



General Intelligence and
Security Service
*Ministry of the Interior and
Kingdom Relations*

Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands

A serious threat to the democratic legal order?



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Cover photo:

A traffic sign in the village Vrouwenpolder in Zeeland, which has 'The Great Reset' spray-painted on it in big black letters. Below there is a sticker with the text 'NOS = FAKENEWS'. Photo: ANP

Key points

This publication is meant to provide an insight into the threat posed by anti-institutional extremism to the democratic legal order. This analysis is available to the public so that all government bodies, but also the media, researchers and scientists, and all Dutch citizens will be able to recognise and counter anti-institutional extremism.

At the same time, the General Intelligence and Security Service (*Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst*, AIVD) wants to ensure that criticism of institutions is not automatically labelled as extremist. After all, criticism, protests, and demonstrations aimed at institutions - including actions in which the limits of the law are tested - are essential for the functioning of the democratic legal order.

'Evil elite'

This publication on anti-institutional extremism deals specifically with the movement which believes that globally and in the Netherlands there is an 'evil elite' in power which wants to oppress, enslave, and even kill part of the population. This 'evil elite' allegedly fabricates and orchestrates all kinds of things in order to frighten the population, make them obey, and implement its own 'secret' agenda. Examples are the corona pandemic, the nitrogen pollution crisis, the war in Ukraine, the earthquakes in Turkey, and the train derailment in Voorschoten. The AIVD refers to the whole of these propagated messages as 'the narrative of an evil elite'.

Anti-institutional extremism is not part of right-wing extremism or vice versa. Although there is some overlap between the two movements, anti-institutional extremists are not necessarily anti-Semitic and they do not necessarily consider the 'white race' to be superior.

Undermining of the democratic legal order

The most significant threat posed by anti-institutional extremism is that in the long term, the spread of the 'evil elite' narrative will likely seriously undermine the democratic legal order.

The narrative subverts the democratic legal order by painting a picture of the existence of an evil elite which is factually incorrect. In doing so, the narrative wrongfully harms the trust in the legislative, executive, and/or judicial powers, 'traditional' media, and science and slowly but surely undermines the legitimacy of these institutions.

Possible threat of violence

The AIVD assesses that the broad dissemination of the narrative may in time pose a threat of violence. Although in general inciters of anti-institutional extremism do not explicitly call for violence, the narrative does provide a framework for the fact that there is an enemy - the 'evil elite' - with which people are actually in a state of war.

Individual supporters could see this as a justification for violence and intimidation aimed at representatives of institutions, such as politicians, judges, journalists, and scientists.

Resilience and faith in institutions

The resilience against the threat of the 'evil elite' narrative partially depends on the public faith in the institutions and the persons who are responsible for them. The way in which matters such as the childcare benefit system scandal and the gas extraction in Groningen were handled, likely caused larger groups of people to doubt the trustworthiness of government actions. Inciters of anti-institutional extremism actively play into this by explaining these actions based on the narrative of an 'evil elite'. The way in which (government) institutions function and communicate thus has a direct influence on the threat posed by anti-institutional extremism and any resilience against it. The public perception of political decisions, policies, and particular events, as well as the perception of whether the decision-making has been transparent and whether any opposing opinions have been taken seriously, play a very important role in this.

The AIVD has chosen to publish an extensive and relatively technical analysis in order to provide as much insight, transparency, and nuance as possible regarding the social debate on anti-institutional extremism. You will find the citizens summary at the back of this publication.

Introduction

Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands

A movement has arisen in the Netherlands of persons who believe that the world and the Netherlands are ruled by an 'evil elite', consisting of the government, media, and researchers and scientists, which wants to oppress, enslave, and even kill part of 'the ordinary people'. The elite is believed to strive for total world control through its 'secret agenda'.

Supporters of this ideology therefore argue that they are at war with this alleged 'evil elite'.

The General Intelligence and Security Service (*Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst*, AIVD) describes this conviction as the narrative of an 'evil elite'.¹ This narrative is extremist² in nature, because this idea could undermine the democratic legal order if a substantial part of society were to believe in it. The AIVD refers to supporters of this 'evil elite narrative' as anti-institutional extremists, because this movement is directed against the government, media, and science (democratic institutions).

Twofold threat

The narrative that an 'evil elite' is in power has two types of consequences. Firstly, the AIVD deems the growing mistrust of the government and institutions which purportedly work for the 'evil elite' fed by this narrative to pose a serious long-term threat to the democratic legal order. It is very important that people are able to express (un)founded criticism of the government and institutions. There is often - even within conspiracy theories³ - an element of truth or legitimate criticism. However, the belief that there is an 'evil elite' which is in control of institutions and wilfully suppresses and partially kills regular citizens in order to obtain complete power is deemed to be subversive to the democratic legal order by the AIVD. The mixture of criticism and the 'evil elite' narrative makes this different from 'normal' criticism and other expressions of dissatisfaction with institutions. This is a crucial distinction to make.

¹ In this context the AIVD defines a narrative as a set of messages which relate to certain events, situations, or developments in the world and believe there to be a certain explanation for these. This explanation does not have to be stated explicitly, but can also be implicit in the systematic repetition of suggestive messages.

² The AIVD defines extremism as a willingness based on ideological motives to carry out non-violent and/or violent activities which undermine the democratic legal order. Examples of non-violent activities are systematic hate-mongering, spreading fear, spreading disinformation, demonising and intimidation, rejecting laws and legislation, and making attempts to establish a parallel society in which the authority of the Dutch government and legal system are rejected.

³ The AIVD defines a conspiracy theory as a specific form of dis- or misinformation, in which people are convinced that certain events or situations were secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful groups with evil intentions.

The fabricated image of an evil government and servile or unreliable media and scientists contributes to the damaging of the trust in the legislative, executive, and/or judicial powers, 'traditional' media, and science, and undermining the legitimacy of these institutions. When the trust in institutions diminishes, society can no longer delegate power to its authorities, and the democratic legal order erodes. If specific groups of people were to stop voting because they no longer trust politicians, their opinions and ideals will not be taken into account as much when political decisions are taken regarding matters in the Netherlands. The judicial system may also come under pressure if people no longer believe that judges are independent. If this is the case, they may also feel as though they do not have to adhere to court rulings. Additionally, the relationship between citizens may also become further polarised because extremists seize upon this narrative to justify an intolerant parallel society. If the number of supporters of the 'evil elite' narrative will continue to grow, it is likely that in time more people will deny the legitimacy of constitutional institutions and treat others with intolerance.

Secondly, in the short term this 'evil elite' narrative may provide a possible justification for the use of violence against the supposed 'evil elite'. Never before did the team dealing with threats against politicians (Team Bedreigde Politici) receive as many reports of threats and intimidation as it did in 2022. This is the police team which handles punishable threats against persons in the central government.⁴ In the first eleven months of 2022, the team already received over 1000 reports; in comparison, in the years before they received a maximum of 600 reports during the entire year. Although we cannot simply demonstrate a connection here, this rise is partially contributed to the increased social unrest regarding matters such as the corona measures and the nitrogen pollution crisis.

It is likely that this unrest is partially fuelled by the 'evil elite' narrative.

An example of the violent threat posed by the 'evil elite' narrative is the 2022 arrest of a man who was devising an assassination attempt on (then resigned) Prime Minister Mark Rutte. He sent multiple inflammatory messages in Telegram groups in which a lot of anti-institutional messages were disseminated. In January 2022 another man was arrested after he visited D66 party leader Sigrid Kaag at her home while carrying a burning torch. He too turned out to be a supporter of various theories which are part of the 'evil elite' narrative.

⁴ www.politie.nl/nieuws/2022/september/30/00-steeds-meer-meldingen-van-bedreiging-politici.html
Steeds meer meldingen van bedreiging politici, dated 30 September 2022.

Duty AIVD

Within the context of national security, the AIVD has the legal duty to conduct investigations into organisations and persons who, either because of the objectives they pursue or through their activities, give cause for serious suspicion that they pose a threat to the continued existence of the democratic legal order, or to the security or to other vital interests of the state.⁵ In light of the threat posed by anti-institutional extremism against the democratic legal order, the AIVD conducts investigations into persons and organisations which can be seen as inciters of the 'evil elite narrative' on the basis of their statements, contacts, and activities. These can be both persons and organisations which operate publicly and actively broadcast the narrative, and persons and organisations which act in the background and e.g. play a large facilitating role. The AIVD's objective is to gain insight into the threat posed by anti-institutional extremism and the related narrative regarding an 'evil elite' in order to enable other parties to counter this threat. This includes government partners, but also the wider public. Both the government and citizens are responsible for the proper functioning of the democratic legal order and society as a whole has to act in order to safeguard the democratic legal order from the effects of extremist ideologies.

An open publication about anti-institutional extremism

In light of the described threats, the AIVD wants to help government partners and institutions understand this phenomenon, in order to also enable society as a whole to recognise and counter the threat of anti-institutional extremism. In this it is crucial that people are able to distinguish between hostility which is based on an extremist ideology, such as detailed the 'evil elite' narrative, and normal forms of criticism of institutions. Activism and radical protest actions are part of the functioning of the democratic legal order. With this publication, the AIVD strives to make it easier for the reader to recognise extremist messages which are part of the 'evil elite' narrative and realise that this narrative is factually incorrect.⁶ The aim is also to ensure that criticism of institutions is not always simply labelled as extremist. After all, criticism, protests, and demonstrations aimed at institutions - including actions in which the limits of the law are tested - are essential for the functioning of the democratic legal order.

