Whether he wins or not, Geert Wilders has successfully managed to put Islam at the centre of the Dutch elections

23/02/2017

The Netherlands will hold parliamentary elections on 15 March, with Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) currently leading in several opinion polls. **Lucien van Liere** *writes on Wilders' focus on the threat of Islam in the election, arguing that regardless of the result, the PVV has largely set the agenda of the campaign.*

It may not come as a surprise that as we inch toward the Dutch parliamentary elections on 15 March, the issues of Islam and immigration are playing a significant role in electoral programmes and debates. Extremism and radicalisation are frequently discussed in the Dutch media and more often than not these themes are related to Islam. When in September last year the ruling liberal party (VVD) began their election-campaign, Edith Schippers, Minister of Health and Welfare, talked at length about a broad "coalition of freedom against political Islam". She indicated she had noticed growing intolerance and self-censorship, for example in Dutch public schools.

From this starting point, the liberals eagerly wanted to attract voters from the political right, especially from Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV), which according to the polls has a substantial chance of becoming the country's biggest party in March. The PVV portrays itself as a two-solution party. On the one hand, it uses a discourse focused on conflict and Islam, while on the other it focuses on financial expense and the European Union. In doing so, it presents both Islam and the EU as underlying factors in almost all of the problems currently faced in Dutch society.

The PVV's popularity among the electorate is predominantly based on Wilders' Twitter-based media strategy in which he profiles himself as being strongly against the Dutch political elite, who are presented as being too blind to see the disastrous Islamisation taking place in the country. He shies away from many public debates and only rarely gives interviews. His party programme remains extremely vague: it runs to only one page, focusing above all on opposition against the destabilising forces of "Islamisation", which the party associates with violence, terror, and also mass-asylum, immigration and a lack of security.

West Mosque, Amsterdam. Credits: Guilhem Vellut (CC BY 2.0)

Be this as it may, the absence of the PVV in direct confrontation with other parties in the run for power creates a space in which themes that normally appear in the context of debates on Islam, like tolerance, discrimination, radicalisation and extremism, have become manifest at a different level without explicit reference to Islam as such. The split between what belongs to "us" and what does not, triggered by the PVV, has been adopted by the other parties, without of course taking the PVV's answer for granted.

Last month, for example, Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD) published a full-page message addressed to "all the Dutch" in leading newspapers, in which he bluntly cited a difference between what is 'normal' and belongs to Dutch society and what is not, explicitly referring to immigrants as people who are misusing freedom, and underscoring public issues on immigrant behaviour that were extensively discussed in the media (such as sexual harassment, hate speech, and refusal to shake hands with the opposite sex).

Islam is not mentioned in Rutte's message, but the debate on Islam has broadened into a debate over 'what we stand for' versus 'what is not normal'. In this sense, extremism, and undesirable behaviour are regarded as the opposite of what is considered 'normal'. By identifying these features partly but explicitly as those belonging to immigrants, Rutte describes what he understands as 'normal' and typically Dutch: a hard work ethic, tolerance and a sense of hospitality. Immigrants symbolise the opposite of this self-understanding.

In their election-programmes, the parties on the right have focused on this 'external' threat whereas left-wing parties combine this with 'inner threats' like discrimination and racism in an attempt to avoid polarisation. In the VVD's election-programme for instance, 'Islamic extremism' is mentioned twice as a threat. It is not Islam, but Islamic extremism that is the problem. The Christian-democrats (CDA) are wary of "radical Islam", which is presented as the source of terrorism. Radicalisation is the real threat in this case.

On the left, perspectives are more inclusive as parties do not mention Islam in their programme, nor do they combine Islam with extremism or radicalism, but speak more inclusively about 'diversity' and the acknowledgement of diversity. This is the approach adopted by the left liberals of D66. The social democrats (PvdA) on the other hand,

who are likely facing an enormous electoral defeat, argue that "exclusion, racism and discrimination do not belong in the Netherlands. Neither do sexual intimidation and religious extremism".

Islamic extremism and radicalism have become religious extremism. Whereas the right-wing parties still bluntly mention Islam as an alien threat to the Dutch "us", the more to the left one moves, the less specific this threat becomes. The Green Party (GroenLinks) only mentions that antisemitism and discrimination of Muslims should be prosecuted on an equal basis. From the right to the left, Islam fades slowly away from the electoral programmes but at the same time the themes evoked by public debates on Islam on the right side of the electorate remain almost intact: concerns about Islam, Islamic extremism and radical Islam are translated by the left into concerns about religious extremism, a threat to diversity and, ultimately, discrimination against Muslims.

Whatever the final result of the election may be, it appears that the PVV has set the agenda. Because Wilders stands to achieve electoral success, other parties have felt obliged to adopt the PVV's core campaigning themes, albeit in a rather vague fashion, translating Wilders' blunt focus on Islam into subtler distinctions between what belongs to the Dutch and what does not. The effect has been to create a clear sense of those who belong 'in' and 'out' of Dutch society, with Islam functioning as a twisted mirror in which citizens view themselves.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

_____

About the author

Lucien van Liere *– Utrecht University*
Lucien van Liere is an Associate Professor at Utrecht University. He is an expert on the role of religion in contexts of violent conflict.

-