

DEV Issues article (1.405 words)

COVID-19 and Social Discontent in the Netherlands

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On 20 January 2021 the Dutch parliament decided to introduce a night curfew from 9 pm to 4:30 am. The measure was taken to reduce Covid-19 infections due to potential dinner parties and evening visits. The measure was expected to generate some protest; after all it was the first *Abendsperre* since the Nazi occupation of the Second World War. But very few expected the outburst of discontent in January 2021 in over twenty cities and villages throughout the Netherlands. This article tries to examine what happened, why and how, but also to what extent it was linked to social outbursts in other parts of the world.

The main contextual factor was of course the COVID-19 pandemic. Already since the outbreak of the virus in early 2020 people took the streets to protest against restricting the freedoms of citizens. Groups initiating popular protests on squares in The Hague and Amsterdam used the banner “Virus Madness” (later replaced by “Virus Truth”) or “Netherlands in Rebellion”, pointing at the innocence of the Corona virus, being no more than just a flue variety (‘invented by Bill Gates’). They accused the Dutch government of ruining the national economy by temporarily closing down small and medium enterprises. One of their spokesmen was a dance teacher from Rotterdam with 40.000 followers on Facebook.ⁱ He led several protests during the Summer of 2020, mobilizing a broad variety of people. From elderly who felt most affected, yellow vests against cuts in government spending, anti-5G activists (blended with QAnon conspiracy followers), to a range of others (farmers, event organisers, students) who all were unhappy and who felt their demands were unheard by the conservative government led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte. But they also attacked public media for providing ‘fake news’. This prompted the national television broadcast association NOS to take its logo off their trucks, thus preventing being attacked by protestors.

On Saturday evening 23 January, the first day of the curfew, the protest aggravated in the little Northern fishing community of Urk. Hundreds of teenagers confronted the police with fireworks and stones, eventually leading to the burning down of a Corona testing facility.

Similar protests were held in the cities of Amersfoort, Rotterdam and IJmuiden. The next day, Sunday 24 January, a protest was planned at Amsterdam's Museum Square, but the permission was withdrawn by the Green Left Mayor as it was expected too many people would arrive, being unable to manage social distancing.

The thousands of protesters that came anyway were moved away by horse-backed police. Special police units, often supported by police dogs, arrested 190 people. The unrest soon sparked to many major other cities like Eindhoven, The Hague, Tilburg, Enschede, Helmond, Venlo and Roermond. In Eindhoven the police could not prevent a group of rioters from smashing the windows of the monumental Central Station building, setting fire to cars and looting a supermarket. 55 young activists were arrested, and during the entire weekend over two thousand people were fined for not respecting the curfew and/or social distancing rules.

On Monday 25 January the violent protests extended to a dozen other cities. In Enschede, the entrance of a hospital (where COVID-19 patients were recovering) was briefly under siege when protesters tried to enter, but ambulance personnel withstood the action. Police unions expressed that these were the most notorious riots in 40 years, since the wave of social unrest in Amsterdam of the 1980s triggered by the urban squatters movement. Football hooligans from several affected cities announced on social media that they would go out to help the police downtown to 'protect their city' against the rioters, who ironically used exactly the same tactics as the hooligans. But of course, since football matches were played without any spectators, even the football fans were frustrated and upset about the impact of the Corona measures, albeit claiming the monopoly to use this type of violence against the police.

The president of the Dutch parliament sharply denounced the riots and the violence against police and health workers by saying "this is not the Netherlands we know, nor the Netherlands we aspire to". By Tuesday 26 January the authorities seemed to have found a way to curb the protests: special emergency laws were used and fast-track prosecution was introduced. That, combined with a generally negative response on social and public media, seemed to work: the protests faded out. Basically leaving observers and journalists with the big question: what had caused this outburst of discontent?

It certainly was not only the pandemic. The Belgian sociologist Geoffrey Pleyers countered the suggestion that social mobilizing decreased during the COVID-19, after a period of sharp

increase up to early 2020.ⁱⁱ To the contrary: social movements flourished, albeit in a different manner. Examples are of course the *Black Lives Matter* marches, and environmental protests, but also protests of citizens resisting new regulations by the central government. One of these militant movements in the Netherlands are the farmers, who are affected by new environmental regulations and fear that the future of their business is in danger. Unsatisfied by the concessions of the government, they mobilised hundreds of tractor marches to The Hague where they paralysed public life. Arguing that the prosecution of farmers was becoming similar to the holocaust, they forced their way into the provincial government building in the Northern province of Groningen.

So not surprisingly the extreme right parties in parliament saw a great opportunity to side with these unsatisfied farmers, the producers of famous Dutch cheese and milk, on whom they generally had looked down before. Both the *Freedom Party* (led by Geert Wilders) as well as the *Democratic Forum* (led by Thierry Baudet) competed to express their loyalty to these farmers, as well as later to the virus deniers and the yellow vests. However, soon after curfew riots, both parties were the first to demand military forces onto the streets to restore order, illustrating the contradictory nature of their argument. But these can be explained by the fact that important national parliamentary elections are approaching in mid-March.

Overall, it is clear that the composition of the anti-curfew protests was an eclectic collective which cannot easily be characterised politically (left or right) nor socially (in terms of class). It mobilized hooligans who were unable to see their football matches, extreme-right and racist fanatics linked to PEGIDA (also big in Germany), conspiracy believers, as well as groups opposing the dominance of pharmaceutical companies.ⁱⁱⁱ Apart from the mission 'to defend their freedom', there was an important common tool that brought them together: social media. From Instagram and Facebook to Telegram and Whatsapp, and some even suggested a *gamification* of violence as riots were a way to do live streamed gaming (where points could be gained).^{iv} In a very short time span social media mobilized thousands of angry protesters, and some may even have been inspired by the Capitol mob of 6 January in Washington DC (given their efforts to conquer a hospital).

The bottom line is that the protests represent a serious and widespread dissatisfaction with how our mainstream political system is dealing (or not) with its citizens. It has to be faced that many have turned their back on elected politicians and public (quality) media, searching for

new truths in social media groups, including wild conspiracies. Since the emergence of populist politics with Pim Fortuyn in the post-9/11 era, and his dramatic murder by an animal rights activist in 2002, many people simply feel unheard. The new public media term for these citizens is 'wappies', simply translated as those people that lost their nuance, perpetuate their own paranoia, and stick to their newly created and unrealistic worldviews. That may be the key message to politicians competing for the next elections in the Netherlands: to listen to those also outside their elitists circles in order to find out what people really believe. In that sense, the parallel with the siege of Trumpist followers of the Capitol certainly is significant and therefore an alarming signal to the political elite in the Netherlands and its neighbouring countries.

ⁱ Interview with Willem Engel in *Algemeen Dagblad*, 4 July 2020

ⁱⁱ Pleyers, G. (2020) 'The Pandemic is a battlefield: Social movements in the COVID-19 lockdown', *JOURNAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY* <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2020.1794398>

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Jelle van Buuren in *NRC Handelsblad* 26 januari 2021.

^{iv} Maartje Bakker in *De Volkskrant*, 29 January 2021.