The AIVD has chosen to publish an extensive, relatively technical analysis based on intelligence investigations and open sources. Through this we acknowledge the complexity of the threat, the importance of transparency regarding the way the AIVD makes its analyses, and the necessity of nuance in the social debate regarding anti-institutional extremism. In chapter 1 we will describe what it is we mean by the democratic legal order and which assessment framework the AIVD uses in order to assess the non-violent threat posed by all extremist movements in the Netherlands to the democratic legal order. In chapter 2 we will briefly explain the 'evil elite' narrative.

In chapter 3 we will analyse this narrative on the basis of the assessment framework discussed in chapter 1. In chapter 4 we will substantiate our conclusion: why the AIVD considers anti-institutional extremism to pose a significant, long-term threat to the democratic legal order, as well as a possible violent threat in the short term. Lastly, there will be a glossary of terms and the citizens summary of this publication.

The AIVD's analysis is an intelligence analysis, and not an academic report. AIVD intelligence analyses are usually intended for e.g. policy organisations and often have the purpose of promoting measures for the protection of certain interests of the democratic legal order, national security, or other vital interests of the state. As is common in intelligence analyses, the AIVD makes assessments, even if there is no complete and verified information. The AIVD reflects the uncertainty of these assessments by using 'probability terms'. From least to most probable, these are: 'unlikely', 'doubtful', 'possible', 'likely', and 'highly likely'.

⁵ This is the AIVD's so-called 'A task' as described in the Intelligence and Security Services Act 2017 (Wiv2017), Article 8(2)(a).

⁶ The AIVD considers a narrative to be the whole of messages which together tell a story; in this context it concerns a certain world view that is painted. If a narrative supposes there is a certain problem with regard to the state and/or society and suggests a way to resolve this, the narrative is considered an ideology.

1 Democratic legal order

In this chapter, we will describe the Dutch 'broad approach' to the democratic legal order.⁷ We will discuss what this means in chapter 1.1. Knowledge of the value of the democratic legal order and how it works is essential. This contributes to creating a basis of support amongst everyone who lives in the democratic legal order. This may also increase willingness in society to actively offer resistance if the democratic legal order is under threat. In particular for institutions like the AIVD, which are tasked with safeguarding the democratic legal order, knowledge about the democratic legal order is very important for identifying and assessing possible threats.

The AIVD has therefore drawn up an assessment framework in order to analyse non-violent, extremist threats. We will outline this framework at the end of this chapter.



Photo 1. Cityscape of The Hague with the Hofvijver and various ministries. Photo: ANP

1.1 The broad Dutch approach to the democratic legal order

In the Netherlands, the democratic legal order is seen as a social order, on the basis of law and democracy. This is why the term 'democratic legal order' is preferred. Not every legal order is democratic. Many non-democratic countries do have a legal order (laws and regulations everyone has to adhere to), but no democratic legal order. A democratic legal order is based on fundamental rights, which indicate in which way a government should behave with regard to its citizens. This concerns classic fundamental rights⁸ and fundamental social rights.⁹ Furthermore a legal order is considered democratic when its citizens, on the basis of equal political rights, are regularly involved in the establishment, evaluation, and potential improvement of the legal order. This happens e.g. in elections.

The 'broad approach' means that the democratic legal order in the Netherlands is considered to be a political system (a democratic rule of law) and a way of coexisting (an open society). The relationship between the government and its citizens is also referred to as the vertical dimension. The open society and the relationships between citizens are also referred to as the horizontal dimension. This also concerns the interaction between the state and society, in which media and science play an important role. Both the institutions and the citizens are responsible for the proper functioning of the democratic legal order.

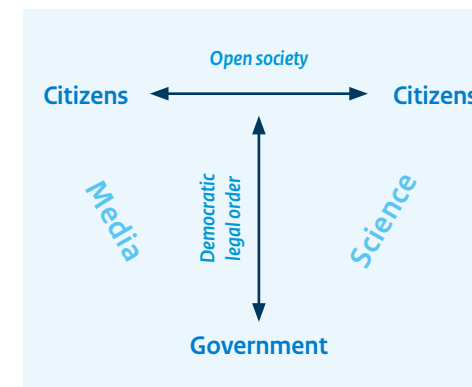


Figure 1. Dimensions of a democratic legal order

⁷ Already described as such in the 2004 AIVD publication: From dawa to jihad. The various threats from radical Islam to the democratic legal order. See <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2004/12/23/van-dawa-tot-jihad>, p.13

⁸ This includes matters such as citizens' rights to equal treatment, rights such as freedom of religion and freedom of speech, and rights such as the right to vote.

⁹ This includes matters such as the right to housing and health care.

1.2 Essential structural elements and necessary process conditions

The proper functioning of the political system, the way citizens coexist, and the interaction between these two are all determined by the so-called *essential structural elements and the necessary process conditions* of the democratic legal order.

The essential structural elements relate to the vertical axis described on page 11. These are basic principles, procedures, and institutions which shape the relationship between the government and citizens. It mostly concerns matters recorded in legislation and regulations such as the separation of powers, elections, and fundamental rights. We will highlight a few in the table below.

Essential structural elements
Principle of legality
Government monopoly of violence
Separation of the powers / trias politica
Fundamental rights
Freedom of information
Majority rule in political decision-making
Rights of (political) minorities
Active and passive electoral rights
Non-interventionist government approach with regard to citizens' private lives

Necessary process conditions, on the other hand, usually refer to conditions that are not officially recorded. As such these are not or rarely recorded in any legislation and as such they cannot be enforced by governments. People 'can' ignore these process conditions and choose not to act accordingly. However, this would be undesirable for the proper functioning of the democratic legal order. There are many necessary process requirements for the democratic legal order. We will highlight a few in the table below.

General process requirements
Sufficient degree of public trust
Sufficient degree of trust in the democracy
Sufficient degree of social cohesion
Sufficient degree of loyalty towards other citizens
Respect for multiformity and diversity
Respect for the open character of our society

Specific process requirements

Acknowledge that instability is part of a democratic legal order

We constantly have to attempt to reach agreement, but at the same time arguments and criticism must always be stimulated.¹⁰

Fierce disagreements and polarisation are legitimate, so long as all parties involved respect each other and do not dehumanise each other. The democratic legal order could also be referred to as 'the art of peaceful fighting'.¹¹

Acknowledge that people are always heterogeneous, with different ideals, interests, and identities. Individually elected representatives can never claim that they represent the people as a whole.

Acknowledge that the responsibilities of 'the people' are not limited to electing representatives. Also after delegating the chosen representatives, citizens remain responsible for the ups and downs of the democratic legal order. In particular, society as a whole always remains responsible for the relations between citizens.

1.3 Democratic legal order in motion

The democratic legal order is not a product that is 'fully ready for use'. It is not a fixed thing and is inherently dynamic. That is why it is important not to idealise the description of the relationship 'between the government and citizens' and 'between citizens' or make it too prescriptive. The democratic legal order is always a 'work in progress'. A healthy democratic legal order can always be improved.¹² That is why it is important to leave room for the development of new ideas on democracy. In a healthy democracy there is always a combination between searching for agreement on how the most significant issues in society should be solved, and facilitating room for objection, with accompanying fierce debates.¹³ As such, a democratic legal order does not necessarily mean a society without friction.

¹⁰ In the democratic legal order it is important to be able to meet each other in the middle through consensus (agreement) where it concerns important decisions, but at the same time it is also important to facilitate and stimulate dissension (difference of opinion). This last point is necessary for the creativity and constant innovation of the democratic legal order and it also prevents 'tunnel vision'.

¹¹ See Hans Achterhuis and Nico Koning in their 2014 book 'De kunst van het vreedzaam vechten' (the art of peaceful fighting).

¹² French philosopher Claude Lefort describes this as follows: 'Democracy? It is a dream to suppose that we already know what it is, to be pleased with its condition or to consider it miserable. Democracy is nothing more than a range of possibilities, rooted in a near past which we have yet to fully explore.'

¹³ As described by Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe in her book 'Agonistics, Thinking the World Politically' (2013).

1.4 Undermining of the democratic legal order by extremism

The AIVD investigates extremist movements because these consist of persons and organisations which are ideologically motivated to carry out violent and/or non-violent activities in order to undermine the democratic legal order. Terrorism therefore also falls under extremism. It includes terrorist movements such as global jihadism and right-wing terrorism. These terrorist movements pose a threat to the democratic legal order because they want to use serious violence to cause fear amongst (part of) the population, effect social change and/or influence political decision-making.¹⁴ Depending on how successful they are in this, it could undermine the functioning of the democratic legal state and open society.

In addition to terrorist movements, the AIVD also investigates other extremist movements. These movements do not propagate (serious) violence, but nevertheless still pose a threat to the democratic legal order through the dissemination of extremist ideology. The spread of extremist narratives can mean that the above-mentioned essential structural elements and/or necessary process conditions of the democratic legal order come under pressure.¹⁵ The effects of this form of extremist threat are not as visible as those of a terrorist threat, but the potential impact on the functioning of the democratic legal order is much bigger in the long term. If trust in institutions further declines, it may also have an effect on people's behaviour. They might choose not to vote in elections or even attempt to disrupt the voting process, while also establishing their own institutions. Another example could be that they might establish their own (intolerant) parallel society. Furthermore, the spread of extremist ideology can also increase the breeding ground for radicalisation towards terrorism.

