

The Dutch elections and Gaza protests

Ferry Biedermann in Amsterdam

One good thing about the Dutch election results, I thought initially, was that my next post for this blog didn't have to be about Israel and Gaza. I could safely get back to the politics of fear, racism, populism etc. in a small European country rather than wade into the moral and political quagmire that is The Middle East. But how wrong I was: it turns out that there might be a link, however uncertain its actual impact, between the events in Gaza and the Netherlands.

Geert Wilders, the clear winner of the Dutch elections on 22 November, and his misleadingly named Party for Freedom (PVV), are anti-immigration, anti-Islam and anti-EU. The PVV has a funny idea of freedom (certainly not for Muslims to practice their faith as they see fit) nor is it really a party in the usual sense of Dutch politics, as it only has one member, Wilders, who wields absolute power. Yet, other than some other far-right European parties, Wilders has never hinted at antisemitism. In fact, he's one of Israel's most vociferous defenders. Since the Hamas attack on Israel of 7 October he has consistently spoken for that country's right to defend itself, although he has expressed some sympathy for casualties in Gaza. At one point he accused the leader of the Labour/Green Left alliance, former EU Commission vice-president Frans Timmermans, of having participated in a climate march amid pro-Palestine demonstrators.

So, taken on face value, the conflict did play a small part in the election campaign. A small part, because it was very far from being the focus for Wilders, nor anyone else. Except for one small minority-rights party, DENK, with roots among people from a Turkish migrant background, that clearly ran with the Free Palestine slogan and appeared initially to boost its support slightly, only to end level. Some on the right, including Dilan Yeşilgöz, the new leader of Mark Rutte's centre-right VVD, did come out against the slogan 'From the River to the Sea' but so did the Green Left mayor of Amsterdam. Apart from an extremely nasty anti-Muslim tweet from a PVV councillor after a demonstration in The Hague, there was nothing on the level of Suella Braverman's attempt at interference or senior politicians talking about 'hate marches'.

Yet, both anecdotally and in some analyses by political observers after the elections, the atmosphere created in the Netherlands by the events in Israel and Gaza was cited as contributing in some way to the PVV's surprise victory. Demonstrators carrying Palestinian flags through the streets of Dutch cities, expressing support for Hamas and excoriating not just Israel but also its Western supporters, was not something many voters wanted to see, one political scientist noted. The PVV and its ilk didn't even have to do much to make this an election issue; the vehemence of the anti-Israel movement, veering sometimes into wider anti-Western overtones, was enough to move part of the electorate one notch further to the right, or at least confirm voters in their fears and biases.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying there's any excuse to vote for a nasty, xenophobic, populist party. There were plenty of other, so-called 'decent' options to choose from for the average anti-immigrant Dutch voter. All the parties of the right, which, including Wilders, now hold some two thirds of the seats in parliament, have come out with some sort of anti-immigrant rhetoric and proposals. The gap between the left and the right has not been this big for decades, so it's well possible that some of the people worried by the anti-Israel marches did opt for one of the parties on the right that are somewhat less extreme than Wilders.

There could be a lesson here for the UK Labour party and its leader, Keir Starmer. There is indeed a danger that a small part of the more radical left and the Muslim community might withhold their vote because of his stance. But there's much more to be lost by aligning too closely with the more

radical left-wing fringe. It appears to be the same lesson that was learned from the Corbyn years. Thus, apart from the policy in all likelihood also stemming from conviction, Starmer's stance makes electoral sense. In the Netherlands, Timmermans was seen as being supportive of Israel's right to defend itself, but the fresh alliance with the traditionally more pro-Palestinian Green Left fanned suspicions. Especially among Dutch Jews, a tiny part of the electorate, disappointment with the left's stance may have alienated some voters. Many Jews in the Netherlands have expressed concern over a spike in antisemitism, including violent incidents, threats and a generally hostile atmosphere, since the Hamas attacks of 7 October, even before the Israeli counter attack fully got underway. Anti-Muslim threats and incidents have also increased sharply but there's no clear indication yet of what effect the issue had on the much larger Muslim vote.

But this is not about the Jewish or Muslim parts of the electorate. It's about a much larger group of voters, in all likelihood without a very steady commitment to either side of the political spectre, that could be nudged further to the right by the perceived radicalisation of part of the left. On the one hand, this dynamic fits in with the established tropes of the culture wars and the woke scare, on the other it's a throwback to 1970s and 80s arguments over anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism, and partly the protests against the Iraq war. The marches for Gaza, whatever their merits or demerits, cannot fail but be part of a larger cultural and political fight. Decolonisation has taken the place of anti-imperialism; Israel has taken the place of South Africa. Added to this mix in most European countries is the increasingly explosive issue of migration and the presence of large groups of people of Muslim and Arab descent who feel personally affected by events in the Middle East.

The more pro-Palestinian left has some powerful arguments when it comes to Israel's treatment of Palestinians and can also point to history: 'We were right about South Africa, now we're right about Israel'. And surely people in Europe and elsewhere have the right, even the duty, to speak out against human rights abuses on our doorstep and the threat of genocide. Even those inclined more towards the centre will feel that the world should have acted, for example, to prevent the Rwanda genocide. But there's also the rub: Despite all its problematic aspects and the awful human toll, the spectre of Israel in fact carrying out a genocide, is remote (this might not be true for the danger of ethnic cleansing, if Palestinians are not allowed to return to their homes in Gaza). In general, notwithstanding the accusations of Apartheid, Israel is also a very different kettle of fish from South Africa, with a very different history, population, political system, geopolitical position, regional position etc.

The same goes for the new cold war-like situation that the world is finding itself in, particularly since the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Whereas, despite their awful crimes against their own populations and others, communist systems still offered an alternative of sorts to capitalism and its main Western proponents. Nowadays the supposed international alternative on offer to America's ascendancy is only a more authoritarian version of what the West already has. Still, many of those vehemently protesting Western, and especially American, so-called complicity with Israel's assault on Gaza, find Moscow, Beijing and Teheran acceptable allies in their fight. The levels of vitriol aimed from the far left at US president Joe Biden are quite remarkable and difficult to explain only as stemming from the current situation in the Middle East.

Neither blind support for Israel out of some misguided 'defence of the West' idea or wholesale opposition to the country stemming from anti-imperialist, anti-American, decolonisation ideology, will help improve the situation, if anything will at all. Also, the people on both sides of the political spectre in the West, both the right-wing Putin and Orbán groupies and the left-wing Russia and China acolytes, are playing with fire in a Western world that's much less united, resilient and effectively organised, thanks to, among others, Brexit, Trump and online manipulation, than it was during the

Cold War. The ceasefire that everybody in the West could and should actually do something about, is one between our own polarised political extremes.