

VIDEO: Dutch Government Collapses Over extending Military Participation in Afghanistan

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The Dutch government has collapsed over a rift between coalition parties about extending Dutch military participation in Afghanistan.

"Later today, I will offer to her majesty the Queen the resignations of the ministers and deputy ministers of the PvdA (Labour Party)," Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende told journalists.

News of the collapse came in the early hours of Saturday morning following 16 hours of crisis meetings and days of speculation that the differences between the coalition parties had simply become too great to bridge.

The stand-off began after [Deputy Prime Minister Wouter Bos](#), leader of the Labour Party, drew a line in the sand over extending the Dutch mission in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan – coalition partners wanted to consider this option after a specific request from NATO to do so.

This was Mr Balkenende's fourth cabinet. It was also the fourth time he failed to carry a coalition to the end of the full four-year term.

Video: Jan Peter Balkenende announces the government's fall at a press conference

Uneasy coalition

Uneasy compromise typified the coalition from the beginning. The centre-right Christian Democrats (and its predecessors) had governed with the centre-left Labour Party before. But the two parties have trouble forming a stable coalition.

Balkenende IV was no exception. Difficulties were already apparent during the negotiations to form the government in the winter of 2007. All three coalition partners, the two larger parties plus the smaller Christian Union, had to compromise on major issues.

During three years of government, many decisions were made only after long disagreements inside the cabinet. These included plans to raise the government pension age, how long to try to keep government expenditures up in the wake of the economic downturn, and whether or not to keep investing in the development of a new fighter plane,

the Joint Strike Fighter.

Uruzgan

The issue where a compromise could not be found – whether or not to extend the military mission in the unruly Afghan province of Uruzgan – was itself not new. The cabinet decided back in the autumn of 2007 to extend the mission to Uruzgan by two years.

But the Labour Party felt it could not compromise again on an extension of the military mission. The criticism of Dutch support for the invasion of Iraq, presented by the independent Davids Commission in early January, only reinforced the Labour Party's resolve.

Save face abroad

The fall of the government may, paradoxically, help the Netherlands save face abroad. At NATO headquarters, as well as in the United States, there is little sympathy for the Labour Party's veto of an extension of the Uruzgan mission. The Netherlands pulling out of Uruzgan is a source of irritation both in Brussels and Washington. The Netherlands even risks losing its hard-earned seat at the G20 meetings.

But a cabinet crisis is seen as a reasonable excuse, even if the end result – pulling out of Uruzgan – remains the same.

Unstable

Of perhaps greater consequence is what the fall of the cabinet means for Dutch politics. Nearly ten years ago, this country was shocked by the sudden rise of the populist politician, Pim Fortuyn, and even more shocked by his murder. More recently, the right-wing politician Geert Wilders underscores a long-term trend in Dutch politics: instability.

The Dutch electorate is famously fractured – no one party can ever hope to form a majority, and eight or more parties typically gain seats in parliament (there are currently eleven parties in the Dutch parliament). Plus, Dutch voters no longer identify very strongly with the traditional political parties.

This combination makes it possible for a Pim Fortuyn, or a Geert Wilders, to suddenly rise to prominence with the support of as little as ten percent of the population.

The Wilders factor

Geert Wilders has profited from the current political climate. And he will play a major role in the upcoming election, even if his Freedom Party does not become the largest party. Mr Wilders is a polarising figure, and the campaign is likely to feature a camp on the right that will consider governing in a coalition with Mr Wilders, and a camp on the left that rules it out.

But the major parties will not likely make up much of the ground they've been losing, and the next coalition could need four or more parties (in place of the usual two or three) to form a majority. During a time of economic recovery, the Netherlands is entering a period of political instability.

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