¹⁴ The AIVD defines terrorism as: 'Having the ideological willingness (to prepare) to commit violence against people's lives or cause significant damage which is disruptive to society, with the goal of achieving societal change, strike terror into (part of) the population, and/or influence political decision-making.'

¹⁵ It differs per extremist movement to what extent the inciters and supporters intend to undermine the democratic legal order. Extremists who oppose the system of the democratic legal order and want to reject it can be labelled 'anti-democratic'. For the impact of the threat it does not matter if the extremists are consciously undermining the democratic legal order or if this is just a side effect of their actions.

1.5 Framework for the assessment of the threat from extremist narratives

The AIVD investigates four different types of non-violent extremist movements which pose a threat to the democratic legal order primarily through the spread of extremist ideas. It concerns anti-institutional extremism, left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism, and Islamic extremism. The AIVD uses the same framework for all these movements in order to assess the threat represented by the spread of their extremist narratives, See figure 2. The eventual conclusion is not a simple mathematical calculation, as the figure might make it seem, but it is the combination of qualitative assessments which are made on the basis of the available intelligence.



Figure 2. Assessment framework to assess the threat represented by the spread of extremist narratives

In applying this assessment framework, we first look at the nature of the messages in order to determine the gravity of the undermining of the democratic legal order. We determine to what extent the messages undermine the aforementioned essential structural elements and necessary process conditions and to what extent these lead to extremist action. In order to determine the influence and by extension the scope of the subversion of the extremist narrative, we assess the extent to which the narrative is supported in the Netherlands as well as its potential for growth. Lastly, we will assess the resilience of our democratic institutions and society against the extremist narrative. On the basis of these elements, we can draw a conclusion about the threat posed by the narrative

Ideology of anti-institutional extremism

2.1 The narrative: an 'evil elite' in power

The essence of the 'evil elite' narrative is that there is a small, international, 'evil elite' in power who acts on the basis of a 'bigger' secret plan. This purported 'evil elite' has the goal of achieving total world control and therefore wants to oppress, enslave, and partially murder the regular population. According to the narrative, this elite is in various parts of government, such as the legislative, judicial, and executive powers, as well as within 'traditional' media and science. Various positions and roles are thus part of this purported elite. Scientists, persons who administer vaccinations, local government officials, police officers, and/or politicians could all be considered as part of this elite. The elite supposedly fabricates and orchestrates events and phenomena such as the corona pandemic, the nitrogen pollution crisis, the war in Ukraine, the earthquakes in Turkey, and the train derailment in Voorschoten. Their goal is to frighten and oppress the population to force them to obey.

Not everyone who is part of the government, 'traditional' media, and science is part of 'evil elite' according to the narrative. Some people within the system do enjoy trust, for example some scientists, journalists, and politicians who make statements that are in line with the 'evil elite' narrative.

More information on this narrative follows in chapter 3, where this narrative is further analysed on the basis of the assessment framework from chapter 1.

2.2 Various subnarratives

Although there is an overarching narrative regarding an 'evil elite', there are various groups within this movement which each adhere to their own ideology, i.e. subnarratives, which they frame within the larger, overarching narrative.

It should be noted that not every believer in conspiracy theories is considered to be extremist. The AIVD only considers conspiracy theorists to be extremist if they have an ideologically motivated willingness to carry out violent and/or non-violent activities in order to undermine the democratic legal order. We will describe the subnarratives of the extremist 'evil elite' narrative which are currently the most prominent. However, there are no clear dividing lines between the various narratives. Individuals may believe in multiple narratives at the same time, and the narratives themselves also show partial overlap. There is generally no clear view of what the world should look like following the fall of the 'evil elite'. This gives different groups the joint goal of 'being against the current situation' and also prevents any discord regarding what the new situation should look like.

One example of a prominent anti-institutional subnarrative is the idea that the described 'evil elite' are not just guilty of oppressing the people, but also of child trafficking and satanic child abuse. These groups e.g. make connections between the death of certain children and satanic paedophilia. This has already led to several threats at the representatives of this supposed elite.

There is also a growing group of people who believe that the 'evil elite' has a secret, dictatorial agenda from which they are supposedly imposing a 'woke' ideology on people. This group within anti-institutional extremism originated from a larger social phenomenon of people speaking out against the so-called 'woke' body of ideas. Anti-institutional extremists who speak out against this take things a step further and believe that the 'evil elite' wants to use these ideas to secure their own power through forcing the population to follow these ideas. They believe that the government and media are wilfully spreading a certain ideology and control public opinion on for example 'woke culture', LGBTI+ emancipation, climate change, and immigration. It is stated that the 'evil elite' does not devote its attention to the climate because they are really worried about this, but that the climate crisis was invented because a lot of money can be made through the creation of new energy sources. The term 'cultural Marxism' is also often mentioned in this context.¹⁶

Another subnarrative blends the 'evil elite' narrative with spiritual beliefs. This group emphasises that they are in fight between Good and Evil. This narrative has many elements from various currents, including Christianity/Gnosticism and/or New Age. They argue that God gives humans the right to disobey the 'evil elite' or to wage a spiritual war against the 'evil elite'. In science, this phenomenon is also called 'conspirituality'.¹⁷

A final example of anti-institutional extremist subnarrative concerns the 'sovereign citizens' or the sovereign citizen movement. Municipalities in the Netherlands, the tax authorities, and the police are frequently faced with persons who declare themselves to be 'sovereign'. The sovereign citizens are part of a broader phenomenon in which citizens separate themselves from Dutch society and/or even strive for a parallel society. A large number of people who call themselves sovereign believe that the Dutch government has no legitimate power over them and that Dutch laws and legislations do not apply to them.

¹⁶ Cultural Marxism is seen as the belief that a left-wing elite wants to overthrow the Western culture through imposing Marxist ideas.

¹⁷ See for example Journal for the Academic Study of Religion Conspirituality in COVID-19 times: a mixed-method study of anti-vaccine movements in Spain, dated 2022; Journal of Contemporary Religion Conspirituality and the web: A case study of David Icke's media use, dated 2022; Journal for the Academic Study of Religion Selling (Con)spirituality and COVID-19 in Australia: Convictions, complexity and countering dis/misinformation, dated 2022; Government report for Department of Communities and Justice Online Far Right Extremist and Conspirational Narratives during the COVID-19 Pandemic, dated 2021.

It is a complicated narrative which considers laws to be contracts which only apply if you agree to them. If you do not consent, then the law does not apply to you. Sovereign citizens therefore no longer believe in external authority and state that only they are responsible for their own life. A small number of them are even preparing for a violent struggle which they believe will eventually be initiated by the elite.

2.3 Overlap with other (extremist) groups

Anti-institutional extremism is not part of right-wing extremism and vice versa. Although there is a lot of overlap between both movements as concerns hostility towards the current government and institutions, based on similar underlying narratives, the AIVD sees them as two separate movements.

The biggest difference is in the way they view 'their own group'. The right-wing extremists first and foremost dedicate themselves to the 'white race' which they view as superior. Dominant within right-wing extremism in the Netherlands is the so-called 'Umvolkung conspiracy theory' in which right-wing extremists claim that there is a Jewish elite which purposefully facilitates mass migration in order to weaken the 'white race'. This mass migration would cause the number of white people in the Netherlands to decrease, leading to the replacement of the so-called white identity. The government would purportedly be acting by order of this Jewish elite.

Anti-institutional extremists stand for the people as a whole and view themes such as migration policy as new proof that the 'evil elite' want to oppress the people, but also see this oppression in a number of other topics. Anti-institutional extremists are not anti-Semitic by definition, nor do they view the 'white race' as superior. Although many of the conspiracy theories that are referred to by anti-institutional extremists are anti-Semitic in their origins, e.g. stories that the elite consists of families such as the Rothschilds, it is only rarely that explicit anti-Semitic statements are made. In general they refer to the elite, without referring to 'the Jews'. The AIVD deems it likely that many supporters of the 'evil elite' narrative are not aware of the anti-Semitic origins of many of these conspiracies. As such, the anti-institutional narrative has the potential to appeal to a much broader ethnic and political crowd. This is less true for the right-wing extremist narrative, because right-wing extremists want to protect the so-called white race and push off against other 'races'.

But because both groups believe that problems such as the energy prices, immigration, and the lack of housing are the fault of the government and institutions, both groups can relate to the 'evil elite' narrative. The narrative is very flexible and various types of groups latch on to this if any of the themes appeal to them. They are united by a joint aversion of the government and institutions as well as the belief in a conspiracy of a powerful elite who rule in the background. Where these groups overlap, anti-Semitic statements are made, referencing well-known anti-Semitic elements of the messages. Right-wing groups opportunistically also utilise the themes and actions of anti-institutional extremists in order to reach a bigger audience and normalise their own message.

At the same time, there are themes that are relevant to both groups in different ways. As regards climate, anti-institutional extremists differ strongly from at least a number of right-wing extremist groups. Where anti-institutional groups view the climate policy as a method by the 'evil elite' to oppress the people, a small part of right-wing extremists sees the sustainability of agriculture as an important part of nationalism in which our nature is treated with care. A different part of right-wing extremism poses that the ecological crisis paves the way for mass immigration. According to them, governments and multinationals are the cause of this ecological crisis.

