Rutte," Wilders had said in parliament. "Only with us can you push through stricter migration policies. Here are 20 deputies from my party. Just call on us. There they are, elected by 1.5 million voters. You have to finally take them seriously, Mr. Rutte. Otherwise, everything will go awry again."

Geert Wilders has offered to lend the prime minister a hand

During the exchange, Rutte reminded Wilders of the last time he had participated in the formation of the government: following the 2010 elections, when the PVV backed the prime minister's right-wing minority coalition. With the Netherlands mired in the effects of the eurozone's financial meltdown, Wilders and his cohorts abandoned ship in 2012, and that government promptly fell. "When the going gets tough, a politician can't just walk away," Rutte told Wilders in front of the parliament. "That is also a requirement for a good cabinet - and you have failed this test, Mr. Wilders. You put your party's interests above the nation's."

So, for now, Rutte will keep on negotiating - including with Klaver and the GreenLeft. Despite the differences of opinion, the atmosphere appears good. Klaver has instructed the members of his party not to say "a bad word about the others."

That has apparently been Rutte's strategy, as well. "This is what you call negotiations," he said. "We are a land of coalitions. For centuries now, we have made our name in this process. There are always big differences between parties. But this time around, there were very big differences." There are still months before Rutte approaches the Dutch record of 208 days of negotiations - and many more months than that to come close to Belgium's milestone. But that should not be Rutte's benchmark.