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Watching The World

Sunday, 5 March 2017

Saying No to Geert

BY [MARTIN VENGADESAN](#)



Centre of attraction: Wilders speaking to reporters during his recent visit to Spijkenisse, a suburb in Rotterdam. — Reuters

A former Dutch deputy prime minister is now a professor in Malaysia, and he tells us why the rhetoric of Holland's Wilders is so dangerous.

THE most famous peroxide blonde in Holland is in the news again. Unlike many of his anti-immigration flag-bearing counterparts in global politics however, Geert Wilders hasn't recently materialised. In fact he's been a nuisance for at least a dozen years or so.

But the truth is that when Dutch voters take to the polls on March 15, Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) is favoured to finish first. This is despite his conviction three months ago for inciting racial hatred and insulting Moroccans.

The good news, if I can call it that, is that under the Dutch proportional representation system, finishing first with 30% of the votes only gives you roughly 30% of the seats, so the PVV will not be able to govern. Given that most of its rivals have sworn not to collaborate with it, we can at least feel confident that Wilders will be tamed.

Profile



Star Online news editor Martin Vengadesan grew up in nine countries spread over four continents and is both an avid student of global politics and an obsessive election-watcher.

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to the anti-immigration backlash that has garnered support from voters all across the Western world. More than 15 years ago, the charismatic Pim Fortuyn was gaining support with a similar message.

He was shot dead just before the May 2002 elections, and as a result, his party, the Pim Fortuyn List was part of the next government. Without their dead leader, however, the party descended into factional warfare and its time in power was brief.

Interestingly, the deputy prime minister in that government, Eduard J Bomhoff, has been resident in Malaysia since February 2004 and is a Professor of Economics at the School of Business in Monash University.

He told me about the differences between the Pim Fortuyn List and what Wilders is trying to accomplish.

"We were not similar. Pim Fortuyn spoke about cultural issues, how migrants from poor countries such as Morocco were part of the country but still came from a conservative rural background. They didn't learn our difficult language, they believed in child marriage, they were pulling daughters out of school.

"We have a strong tradition in the Netherlands of multi-culturalism but Fortuyn wanted to address some elements and voters agreed with that."

"Wilders on the other hand is trying to ban the Quran. He wants all the passages he doesn't like to be removed. He takes a line towards Islam that is insulting and abusive. He uses foul language to insult the religion."

Bomhoff says the Pim Fortuyn List was very diverse.

"We had five MPs who were medical doctors. They were so fed-up with the bureaucracy of the health system, with people dying due to very long waiting lists, and they wanted to reform it. If you look at Wilders' party you will not see such a variety of reform-orientated groups."

"Also Fortuyn was never against the European Union, whereas Wilders wants us to leave it."

I had to ask Bomhoff why he chose to come to Malaysia.

"When the government was replaced, I could have become a TV pundit for example. But I had a background as an academic and a newspaper columnist, and I did not want to become some guy on television just talking.

"I had worked overseas in Japan, the US and Germany and decided to try something else. I am happy in Malaysia, I like many things here, I also wrote a best-selling book about my time in government. It was interesting, but more interesting than enjoyable!"

Perhaps what's alarming about Wilders' rise is that the centre-right party outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte has also echoed some of his calls to get tough on immigrants.

Meanwhile, a country which has enjoyed a benevolent welfare state since the William Drees administration of 1948 is witnessing a break down in support for the traditional centre-left Labour party. Support for the Socialist Party isn't growing either while the Left Greens have picked up most of the declining support.

There is no new populist Syriza or Podemos, but instead single issue parties like the Party of the Animals and the pensioner rights 50+ are in the picture.

Most likely, we will see Rutte cobble together an anti-PVV coalition.

These anti-immigration movements seem to centre around stopping the present and future influx of migrants, particularly those from Muslim nations. What

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out? what then? increased polarisation? Retaliation? Where will it end?

Star online news editor Martin Vengadesan thinks Wilders may one day get his way.

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