Right-wing extremists and anti-institutional extremists have differing opinions on what the world should look like without the current 'evil elite'. Anti-institutional extremists first want to overthrow the 'evil elite', without having a clear idea of what should happen after that. Right-wing extremists want to work towards a new system in which they have a bigger influence, so that they can work towards a society in which the 'white race' and their way of life is protected.

Apart from the overlap with right-wing extremism, there are several, more surprising, signs that some Islamic extremist inciters have an interest in the 'evil elite' narrative. The other way around, anti-institutional inciters have also shown an interest in some of the more conservative views of Islam. Like right-wing extremists, they likely find concordance in their shared anti-institutional sentiment and conservative values.

Although there is some overlap with a number of right-wing extremist currents as regards their ideas on e.g. the role of the government, there is little visible cooperation between the groups.

2.4 International influences

Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands is constantly influenced by developments abroad, in particular by developments in the United States. Although there are conspiracy theorists everywhere cross the world, large parts of anti-institutional ideas come from the United States. Furthermore, the Netherlands has always shown a relatively large amount of attention for developments in the United States, and this is also true for Dutch anti-institutional extremists. A clear example is the argument that election fraud was committed. The first time that possible election fraud was mentioned was when President Trump lost the US elections, after which there also came claims that local elections had not been fair in countries such as Brazil and the Netherlands. After the storming of the Capitol, similar actions were discussed in the Netherlands. These ideas never turned more concrete.

The sovereign citizens movement in the Netherlands also shows international influences. The sovereign citizens movement has existed for much longer in countries such as the United States, Sweden, and Germany and there are also persons in the Czech Republic and Belgium who claim to be sovereign citizens. In December 2022 the German police arrested supporters of the right-wing extremist sovereign Reichsbürger movement. Supporters of this movement are united by a shared aversion of the way democratic institutions are given shape.

Reichsbürger do not acknowledge the current Federal Republic of Germany and are of the opinion that German laws do not apply to them. In Belgium too several house searches were conducted in September 2022 at the residences of persons with similar beliefs. During these house searches one individual died following a shooting incident. He called himself a 'sovereign citizen' and was preparing for the end times.

At the same time, the rise of social media has made it increasingly difficult to identify the origins of certain messages. After all, some narratives also come to e.g. the United States via other countries. Anti-institutional extremists in the Netherlands have attempted to frame the nitrogen pollution crisis as an effort by the so-called evil elite to oppress farmers. This started in the Netherlands, but gained international traction when persons such as former American President Trump, his former security advisor Michel Flynn, and Fox News in the United States as well as Marine Le Pen in France provided an international stage for this news.

Movements which believe that the elite is guilty of satanic child abuse, share a lot of similarities with the stories from the QAnon conspiracy theories. These were already circulating in the Netherlands before QAnon existed. If we look at the origins of such theories, there were already rumours about satanic child abuse as early as the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries and stories about the elite drinking children's blood in the twelfth century.

The messages and narratives of anti-institutional extremism are clearly becoming more interwoven at a global level. Apart from that, there is likely no large-scale international cooperation amongst anti-institutional extremists. There are some signs however that a number of Dutch anti-institutional inciters are interested in this. After all, they believe there is an international 'evil elite' which threatens us all.

A conceivable (future) risk of the anti-institutional movement and the 'evil elite' narrative is the possibility that it may be used by foreign state-sponsored actors. Through covert influencing they could play into certain existing social sentiments in order to increase tensions within Dutch society. It is notable that the extremist anti-institutional movement is predominantly pro-Russian and paints Putin as a 'saviour' in the fight against the 'evil elite'. Although this pro-Russian attitude does not necessarily contribute to the spread of the narrative, as Dutch citizens are generally pro-Ukrainian or neutral as regards the conflict, this attitude likely does make this extremist movement more susceptible to covert influencing from Russia. However, the AIVD still believes that the risk posed to the Dutch democratic legal order by Russian covert influencing is limited. Moscow is more likely to aim its influencing activities towards the West at countries that it deems more important or susceptible than the Netherlands.

2.5 The background of the development of anti-institutional sentiments

The rise of social media has caused several protest movements to become more entangled. It is quick and easy for people to find each other online. Persons who oppose certain policies such as migration or nitrogen pollution policy, come into contact with persons who are against policy on different themes. In spite of the different origins of their objections, some of the persons have found each other in their opposition against and aversion to the government and institutions. Their ideas were then constantly confirmed within this online environment. This development gained momentum during the corona pandemic. Various people and groups came into contact via the internet and then met at physical demonstrations. Within this broader protest movement there is an increasingly large group which turns away from what they call an 'evil elite'.

Part of this movement has moreover radicalised from activist to extremist over time. Initially, their focus was on the policy regarding COVID measures, and this later grew to include other themes. Various topics which touch on latent concerns that people already had about the government and institutions were adopted in existing messages. These messages were spread incredibly quickly through social media. For some of the movement the narrative of the 'evil elite' offered an explanation for all their concerns and the adversity they experienced, and from there these ideas became increasingly dominant. The group which continued to believe in this narrative of an 'evil elite', has turned into the anti-institutional extremist movement.



Photo 2. Large poster with the call to rise up against the COVID measures, used at a protest in The Hague. It shows prominent persons which are allegedly part of the 'evil elite'. Photo: ANP

3 Assessment undermining democratic legal order

In this chapter we will explain how the AIVD assesses the threat posed by anti-institutional extremism. The conclusion follows from steps from the assessment framework we introduced in chapter 1. We first look at the nature of the messages in order to determine the gravity of the subversion (in the vertical and horizontal dimension) and in order to assess to what extent they incite extremist action. We then describe the extent of support and the extent of resilience.

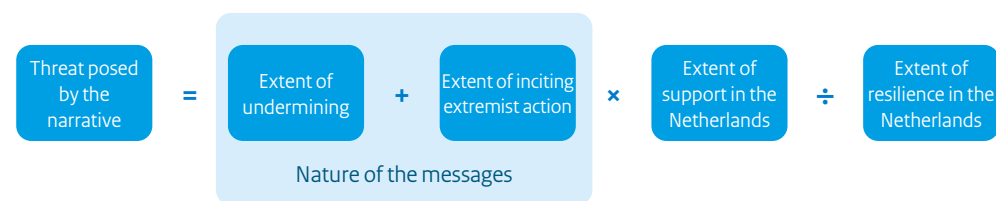


Figure 3. Assessment framework to assess the threat represented by the spread of extremist narratives

3.1 Undermining political system (the vertical dimension)

Generally the messages of anti-institutional extremists are not aimed at the system of a democratic legal order. Although anti-institutional extremists do not accept the authority of the current government and strive for such things as a new government, what they consider to be correct media coverage, other/new judges, and independent law enforcement, in general there are no explicit proposals for a different political system.

Most of the supporters of this narrative advocate matters such as the preservation of current constitutional rights and do in fact appear to support a separation of powers. Active participation in the democratic process is therefore mentioned as a means to change the current situation. People have lost faith, but the messages do not target the system itself.

The 'evil elite' narrative poses a threat to the vertical dimension of the democratic legal order because it wrongfully harms and undermines the trust in the institutions of the rule of law on the basis of factually incorrect messages stemming from an extremist ideology. As stated before, legitimate criticism is an indispensable part of democracy. It is therefore important to be able to assess with a high degree of certainty whether elements from a certain narrative are factually correct or incorrect. The AIVD does not see any evidence for the existence of an 'evil elite' which is in control of all institutions in the Netherlands and has the intention of using fabricated events or interpretations of actual events, oppressing the people, enslaving them, or even killing them. The narrative assumes a factually incorrect world view. In this it differs from (un)founded criticism and other expressions of dissatisfaction with institutions. This is a crucial distinction to make.

We only speak of extremist statements when these are supported by an extremist ideology, such as described in the 'evil elite' narrative. If this 'evil elite' were to exist, this in itself would pose a threat to the democratic legal order and as such would be investigated by the AIVD. However, anti-institutional extremists will believe that the AIVD is also under the control of the 'evil elite'.

Some institutions are vital for the functioning of the vertical dimension of the democratic legal order. Below we will detail per institution in which way it is undermined by the 'evil elite' narrative.

Factually incorrect?

The AIVD does not deem it to be its task to assess the correctness of the messages that are spread within Dutch society. It is the AIVD's task to provide an apolitical and factual interpretation. It is, however, necessary to evaluate the correctness of specific messages in order to assess whether a certain narrative undermines the democratic legal order. A critical but factually correct message about the rule of law in which it is stated that the system does not function properly, actually contributes to improving this system. Lastly, if there was an 'evil elite' that wished to enslave the people, this would pose a serious threat to the democratic legal order. In that case it would be important that the institutions and society were aware of this, so that the threat could be countered. However, spreading a world view about an 'evil elite' which wants to enslave the people while this is factually incorrect, in itself poses a threat to the democratic legal order. Because this world view is factually incorrect, this narrative undermines the democratic legal order by inciting hatred, spreading fear, causing demonisation and intimidation towards institutions of the state. As described in paragraph 3.1.

