

To Mayor Femke Halsema:

Last Saturday a group of Amsterdammers found themselves confined in cells for several hours. Their crime? Peacefully demonstrating against a well-known extremist group that was allowed to spread its hateful ideology on Africa Day. All with the approval and protection of the Municipality of Amsterdam.

The images speak for themselves. On the doorstep of the Tropenmuseum, in the heart of Amsterdam, a group of “protestors” glorified white supremacy with symbols, music, and slogans. This included the Prince Flags used by the Dutch political party NSB, which collaborated with the Nazis in WWII. These flags are now well-known symbols of the extreme right and neo-Nazis. Africa Day participants were harassed and intimidated upon arrival. All under the watchful eye of the police. In the distance stood a handful of counter-protesters holding up two banners calling for an end to the normalization of fascism in our city. Soon the entire attention of the police is on the counter-protestors. They surrounded them in an intimidating way. In the space of a few minutes, several police vans arrived and the riot police even showed up. On horseback and on foot, the police outnumbered counter-protesters four to one.

When threatened with arrests - ordered by you as mayor - the demonstrators decided to end their action and leave. They were then followed by a group of men who turned out to be undercover police. A few minutes later they were surrounded up by riot police, arrested and taken to the Southeast Detention Center. The right-wing extremist group was given every opportunity to continue its demonstration -- with full police protection. In fact, the police informed the far-right group in advance about the counter-demonstration and the protection they could count on.

Madam Mayor what went wrong? What went wrong here in this city that pretends to stand up for diversity and inclusivity, that wants to offer security to all citizens, especially the vulnerable? What is going wrong here in a city that wants to be a shining example of tolerance, that prides itself on its diversity policy and its initiatives to promote coexistence? What is going wrong here in a city that apologizes for the wrongs of the past, but draws no conclusion whatsoever for its actions in the present?

Saturday was a textbook example of a series of questionable decisions (by the mayor and the police) that showed how our capital city struggles with a completely misguided idea of how to combat racism and hatred. The string of decisions starts with giving far-right groups the central stage in Amsterdam, giving space for intimidating displays of hatred and racism. Next comes the decision to dissolve the peaceful counter-demonstration. Then the decision to chase, surround, arrest counter-demonstrators that had already disbanded, an arrest made by plainclothes police, rather than uniformed police. And finally, the decision to hold the protesters as criminals for hours (fingerprints, photos, body search). All of these decisions could have been made differently, including within the framework of the law.

Madam Mayor, the Amsterdammers you had arrested on Saturday form the diversity of the city. They are Jewish, LGBTQI+, descendants of resistance fighters, citizens concerned about increasing hatred in the city. Together they act as a collective called Mokum against Fascism. They are the same people you invite to speak at tolerance conferences, official

coalitions against racism, official residence dialogues, and the voluntary testing of anti-discrimination toolkits. They are the very people who have the courage to discuss this with you, the courage to take to the streets, and the courage to speak out. You have made them criminals.

In a situation like this, many reactions are conceivable that fall within the letter of the law. Legality is not automatically justice, yet even the legality of the actions taken on Saturday is not certain. The choice to remove the counter-protesters and then detain them for hours directly and indirectly fosters extreme right-wing elements in our society. Silencing the voices of peaceful activists who dare to protest against intolerance and white supremacy is inexcusable. Your choices encourage precisely those elements that fuel intolerance in Amsterdam. Why didn't the city council and the administration join the counter-demonstration?

Ultimately, Amsterdam's leadership will be judged by its actions, not its apologies.

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