WE WANT TO GIVE OUR COUNTRY BACK TO THE HARDWORKING DUTCHMAN

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Inhoudsopgave

Introduction

In 2010 the liberal Prime Minister M. Rutte used the famous words 'We want to give our country back to the hardworking Dutchman' as a promise to his voters. He promised less government interference in business and approached the issue from a political-economic perspective. He also realized the opportunity for the Freedom Party (PVV) to be part a coalition partner. In the coalition agreement speech, one of Mr. Wilders first sentences focused on 'safety of ordinary people and less asylum seekers and immigrants in the Netherlands'. This was (and still is) *his* contribution to a country for the hardworking people. Listening to the whole speech with the knowledge of today, I can confirm that most of their promises haven't been realized. Rather, the political promises concerning asylum and immigration policy become even more extreme than 10 years ago. Is it populism talking?

From a political perspective, populism has grown into polarization between right-populistic (political) nationalism and people of whom is assumed they are Muslim. National research (Albada, et al. 2021) shows that 18,7 % of the Dutch people are open for migrants and refugees. 33% is welcoming refugees and migrants. 31,8 % of Dutch citizens are critical, they are less welcoming towards newcomers. 16,5% hold on to anti-migrant and anti-refugees' sentiments. Scholars have concluded that politics of the last 20 years have accelerated a schism in our society (Oudenampsen, 2013). What happened to society that has created this division? How is it possible that tolerance is challenged, diversity becomes questioned, and universal human rights is under pressure in The Netherlands? The main question of this article is '*are socio-political anti-Islam sentiments in the Netherlands justified?*'

A globalizing society

From a global cultural perspective nations became less important. A culture is based on a system of symbols that give meaning to life (Geertz, 1973). Human groups are tied in an interactive combination of individual personalities, a social system, and a cultural system. The last consist of a complex network of values, and beliefs. A culture consists of socially established structures of meaning and is in a process of constant development. Cultural differences come from a diversity in developing ideologies based on the collective development of the three aspects of a human group (individual personalities, social system, and cultural system), combined with different perspectives on behavior and actions of these individuals, communities, and nations.

The process of cultural change accelerated by globalization in our post-modern society (Lehman, 1998), approached from this socio-cultural perspective, can take two paths. The distracting path of closure, discrimination, prejudice, and exclusivism leads to nationalism and extreme traditionalism. The more constructive path of peace, equality, democracy and inclusivism or pluralism leads to a two-way enrichment on a cultural, economic, technological, innovative, and ideational level (Triandafyllidou, 2017). When different cultures meet, it's not self-evident they become more homogeneous (Lehmann, 1998). Dutch citizens don't need to fear losing cultural values on a collective scale when migrants and refugees come to our country.

It still seems that our society takes the first exit. This is the path of polarization with all its consequences. According to Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo (2022) polarization challenges societies, for it reduces the possibilities of achieving consensus due to the difficulty to come into a constructive dialogue with other people who are (also) fundamental in their ideological thought. It's the lack of clear boundaries to society, and culture, that we all encounter (Beyer, 1994; Bauman, 2000). Lehmann (1998) question's if cultures ever have had clear boundaries at all. Maybe, due to globalization, we become conscious of the porous borders of our culture, our society, and its fundamentals? This awareness strengthens the insecurity that comes with a lack of sense of belonging due to a borderless world (Bauman, 2000). Deep emotional structures as fear of losing protection and safety are evoked and framed (Vos, 2023). We search for ways to grasp reality and keep control. One way is to return to your roots and amplify differences with others.

Polarization because of globalization

Polarization applies to how we think about others and their identities. It occurs when we privilege identities that we share with a group we belong to and downplay or ignore identities we assume we differ with. Polarization with inwardly focused group thinking, communication and communion can increase extremist behaviors, the information gap and number of enemies. Research has shown that communities with different ideas have other perceptions of the same reality. People perceive this reality in a way consistent with their cultural, social, and political views and background (Alesina et al, 2020, Lehmann, 1998). We see what we want to see. Being stuck in your own worldview, the fear of certain identity-based difference leads to avoidance (Barthold, 2020), and avoidance leads to hostile stereotypes that result in "us-versus-them" thinking wherein one believes that the other's identity is the source of the other's alleged moral degeneration, dangerousness, stupidity, craziness, or evilness. This ignorance of a large population stems from difficulty to personally cope with globalization. This creates a certain insecurity within people and groups. Nussbaum (2012) argues there are three interrelated solutions necessary to overcome our fears: sound principles regarding human equality, widely supported arguments – based on knowledge of things - and curious and sympathetic imagination. Populism blocks this direction and feeds the opposite.

Polarization is reinforced using the internet, where people's reality is framed. The digital system support finding like-minded people, mainly discuss topics with them, and avoid interacting with people who challenge existing convictions (Bruns, 2022). It creates a distorted picture of the actual, local society in which diversity is present. People no longer learn how to deal with differences (Pérez-Escolar & Noguera-Vivo, 2022).