In light of the vital interest of being able to express free and unrestrained criticism towards institutions, the AIVD is very reluctant to assess the correctness of these messages, even if they are extremist in nature. That is why the AIVD does this only if the narrative of which these messages are part are such in nature that they could significantly undermine the democratic legal order and if it can be said with a very high degree of certainty that this narrative is factually incorrect. The AIVD carries out this assessment in order to gauge the threat that is posed by this narrative, not to further the social debate.

In this case the AIVD merely assesses whether there is an (international) elite which is in control of all institutions in the Netherlands and has a larger secret, evil plan of using fabricated events or interpretations of actual events, oppressing the people, enslaving them, or even killing them.

You can read in the main text that the AIVD assesses this core element of the anti-institutional extremist narrative to be incorrect.

3.1.1 Messages which undermine the legislative, executive, and/or judicial powers

The 'evil elite' narrative is clearly anti-government. The government, with the exception of several figures selected by anti-institutional extremists themselves, is painted as a malicious enemy and as such delegitimised.

When talking about reasons that the Dutch government does not function properly, the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the 'Great Reset' are often mentioned. The 'Great Reset' is a proposal by the WEF to rebuild the global economy in a more equitable way following the corona pandemic.¹⁸ Within the 'evil elite' narrative, however, this is seen as a big secret plan by the elite to transition to a new reality in which they will have full control over the world and thin out the population. An example of a statement made about the WEF is that the WEF is directing the Dutch government to carry out the Great Reset's secret agenda, without the government having any input in this. The WEF is also referred to as the 'spider in the web' and, according to supporters of the narrative, is the one that is 'really' in charge together with other big, international organisations.

In addition to the focus on the government as a whole, the 'evil elite' narrative also focuses on separate institutions.



Photo 3. A cyclist on the Prins Willem-Alexander bridge across the Waal river passes by graffiti slogans which question the corona virus and the trustworthiness of traditional news outlets. Photo: ANP

Firstly, the judiciary is seen as part of the 'evil elite'. Judges are painted as criminals and there are calls to file charges against individual judges and take them into custody. Anti-institutional extremists do not have any faith in the independence of the judiciary. They spread messages which state that the government-appointed judges go along with the government narrative that is imposed on the population. The Public Prosecution Service is also dismissed as being corrupt.

Secondly, the 'evil elite' narrative claims that the government and States General, with some minor exceptions, are part of the elite. This distrust in the legislative authority shows itself in the various messages that are spread. One of the claims is that the 2021 elections are invalid. They claim that fraud was committed and the House of Representatives came to power through a coup.

It is also claimed that the legislative power fabricates issues in order to implement its own agenda. Messages which relate to this claim, for example, state that the government attempts to push a certain view of reality on people which does not match the actual reality. One example of an issue which was devised by the government, is the corona pandemic.

It is said that the purpose of the measures was not to improve national health, but had everything to do with corruption, money, and the elite's power. Corona does not exist or is not as bad as the elite would have the people believe. Apart from any consequences these messages may have for the trust in the legislative powers, they are problematic in themselves due to their possible effects on national health. Another example are various messages regarding the war in Ukraine. Some messages state that there are no civilian casualties, but as part of a bigger secret, people are told that there are, or that Putin invaded Ukraine because there are laboratories in which bioweapons are being developed for use against Russia.

According to supporters of the 'evil elite' narrative, the elite gains more and more power through these fabricated crises. They furthermore believe that the elite is purposefully killing democracy, pushing through a radical left agenda, and silencing citizens who express criticism. In doing so, they want to enslave and even kill part of 'the ordinary people'.

Lastly, they view the executive power as the 'lackey' or 'instrument' of the elite, carrying out its agenda. People no longer have any faith in police, because it acts by order of the elite and is no longer independent. Some of the messages that are spread state that the 'evil elite' places people on key positions within institutions such as the police or the media, which means these are no longer independent.

The trust in various institutions is disproportionately affected by the dissemination of factually incorrect messages. Because supporters of the narrative share falsehoods regarding the 'evil elite', the public trust in its representatives undeservedly diminishes. This decreasing trust can have serious long-term consequences for the democratic legal order.

¹⁸ For more explanation on the plans of the WEF see www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/now-is-the-time-for-a-great-reset

Faith in institutions is, after all, essential for government-citizen relations as well as for the relationship between citizens. An important note is that the messages of the narrative are strengthened and reinforced by grievances regarding actual government actions and the way in which these are communicated to the public. Anti-institutional extremists place the failings in the childcare benefit system, lack of open communication surrounding the face mask deal, Prime Minister Rutte deleting text messages, unclear nitrogen emissions policy, and other personal frustrations with the government in the context of an 'evil elite' narrative.

These types of incidents and the way in which the government communicates about these incidents strengthen the belief that anti-institutional extremist supporters have in the narrative that regular citizens are wittingly being oppressed.

3.1.2 Messages which undermine media and science

The narrative also targets 'traditional' media and science. They are allegedly also part of the 'evil elite' and therefore purposefully spread and perpetuate 'fake news'. Because people no longer trust these media outlets, numerous alternative media outlets are developed to spread 'the truth'. Social media is also a source of alternative information. The purpose is to inform the audience about topics that are not discussed in 'traditional' media or are represented in an 'incorrect' way.

This is reinforced by the fact that 'traditional' media plays an important role in identifying and labelling disinformation, which can include anti-institutional theories. On the one hand, the development of alternative media has large democratic potential. It offers a platform for alternative voices and possible criticism of the established order. On the other hand, the frequent spread of factually incorrect information poses a threat to the functioning of 'traditional' media'. It is exactly the gatekeeping function of 'traditional' media that is crucial, because people need multiform and reliable information in order to be able to take well-informed decisions.

Scientists are also dismissed as unreliable on the basis of factually incorrect information within the 'evil elite' narrative. It is claimed that they are part of the elite and have an evil agenda which they want to carry out in secret. As previously mentioned, supporters of the narrative claim that corona does not exist or is not as bad as the elite would have the people believe. Climate research is similarly dismissed as a hoax. Anti-institutional extremists believe that these themes are purposefully used within the larger secret and evil plan to oppress the people.

As stated before, not everyone who is part of the government, 'traditional' media, and science is part of 'evil elite' according to the narrative. Some people within the system do enjoy trust, for example some scientists, journalists, and politicians who make statements that are in line with the 'evil elite narrative'.

Messages which promote an intolerant, parallel legal order and/or society

A number of anti-institutional extremists want to create a kind of sanctuary where they can withdraw from the authority of institutions and from where they will defend themselves from the 'evil elite' with their own militias. This parallel society would have to have its own shadow government, its own currency, and its own education. Isolationism in itself is not subversive to the democratic legal order. Turning away from society does not become problematic until it is accompanied by intolerant isolationism.¹⁹ However, within the 'evil elite' narrative, the existing institutions, which are after all a part of this elite, are not acknowledged and the democratically elected parliament and parliament-controlled government are rejected. By systematically rejecting Dutch institutions, these messages undermine the democratic legal order on the vertical dimension.

The above applies to the sovereign citizens more than it does to others who believe in the 'evil elite' narrative. A large group of sovereign citizens claims that the Dutch laws and regulations do not apply to them any longer. In letters which some of them write to their local governments, they write that they will no longer be represented by politicians and they, for example, withdraw from authority by developing their own identification documents or by not paying their taxes or fines. They want to declare themselves stateless and through doing so withdraw from Dutch laws and regulations. It goes without saying that Dutch laws and regulations still apply on Dutch territory.

Intolerant isolationism

Isolating yourself from society in itself is not subversive to the democratic legal order. Unless this form of isolationism takes on intolerant forms. In order to determine whether this is the case, the AIVD uses the following criteria. Only one of the following four criteria has to be met for isolationism to be considered intolerant:

- the own circle is developed and expanded on the basis of preaching hatred towards the 'outside world';
- dissension within the own circle is made impossible;
- withdrawal from the own circle is made impossible;
- people accept only authority within their own circle and the democratically elected and checked government is rejected; people want to adhere to only their own laws and regulations and not that of the government outside of this circle.

NB: ecclesiastical courts, rabbinical courts, or sharia advisory bodies are considered legitimate, so long as the broader legal system from 'outside' is accepted.

¹⁹ See also AIVD publications *From dawa to jihad. The various threats from radical Islam to the democratic legal order, from 2004.* <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2004/12/23/van-dawa-tot-jihad>. And *Salafism in the Netherlands: diversity and dynamics, from 2015* <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2015/09/23/salafisme-in-nederland-diversiteit-en-dynamiek>

3.2 Undermining open society (the horizontal dimension)

Although the 'evil elite' narrative mainly affects the vertical dimension of the democratic legal order, it also impacts the functioning of the 'open society'. This impact is limited, however. The AIVD also estimates that, in part due to the flexibility of the 'evil elite' narrative and the lack of a joint goal, anti-institutional extremism is the most tolerant and inclusive extremist movement right now. This also means that this movement likely has the biggest potential to grow. Below we have detailed for each criterion of the assessment framework why the AIVD estimates that the impact on the horizontal dimension is as yet limited.

3.2.1 Messages which discourage open criticism of institutions, power structures, and other members of society

The 'evil elite' narrative is not aimed at discouraging criticism of institutions, power structures, and other members of society. It is also unlikely that the freedom of speech will be structurally restricted by anti-institutional extremists. This group makes frequent use of constitutional rights such as freedom of speech or freedom of demonstration. As a matter of fact, people are encouraged to investigate by themselves and form their own opinion. The narrative likely does result in polarisation between proponents and opponents of anti-institutional messages, which in time can be subversive to the open society. Examples of this are online intimidation of alleged opponents of anti-institutional extremism or the verbal abuse and denigration of persons who adhered to the COVID measures and/or were vaccinated.

Discussions, sometimes very fierce ones, on social media or in people's homes are also a result of this polarisation. Right now these issues are likely incidental and not structural, meaning that the undermining of the open society in this way is as yet limited.

3.2.2 Messages aimed at ascribing different values and/or rights to a certain section of the population

Contrary to for example right-wing extremism, anti-institutional extremism does not label specific population groups as inferior or as a threat. The exception to this are inciters and supporters who, in addition to being anti-institutional, are also right-wing extremist.

3.2.3 Messages which promote an intolerant, parallel legal order and/or society

Although the 'evil elite' narrative can lead to the establishment of parallel societies, it generally cannot be said that these are intolerant towards the horizontal dimension, so towards other citizens. Dissenting or withdrawing from the anti-institutional movement is likely not made impossible.

A parallel legal order and/or society based on anti-institutional extremism could potentially become intolerant where there is an overlap between right-wing extremism and anti-institutional extremism. The antisemitic origins of many messages in the 'evil elite' narrative may contribute to this in the future.

Although many supporters of the narrative are likely unfamiliar with these origins, right-wing extremists may see these as starting points to shed more light on the antisemitic aspect. At this moment, however, the AIVD does not have any indications that the broader anti-institutional group projects enemy stereotypes on those with different beliefs.



Photo 4. People out shopping in the city centre of Groningen. Photo: iStockphoto

3.3 Extent of inciting extremist action

In addition to the undermining of the democratic legal order, it is also important to investigate to what extent the narrative encourages violent and non-violent extremist action. Although in principle it does not explicitly incite violent action, it does provide a framework in which there is an enemy elite with which they are in a state of war.

Adherents of this ideology argue that they live in occupied territory and are at war with the 'evil elite'. The goal of anti-institutional extremism is to overthrow the 'evil elite' in order to restore what they believe to be the 'true' democratic legal order. Anti-institutional extremists believe that people who are part of the 'evil elite' should be arrested and tried. It is said for example that so-called representatives of the 'evil elite' should be brought before a tribunal and that the 'old world' will be restored. The death penalty is often seen as a legitimate punishment for the 'evil elite'. Some people for example also state that they have little faith in a purely political solution to the issue, because the elite censors opponents.

An example of more violent statements are the calls for citizens' arrests. For some people, this belief could legitimise extremist action against representatives of the so-called elite. The most likely targets of this are public figures who represent the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, but also e.g. journalists or scientists.

In the introduction of this publication, we already mentioned a number of violent excesses that occurred in the Netherlands. Although the narrative thus does not explicitly preach violence, it does possibly contribute to these kinds of violent incidents.

As yet, the number of violent actions stemming from the 'evil elite' narrative are limited. There is also a no clear view of what the Netherlands should look like following the toppling of the elite. Moreover, the 'evil elite' narrative does not provide a specific strategy to free 'the people' from 'the tyrannical elite'. They propose various tactics in order to overthrow and punish the elite, such as sabotaging the democratic system by using the rights provided to them by that same system, and stimulating civil disobedience and protests. Establishing parallel societies is also mentioned as a possible solution. In general it can be said that anti-institutional extremists call for resistance, but not explicitly for violence. In part because of this, the AIVD deems it doubtful that many supporters will seize upon this narrative to legitimise violence.

The lack of a clear strategy or idea of what the new situation following the fall of the elite should look like, likely also makes the movement less decisive and effective. At the same time, this unpredictable end state also makes the possible threat of violence less predictable. Moreover it is unknown what the risk of radicalisation is, should supporters not achieve the desired results through non-violent action.

The narrative furthermore does lead to fewer violent, but nevertheless intimidating consequences. Such intimidation is facilitated by the fact that there are frequently incidents in which people's personal details are spread, which is called *doxing*. Some members of parliament have indicated that they receive so many threats in their private life that they sometimes do not share their own stance on a topic.²⁰ These types of incidents undermine the authority of various representatives who bear responsibility for their institutions and limit them in their freedom of action. This is therefore subversive to the democratic legal order.

3.4 Extent of support in the Netherlands

The extent of support in the Netherlands is a crucial aspect of the threat posed by an extremist narrative. If only a dozen people believed in a body of ideas that is subversive to the democratic legal order, this could be seen as problematic, but this would not really threaten the continued existence of the democratic legal order. Once considerable parts of Dutch society no longer support the basic principles of the constitutional state and open society, it affects the functioning of the democratic legal order. In the Dutch democratic legal order, the power is with the people who elect their representatives and political decision-making involves a majority rule.

The bigger the part of the population which supports a certain extremist narrative, the bigger the threat this narrative poses to the continued existence of the democratic legal order. It is currently not possible to ascertain the number of supporters of the 'evil elite' narrative with certainty. Considering the number of followers, viewers, and reactions enjoyed by important anti-institutional inciters and channels, the AIVD estimates that over a hundred thousand Dutch persons believe in the 'evil elite' narrative to some extent. Depending on the topic (such as the war in Ukraine, corona, or nitrogen pollution) other large groups may join. It is impossible to make an exact estimate due to the strongly varying landscape and overlap in support between different channels and inciters. It is notable that compared to 2021, when there were still corona measures in the Netherlands, there was a large increase in followers in 2022 rather than the possibly expected decrease following the lifting of the corona measures.

Support of the 'evil elite' narrative moreover has the potential to grow, partially because it goes well together with other extremist messages, and partially because the narrative reaches a large and diverse audience through a number of individuals with a large reach. This normalises the message. Because the narrative is relatively flexible due to the adoption of new messages with regard to current events and phenomena, it is easier for other (extremist) groups, including right-wing extremist and Islamic extremist groups, to latch on to this.

Because there are so many different messages in the narrative, its potential reach is vast. It caters to an audience which already feels unheard by the government, is disappointed in the government's response to certain events, or no longer has faith in the government's approach of diverse and complex (and often interwoven) problems. This relates to problems such as the corona pandemic, the nitrogen pollution crisis, the housing crisis, and the war in Ukraine.

This overlap is reinforced by the fact that the desired end result, after the elite has been overthrown, is still unclear and therefore open to interpretation. As yet there is no discussion on what this should look like. This makes it easier for different groups to unite against a common enemy. As such the supporters of this 'evil elite' narrative are very multiform. Other extremist groups opportunistically also utilise the themes and actions of anti-institutional extremists in order to normalise their own message and reach a bigger audience.

The above increases the reach and supporters base of the narrative. As such, the AIVD estimates that the 'evil elite' narrative is currently the most popular narrative amongst extremist groups in the Netherlands.

²⁰ NOS Onderzoek NOS: Kamerleden voelen zich geïntimideerd, houden mening soms voor zich, d.d. 20 november 2022.

3.5 Extent of resilience

Highly likely that the vast majority rejects the ideas of anti-institutional extremism

It is very difficult to ascertain how big the actual resistance within Dutch society against the 'evil elite' narrative is. As yet, it is highly likely that the vast majority of Dutch society rejects the idea that there is an 'evil elite' that is after world control. On social media people often enter into discussions with people who spread the 'evil elite' narrative. In addition, the media frequently refutes important messages from this anti-institutional extremist narrative. Moreover, a large part of the Dutch population does have faith in the government and institutions.²¹ The democratic legal order is by no means close to collapse at this moment. Within the institutions themselves there is generally considerable resistance against this narrative.

Crumbling resilience due to decreasing trust in institutions

At the same time, the resilience to this narrative has likely decreased in the past years. In the past, ideas about the existence of an elite concocting evil plans in order to achieve complete control were reserved for only a very small group of people, which were not taken seriously by the majority of people. Now, these voices can be heard in various different parts of society and the group of supporters has grown considerably. There are now also a number of institution representatives who support and further spread messages from the narrative. This contributes to decreased trust in institutions.

The AIVD assesses that the decreased resilience to the extremist narrative is likely in part the result of the actual actions of the institutions. In particular the measures that were taken during the corona pandemic, likely increased the credibility of the 'evil elite' narrative for a lot of people. The fact that the government would be capable of taking measures that would have a considerable impact on people's private life and freedom of movement was something that many had likely deemed inconceivable prior to the corona pandemic.

Furthermore, the way in which matters such as the failings in the childcare benefit system, the nitrogen issues, and the gas extraction in Groningen were handled likely increased doubts concerning the trustworthiness of government actions. Anti-institutional extremist inciters play into these doubts and combine legitimate criticism of institutions and expressions of real concerns with the narrative that government actions and failings are all part of a secret, preconceived plan. Through this plan, the 'evil elite' allegedly wants to oppress the population and achieve its secret goal of total world control. For supporters of the anti-institutional extremist ideology, this narrative is now considered to be more logical than the fact that officials of the various institutions - in spite of their best intentions - take measures and/or make mistakes that have a negative impact on the personal circumstances of citizens. Media reporting can also further isolate this group from the rest of society by referring to them with terms such as 'nutter', 'crazy', or 'fantasist'.