Polarization becomes manifest in populist movements with the explicit aim to polarize against others and distance themselves from any political establishment. Polarization is a process, an activity of dividing. Populists promote nationalism and protectionism as counterforce to a globalizing world. It is often related to the discourse against newcomers of those who claim to be native to a country. Migrants are associated with the worldwide danger of Muslim extremism. Religious or ethnic minorities are regarded as not belonging to national identity and therefore marginalized and oppressed (Vos, 2023). Fear of people and lack of boundaries are two of the main sources of (ethnic) violence, either religiously motivated or inflamed by nationalistic movements (Vos, 2023).

The development of national populism and anti-Islamism in Dutch society

Progressive and conservative socio-political waves alternate. From the beginning of the 1990s our national consciousness came into a moral crisis, due to the Balkan wars. In what way were we guilty of the massacre of more than 8.000 Serbian Muslims who were under Dutch peace protection? It was the beginning of a new wave of moral complexities. Complex social problems were reduced to moral problems and then avoided and trivialized (Muysken 2016). In the same period there was an increase of refugees in the Netherlands, which consequently brought new challenges with them, concrete, in policy and on a cultural level.

Where religious communities and traditions have always maintained permeable boundaries and interacted with each other, bringing cultural (and religious) change, it seems that people who adhere nationalistic populism don't seem to like the transformation of (cultural) traditions (Juergensmeyer, 2006).

Denying of social problems and the underlying dissatisfaction with 'newcomers and their religion and cultural differences', came to the surface and got accepted by a larger public in early 2000s when Right-oriented Mr. Fortuyn entered Dutch politics. Looking at the political developments in the Netherlands since then, we see a dramatic swing to the Right. It can be assumed as a manifestation of an undercurrent displeasure in our society embedded in tensions in Europe as a whole. This issue is described as the globalization backlash (Herrington, 2012). Revival of nationalism combined with right-wing populism[1] is strengthened by opposing against immigrants and asylum seekers. Muslims and Islam are especially disapproved.

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[1] From a scientific perspective it's difficult to explain the development of populism for there is no theoretical consensus on any definition nor is populism a neatly contained phenomenon. Therefore, it's difficult to draw a line on what is and what isn't populism. Let alone we can explain the success (Oudenampsen, 2013). For now, we use the definitions of Merriam-Webster dictionary: 'a member of a political party claiming to represent the common people' and 'a believer in the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people'. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/populism

The debate is centered around the concept of 'us' and 'them', the original inhabitants versus the immigrants, the ethnic diversity between Dutch and other people based on ethnic and religious difference. The debate is dominated by a strong discourse on national identity, Islam, law and order, terrorism, and immigration (Oudenampsen, 2013). It highlights an invisible line drawn through the social fabric between two kinds of people (Muysken, 2016).

There is a growth of immigrants and with it comes the question how to deal with the complex interplay with the convergent factors of country of origin, migration channel, legal status, migrants' human capital, access to employment, locality, transnationalism and the response of local authorities, service providers and residents (Vertovec, 2007). This complex interplay becomes even more complex by the generalized public *image* of aggressive Moroccan young guys who steal your wallet, harass young women and who are vulnerable for Muslim fundamentalism and extremism. The complex social problems can't be avoided any longer for its sensitive for abuse. A public image fueled by nationalistic populism, wherein the debate on this complexity including street criminality (and how to deal with it) becomes confused with a discussion about Islam in general (Muysken, 2016).

Religious fundamentalism, Islam, and violence

Western scholars have assumed, or wished, that religious belief doesn't play a central role in our society anymore (Appleby, 2000; Herrington, 2012). Religion has rather always been here and will never leave, it's inherent in being human (Riesenbrodt, 2003; Larsen, 2007). On a global scale Islam is on a revival, just like Christian Pentecostalism and evangelical Protestantism (Emerson & Hartman, 2006; Thomas, 2010). These religions or denominations can be lived by in many ways. How they crystallize is contextual dependent (Emerson & Hartman, 2006). In one extreme it is a positive force for people to try to reach beyond their narrow-minded fixations and develop themselves towards a more tolerant understanding of the world. In the other extreme, it becomes absolutism what can turn into fundamentalism with the main exclusivist thought that 'we are right' and 'you are wrong' (Juergensmeyer, 2017). When religion becomes fundamentalistic it has the potential of becoming extreme and violent. This has been the case since late 1990s when there was an enormous increase in religious terrorist groups (Juergensmeyer, 2017). Many of these terrorist groups experience modern society as a threat to their community, values, social ties and meaning and go as far as to 'fight against this' (Emerson & Hartman, 2006). Events of Islamic terrorism like 9/11, Bataclan attack in Paris, the rise of groups like Al Qaida, Al Nusra, Islamic State, Taliban, and Boko Haram with their extreme violent behavior and the attack of the terrorist group Hamas on Israeli ordinary people on the 7th of October 2023, have a polarizing effect on the debate and fed the fear of people all over the globe. Horrific pictures, scenes, and stories are available via (social) media within the blink of an eye. "Fundamentalism is in the news and is having a global impact." (Emerson & Hartman, 2006). What different fundamentalist groups have in common is a longing for and belonging to traditions combined with ideological rejection of diversity and strengthening of differences. These commonalities lie at the center of exclusivism and drives a person or group towards (religious) extremism or violence (Pratt, 2018).