Although it is not possible to come to a clear characterisation of persons who are most inclined to believe extremist narratives, there are some possible breeding grounds. An example of this are the effects of the actual failings of the institutions. Some supporters of the 'evil elite' narrative were first impacted by government actions and then came into contact with the anti-institutional movement. A different breeding ground is the increasing globalisation. The AIVD deems it possible that this gives some people the feeling that they are losing control over local matters. However, the group of adherents of the 'evil elite' narrative is very diverse and as such no clear characterisation can be made.

Sustainability of the narrative

The 'evil elite' narrative is relatively flexible due to the constant adoption of new messages regarding current events and phenomena. Moreover a clear idea of the desired, new situation following the toppling of the elite is lacking. This may prevent possible internal discord regarding the 'how' and provides the collective situation of being 'against the current situation'. This flexibility is opportunistically utilised by some groups other than the anti-institutional extremist groups in order to achieve their goals.

The narrative cannot be tested properly because the conspiracy presupposes that powerful entities are attempting to maintain their positions of power somewhere behind the scenes. Because of this, any evidence that is presented to the contrary is refuted by adherents of the narrative as being supportive of the message that the powerful elite has control over everything and deceives the people. This evades any burden of proof for the existence of the 'evil elite'.

The importance of criticism of institutions for the democratic legal order

The AIVD continues to emphasise that being able to express free and unhindered criticism of institutions is vital to the proper functioning of the democratic legal order. This includes radical protest actions which test the limits of the law. Speaking out about government policy, disputing the justice of legal rulings, labelling politicians as elitist, and questioning the truth of journalist or scientific articles, or breaking the law during protests is not extremist. These actions are only extremist if they are substantiated by an extremist ideology, such as the 'evil elite' narrative.

On the basis of public reports from supervisors and journalists, politicians and society sometimes have criticism of the AIVD. The service learns from this criticism and uses this to prevent future mistakes as much as possible. The fact that politicians and citizens can freely criticise the AIVD is an important safeguard for society to ensure that the AIVD sticks to the tasks and conditions provided in the law. Having the trust of society provides AIVD with a 'license to operate'; the mandate it requires to do its work. That is why the service has to continue proving itself to society as a trustworthy institution which contributes to the protection of the democratic legal order and other interests of national security.

²¹ SCP Burgerperspectieven 2022-2, 2022.

4 Conclusion and outlook

4.1 Likely a serious threat in the long term

The most significant threat posed by anti-institutional extremism is that in the long term the spread of the 'evil elite' narrative will likely seriously undermine the democratic legal order. The narrative undermines the democratic legal order by spreading messages which are *factually incorrect* and through this wrongly harms the trust in the legislative, executive, and/or judicial power, 'traditional' media, and science and undermines their legitimacy. In general, anti-institutional extremists do not want to change the role of the government and they largely still believe in a democracy and in constitutional rights. However, they do reject the *current interpretation* of the legal system, the police, science, the media, the democratically-elected parliament, and the government that is overseen by this parliament and even claim this should be combated.

As the support for the 'evil elite' narrative grows, a larger group would slowly but surely undermine the democratic legal order. The functioning of the democratic legal order will be damaged step by step and in the long term, vital elements of the democratic legal order could come under considerable pressure.

4.2 A potential threat of violence in the short term

Furthermore, in the short term the narrative can offer a framework which legitimises the use of violence against the supposed representatives of the 'evil elite'. Those who spread this message do not explicitly call for a specific form of violent extremist action. However, because it provides a framework for the fact that there is an enemy in the shape of the 'evil elite' with which people are in a state of war, it legitimises violent extremist actions against various representatives of the elite and could therefore indirectly lead to such actions.

As yet, the number of violent actions stemming from the 'evil elite' narrative are limited. Because inciters in general propagate non-violent resistance and condemn calls to violence, the AIVD deems it doubtful that many supporters will use the narrative to engage in extremist violence. The lack of a clear strategy or idea of what the new situation should look like, likely also makes the movement less decisive and effective. At the same time, this unpredictable end state also makes the threat less predictable. The AIVD has a task here to investigate the possibly changing (violent) threat of the 'evil elite' narrative and the unanimity of its supporters.



Photo 5. A poster in Limburg which shows an image giving the impression that Mark Rutte, Sigrid Kaag, Bill Gates, Klaus Schwab, and George Soros have been shot in the head. Photo: ANP

4.3 A narrative with potential to grow

It is currently not possible to ascertain the number of supporters of this narrative with absolute certainty. The AIVD assesses that there are likely over a hundred thousand persons who believe in the anti-institutional body of ideas to a certain extent. Depending on the topic (such as the war in Ukraine, corona, or nitrogen pollution) other large groups may latch on. It is impossible to make an exact estimate due to the strongly varying landscape and overlap in support between different subcurrents, channels, and inciters. Moreover, the 'evil elite' narrative has a considerable potential for growth. This is in part because of its flexibility, which means it also combines well with other extremist messages and is therefore also used opportunistically by other groups. The narrative furthermore has a large reach through a small number of specific persons, which strengthens the normalisation of the messages from this narrative. It is notable that compared to 2021, when there were still corona measures in the Netherlands, there has been a large increase in followers rather than the decrease which might have been expected following the lifting of the corona measures.

Dutch society is resilient to the narrative. There are numerous examples in which the narrative is refuted by others in society. At the same time, the nature and flexibility of the narrative make it easy for people to join in on it. After all, a (large) part of the messages contain justified criticism of institutions, expressions of genuine concerns or make use of legitimate democratic rights and legal processes. The 'evil elite' narrative is furthermore relatively flexible and difficult to refute because the conspiracy presupposes that powerful entities are attempting to maintain their positions of power behind the scenes.

The messages of the narrative are reinforced by grievances against government actions, such as the serious failings in the childcare benefit system, or other personal frustrations with the government. People feel they are not taken seriously.

Although the institutions within the democratic legal order are generally resilient to the narrative, there are also a number of representatives of the institutions which support and spread the messages from the narrative.

The AIVD estimates that the 'evil elite' narrative is likely the most popular extremist narrative in the Netherlands at the moment. It is expected that this narrative will continue to exist in the long term.

4.4 Handling the narrative

The resilience against the threat of the 'evil elite' narrative partially depends on the public trust in the institutions and the persons who are responsible for them. The way in which (government) institutions function and communicate thus has a direct influence on the threat posed by the narrative and any resilience against it. The public perception of political decisions, policies, and particular events, as well as the perception of whether the decision-making has been transparent and whether any opposing opinions have been taken seriously, play a very important role in this.

In spite of the conclusion that the 'evil elite' narrative will likely pose a long-term serious threat to the democratic legal order, the nature of the narrative and its consequences mean that this is only partially a case for the police or the judiciary. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press also play an important role in this.

Criminal prosecution is therefore not always possible and could in some cases actually strengthen the narrative and the threat it poses. This makes it even more important for society to be resilient to this narrative. It is important for society to recognise the narrative and identify that it is factually incorrect.



Photo 6. A person affected by the childcare benefit scandal shows a redacted file. Photo: ANP

4.5 Looking ahead

Due to the flexibility of the narrative and the adaptability of inciters, the AIVD assesses that the narrative will likely continue to play a role in Dutch society in the long term. It is therefore important to continue devoting attention to this.

The AIVD estimates that in the future inciters and supporters will very likely continue to seize upon new topics in order to 'breathe new life into the narrative'. Communication regarding political decisions, policies, and events will remain important when public perception is that the decision-making was transparent and opposing voices taken seriously, the narrative will likely have little chance of success.

As detailed above, a conceivable (future) risk of the anti-institutional movement and the 'evil elite' narrative is the possibility that it may be used by foreign state-sponsored actors such as Russia. Although the threat from Moscow is currently deemed to be limited.²²

Another possible future risk is the potential radicalisation of some of the sovereign citizens. Although the movement in the Netherlands has a history without violent excesses and is as yet non-violent, the ideology could lead to violent escalation. In spite of the fact that a group of sovereign citizens believes that they are 'deregistering' from society and no longer have to adhere to Dutch laws and regulations, there is no legal basis for this conviction. When they are then confronted with fines because they refuse to pay taxes or are evicted for refusing to pay their rent or their mortgage, this could lead to confrontations. The question is what will happen then. The AIVD deems it likely that for some people these types of confrontations could lead to a legitimisation of the use of violence and could lead to violent incidents in the future. Similar movements, such as the German Reichsbürger movement and the American sovereign citizens, currently pose a real threat of violence.

At the same time it is important to emphasise that the democratic legal order is a durable system. It is unlikely that this will simply collapse. Awareness regarding the threat posed by anti-institutional extremism is likewise increasing.

As such, resilience against it is also increasing. The AIVD will continue its investigation into anti-institutional extremism and inform those within the constitutional state who are tasked with safeguarding its interests as well as the rest of society about this threat. Through this, the AIVD attempts to help the government, media, science, and society to counter the threat of anti-institutional extremism. Both society and institutions have the important task to protect the democratic legal order against the effects of extremist ideas.

²² 24/2 - De Russische aanval op Oekraïne: een keerpunt in de geschiedenis, d.d. 20 februari 2023. <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2023/02/20/24-2---de-russische-aanval-op-oekraïne-een-keerpunt-in-de-geschiedenis>

Citizens Summary

A publication about anti-institutional extremism

This publication deals with so-called anti-institutional extremism. It is important to increase society's resilience against this. In order to do this, it is important that Dutch citizens can recognise this threat. At the same time the AIVD wants to make sure that other forms of criticism of institutions are not automatically labelled as extremist. After all, criticism, protests, and demonstrations aimed at institutions - including actions in which the limits of the law are tested - are essential for the functioning of the democratic legal order.

The AIVD has the legal task to investigate threats to the democratic legal order, such as the threat posed by anti-institutional extremism. Anti-institutional extremism is not part of right-wing extremism and vice versa. However the investigation into anti-institutional extremism does happen on the basis of the same principles as investigations into right-wing, left-wing, and Islamic extremism. The goal is always to gain an insight into the threat, so that others are (better) able to counter this threat.

This publication is not just intended for government bodies, scientific and research communities, or the media, but for all Dutch citizens. The government and the Dutch citizens are jointly responsible for the proper functioning of the democratic legal order. It is up to society as a whole to safeguard the democratic legal order against the effects of extremist ideas.

Safeguarding the democratic legal order

In order to understand how anti-institutional extremism poses a threat to the democratic legal order, it is important to understand what exactly is meant by the democratic legal order. The democratic legal order is both a political system and a way of coexisting. It concerns both the relationship between the government and its citizens (democratic legal order) and the relationship amongst citizens (open society). This also concerns the interaction between the state and society, in which media and science play an important role.

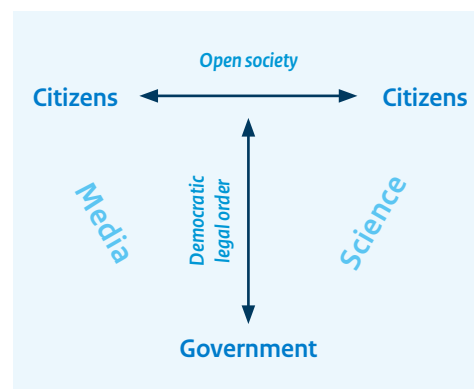


Figure 1. Dimensions of a democratic legal order

• Democratic state under the rule of law

The democratic state under the rule of law is the political system which is based on the freedoms and rights that are recorded in the constitution. These are rules the government has to adhere to in order to safeguard the freedoms and rights of citizens. Think of the prohibition of discrimination, freedom of speech, separation of the powers, active and passive electoral rights. These are the conditions under which the people entrust the government with its power, out of the belief that this power will be used to represent everyone's interest and is overseen by the chosen people's representatives. This includes the conviction that it is in everyone's best interest that there are independent judges, journalists, and scientists.

• Open society

The open society is the way in which citizens interact with each other on the basis of the democratic norms and values. It is about accepting the fact that everyone is equal and at the same time respecting that everyone is different. It is important that people can trust that in the Netherlands we can coexist even while there are large differences (of opinion), so long as we make the right agreements with each other.

Anti-institutional extremism in the Netherlands

Since the beginning of the corona pandemic, more Dutch citizens have become critical of the government and science, journalists, and the judiciary. Being able to freely express unhindered criticism of these institutions is part of a healthy democratic legal order.

At the same time an extremist movement arose. This movement not only believes that certain major events from the past years were wrong and unfair, but also believes that such events are part of a preconceived plan to purposefully harm Dutch citizens. This extremist movement claims that within the government, the judiciary, newspapers and TV channels, science and academia, and large companies, there is an 'evil elite' in charge who are after complete world control. These so-called anti-institutional extremists claim that 'the elite' wants to oppress, enslave, or kill the people. And that this why this elite should be seen as an enemy.

Some believers view the Great Reset as the blueprint for this plan. The Great Reset is a proposal by the World Economic Forum (WEF) to rebuild the global economy in a fairer way following the corona pandemic. Believers also say that 'the elite' made up the corona pandemic and the war in Ukraine in order to make 'the people' afraid and obedient so the elite can carry out their 'big plan'.

The AIVD refers to this world view as a narrative; a collection of messages which provide an explanation for certain events in the world. The most significant threat posed by anti-institutional extremism is that the spread of the 'evil elite' narrative will likely seriously undermine the democratic legal order in the long term

Likely a serious threat in the long term

Firstly, the narrative undermines the democratic legal order because it creates a world view which is factually incorrect. The AIVD has no evidence to suggest that elite members within the government, media, and science and academia are working on a secret plan to enslave or even kill the population. If extremists do say this and other people believe this, it could damage people's trust in such institutions.

This could harm our way of coexisting. Because trust, between citizens and the government and citizens amongst each other, is fundamental to our democratic legal order. The spreading of the extremist narrative, which contains factually incorrect information, may cause people to distrust the government and institutions. If specific groups of people were to stop voting because they no longer trust politicians, their opinions and ideals will not be taken into account as much when political decisions are taken regarding matters in the Netherlands. Or if people were to stop believing in the independence of judges, the legitimacy of the judiciary could come under pressure.

The 'evil elite' narrative also undermines the trust between citizens, as it leads to more polarisation - big differences of opinion between people. Anti-institutional extremists sometimes withdraw into their own groups and clubs and plead for a parallel society, without wanting to accept Dutch laws and regulations.

Secondly, the 'evil elite' narrative poses a threat to the Netherlands because it could encourage individual supporters to use violence against persons who they believe are part of 'the elite'. Influential leading figures who spread the narrative generally do not explicitly call for committing violence. However, they do tell their followers that they are at war with 'the elite'. Some people may see this as a justification for the use of violence.

Representatives of institutions, such as politicians, journalists, and judges are threatened and intimidated more often. Although it is always difficult to ascertain if one thing is caused by another, this conduct is generally attributed to the unrest surrounding the corona measures and nitrogen pollution crisis. These threats influence the way in which these representatives can perform their duties. Some members of parliament have indicated that they sometimes do not share their own stance on a topic due to the large number of threats they receive. They cannot carry out their duties in complete freedom. As such, the functioning of the democratic legal order is undermined.

How damaging the 'evil elite' narrative can be to the democratic legal order depends on the number of people who believe in the narrative and how long this narrative remains relevant. The AIVD estimates that there are currently at least one hundred thousand Dutch citizens who believe this narrative to some extent. It is possible that this group may grow, as the story lines up with other extremist messages. Anti-institutional extremists also continue to see new events as evidence for the work of an 'evil elite'. As such, the AIVD estimates that the 'evil elite narrative' is likely the most popular narrative amongst extremist groups in the Netherlands at this moment.

Increase resilience and counter threats

One of the most important things the government, scientists, media, and judiciary can do against the threat of the 'evil elite narrative' is to (re)gain society's trust. In order to achieve this, they have to show that they are trustworthy and communicate in a way that matches this. This is crucial.

This also means taking opposing opinions seriously. If authorities disregard criticism or are unclear in their communication about this and end up making mistakes, as happened in the childcare benefits scandal, this harms citizens' trust. This strengthens the messages of anti-institutional extremists and increases chances of this becoming believable and appealing to citizens.

The most trust institutions have, the more resilient society is against extremism. The AIVD is one of these institutions. That is why the service has to continue proving itself as a trustworthy institution which contributes to the protection of the democratic legal order and other interests of national security.

The AIVD also finds it important that those who provide oversight can openly report about the service as much as possible and that journalists can freely and critically write about the AIVD. Having the trust of society provides AIVD with the mandate it requires to do its work.

The AIVD will continue its investigation into anti-institutional extremism and continue to inform both government partners and society about this threat. In this way, the government, media, scientists, and society will be able to recognise and counter anti-institutional extremism.

This is even more important in the context of anti-institutional extremism. Because the AIVD has the legal duty to investigate this. This is done on the basis of the same principles as investigations into left-wing, right-wing, and Islamic extremism. The goal is always to gain an insight into the threat, so that others are (better) able to counter this threat.

Glossary

Conspiracy theory

A specific form of dis- or misinformation, in which people are convinced that certain events or situations were secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful groups with evil intentions.

Democratic legal order

A social order that is based on justice and democracy. The broad approach of the democratic legal order views this both as

1. a political system (democratic state under the rule of law), in which the relationship between the government and its citizens is organised (vertical axis), and as
2. a way of coexisting (an open society), in which the relationships between citizens are organised (horizontal axis).

As such, safeguarding the democratic legal order is not simply a legal-institutional issue, but also a social citizenship issue.

Extremism

A willingness based on ideological motives to carry out non-violent and/or violent activities which undermine the democratic legal order. Examples of non-violent activities are systematic hate-mongering, spreading fear, spreading disinformation, demonising and intimidation, rejecting laws and legislation, and making attempts to establish a parallel society in which the authority of the Dutch government and legal system are rejected.

Narrative

A set of messages which relate to certain events, situations, or developments in the world and believe there to be a certain explanation for these. This does not have to be stated explicitly, but can also be implicit in the systematic repetition of suggestive messages.

Terrorism

Having the ideological willingness (to prepare) to commit violence against people's lives or cause significant damage which is disruptive to society, with the goal of achieving societal change, strike terror into the population, and/or influence political decision-making.

Resilience

The ability to offer resistance against threats, by making it less likely for threats to exist, limiting the damage that potential threats could cause if they were to occur, and making adequate recovery possible.