Polarization and violence are not the same. Where conflict features directly involved parties, there are clear problem owners. This is not the case with polarization. Therein there is still the choice to decide the position of the problem owner (Vos, 2023). This means that there are different stages of polarization, worth further analyzing. Polarization doesn't always have to end in violence. According to Juergensmeyer (2017) people are not 'terrorist by nature', they have become terrorists under the influence of (global) communities and their 'Holy War' ideologies with a sole purpose of political intimidation. Concluding, it's the decision of the participating people where they turn to, where they are influenced by and what they promote. Sometimes the external pressure can be enormous though.

From a religious and socio-political perspective there are three additional underexposed facts that needs to be mentioned here. The first is that extremist fundamentalist Islamic groups not only attack western society but do a lot of harm, even more, within their own communities and nations. A main reason for recent mass migrations is the extreme ideology of a few who wish to impose this on others who disagree with these extreme kinds of thought (Pratt, 2018). A Muslim is not a Muslim is not a Muslim, but they are all Muslims. Examples are fleeing of Afghani people, especially the Shia minority, due to the suppression by the (neo)Taliban (Wani, 2021), the flee of political and religious opponents of the religious government of Iran due to the suppression of women or the exile of people from Syria and Iraq due to the multidimensional extremism in those countries (Nanninga, 2017; Pratt, 2018). The second fact gaining insufficient attention, without ignoring the violence combined with Islam ideology, is that religious violence *not only* happens in relation to Islam. Exclusivist thinking, fundamentalism and violence are not only reserved for Muslim fundamentalists.

Fundamentalism is an ideology rather than a theology and therefore can also be found in all religions and other ideologies (Lehman, 1998; Emerson & Hartman, 2006; Juergensmeyer, 2017; Thomas, 2010). The last aspect that needs more attention is the (ab)use of (social) media to make one's own point combined with the reality framing of Bruns (2022). Muslim fundamentalists know how to use this and successfully manipulate their audience (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

The combination of the described factors forms the breeding ground for nationalistic anti-Islam sentiments in the Netherlands. Populists' fallacy though is that from a socio-political perspective, due to diversity, modernism including its individualization, societies and their governments can claim less 'absolute truth'. This is exactly what populist movements with nationalistic tendencies in the Netherlands tend to do; they claim the truth wherein (all) Muslims are to blame.

Conclusion

Many politicians claim truths in a populist manner and herewith contribute to divisions in society. They manage to touch upon an underlying collective uncertainty of groups of people and feed existing unease. People's uncertainty concerns one's feeling of (national) security and stability which is being challenged by globalization and its combined effects of (awareness about) lack of borders, diffusion of traditions and changing culture combined with an increase in migration (of Muslims). Populists turn this 'fear' in the interest of own benefits. Most of the information shared about migration is based on truths that have been exaggerated, slightly twisted or there is a kernel of truth veiled in vague words or supplemented with untruths. In these narratives, the Islam and Muslims are 'the other', the scapegoat.

Fundamentalism presented as non-negotiable absolutism, present in many forms within different aspects of life including religion, is the main challenge. The way in which this fundamentalism is expressed via a small part of the Muslim community is just one concretization of this issue. It also exists in other fundamentalistic groups who believe in their own non-negotiable absolutism of correctness. This issue of such fundamentalism therefore clearly needs attention to prevent transforming into violence. Unlike other places in Europe or on the globe, we should consider ourselves lucky in the Netherlands for we have been little confronted with the violent backlash of globalization in this regard.

Nevertheless, it puts pressure on diversity, tolerance, and feelings of safety and security for all in our society. It's time we transform the moral crisis of our national consciousness on 'good' and 'bad' into true tolerance and experience of deep equality towards 'others' in our plural society. This is a challenging task, but we can't risk further polarization because socio-cultural problems of a small group are generalized and 'used' by populists in favor of their own interests. This essay has clearly explained that Islam and its believers in general are unfairly dismissed as fundamentalists and evildoers.

There is no simple cure for the complex dynamics of polarization. One aspect that needs more attention is the information-gap and how to overcome this. World views, religious institutions, faith communities and individual spiritual seekers can contribute to these dialogues about equality in a plural society and share knowledge about faiths and religions in all their forms. Next, one can try to prepossess a shift in perspective in how those involved think about one another without ending up in arguments. A dialogue is not constructive anymore when polarization has increased and turned into violence. Therefore, this dialogue must be conducted now. Maybe 'they' are no longer so different from 'us' when we are in contact with each other? Realizing our common ground, is the moment dialogue can transcend relationships and society into a new level of interaction. It's the moment and place where an alternative future can arise, based on the creation of a new, shared perspective (Beaman, 2017; Vos, 2023). Through dialogue, regardless of the differences in background and the weight of the topics, people meet each other. In this way the Netherlands can be returned to *all* the hardworking habitants no matter of one's religious, ethnic, educational or cultural background.

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