The Camel Marches On: Legitimizing Frames of Injustice by the Dutch Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

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Titel explanation:

Excerpt from an Eritrean proverb: "The camel marches on while the dogs keep on barking". Refers to the struggle of the Eritrean people of maintaining self-reliance in face of injustice, hostility, and criticism.[1] Because of this, Eritrea adopted the camel as its national emblem.

Cover picture:

YPFDJ logo; "YPFDJ Euro Conference is canceled due to a coronavirus epidemic, Statement" *Raimoq.com* (2020, March 14). http://raimoq.com/ypfdj-euro-conference-is-canceled-due-to-a-coronavirus-epidemic-statement/

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[1] Madote. (2016). Eritrea: The Camel Marches while the Dog Keeps on Barking. Madote.com. http://www.madote.com/2016/05/eritrea-camel-marches-while-dog-keeps.html

Abstract

This thesis aims to research how Dutch Eritreans organized in the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice discursively legitimize the repressive practices of the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands. This group, the YPFDJ, is the international youth wing of the ruling party in Eritrea and has been accused by Dutch journalists and politicians of functioning as the "long arm" of the Eritrean regime. The regime imposes a diaspora-tax on Eritreans abroad and seeks to deter dissent and criticism through threats and intimidation. The YPFDJ performs a crucial role in these practices, both functionally as discursively. The group maintains a significant online and offline presence by spreading narratives about Eritrea and its enemies on social media and organizing conferences and protests. The recurrent elements of these narratives consist of injustice, hostility and criticism.

This research explores these online narratives through the lens of collective action framing. Using this analytic framework, this thesis seeks to analyze the discursive processes through which the YPFDJ engages in meaning-work. The specific concepts of "injustice framing" and "legitimization" offer an insight into the characteristics of YPFDJ framing, and what function these frames serve. Combining collective action framing with the theory on transnational authoritarianism makes it possible to see how harmful political structures and practices are discursively supported and continued.

The main findings of this research are that the YPFDJ employs a standard repertoire of interpretation based on perceived injustice, which leads to regime supporters "rallying around the flag" with an increased aggressiveness towards movement opponents. This dynamic is salient in the context of diasporic identity since the YPFDJ seeks to conflate Eritrean identity with being loyal to the regime. This, in turn, evokes an unquestioned active consent with the Eritrean regime and practices such as the diaspora-tax. Furthermore, due to the threatening reputation of the YPFDJ among Dutch Eritreans, the credibility of its injustice frames serves to ensure that Dutch Eritreans are passively obedient and do what the regime demands of them. Again, the conflation of identity with loyalty is notable since it also serves to exclude disloyal Dutch Eritreans from the Eritrean community. I argue that a deeper understanding is needed of why youth, especially diasporic youth, support authoritarian regimes, and how this relates to the complexity of identity in a transnational setting.

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I want to thank my colleagues and residents of the elderly home I work at. They helped me to stay straight-edged, grounded, and inspired. Without them, the isolated process of doing research during a pandemic would have taken its toll on me.

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1. Introduction

"The more brazen the injustices committed against Eritreans and their country, the more love and respect the Eritrean government receives."[2]

On the 13th of April 2017, a conference in the sleepy Dutch town of Veldhoven became the subject of national attention.[3] The international youth wing of the only legally allowed party in Eritrea was set to have its yearly European conference, and officials from the authoritarian Eritrean regime would be speaking about the importance of the Eritrean youth abroad. According to members of this youth wing, called the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice, these conferences are a celebration of Eritrean culture and development for the whole Eritrean community abroad.[4] However, when the buses of YPFDJ members and regime officials arrived, the conference was brutely disturbed by "killer refugees" and "Ethiopians pretending to be Eritrean", protesting against the visit of officials they fled from.[5] To make matters worse for the YPFDJ, the local mayor decided to ban the conference entirely because of public safety concerns. The day ended with YPFDJ members being stranded in Veldhoven in the middle of the night. For the YPFDJ, this situation exposed what they believed they had always known: the world is against Eritrea, and their democratic rights are violated in Europe. However, this only strengthens the determination of YPFDJ members to support the regime even more, as the quote by a YPFDJ member above shows.

What makes this story salient, and the way the YPFDJ avidly supports the Eritrean regime, is the fact that the Eritrean regime is known to exert its authoritarian rule not only at home, but also abroad. Within Dutch media, and even in parliament, there is a growing concern about the so-called "long arm" of the Eritrean regime.[6] The Netherlands has a sizeable community of Eritrean (former-) refugees that are worried they have not escaped authoritarianism by fleeing to Europe. Eritreans abroad are expected to pay 2 per cent of their yearly income to the regime and are pressured to remain silent and not be critical about the regime.[7] This touches upon the main complication that I want to address with this research. I want to delve deeper into why YPFDJ members, often born and raised in the Netherlands, legitimize authoritarian practices that affect other Dutch Eritreans and deny them the democratic rights that regime supporters claim for themselves. Moreover, this complication also touches upon the difficult notion of identity in diasporic communities. What does the YPFDJ 's worldview, filled with perceptions of injustices, tell us about how they make meaning of their Eritrean background, being raised abroad? These questions and complications form the core of this research.

By adopting "collective action framing" as a central analytic frame, this research project seeks to answer these questions by looking at the meaning-making practices, narratives and symbolism of the YPFDJ. The essence of this enquiry thus comes down to how actors construct and present

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[2] Quote from YPFDJ YouTube video: Haki Fetewo (2017, April 22). *Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees? – Eritrea.* [Video]. Youtube. Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees? - Eritrea - YouTube

[3] NOS (2017, April 13). *Veldhoven verbiedt Eritrea-conferentie, tientallen arrestaties,* NOS. https://nos.nl/artikel/2168120-veldhoven-verbiedt-eritrea-conferentie-tientallen-arrestaties

[4] YPFDJ Holland (2017, April 20). Facebook post.

[5] Fetewo, *Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees?,* Youtube. Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees? - Eritrea - YouTube

[6] Tweede Kamer (2016, December 15). *Debat integrale aanpak Eritrea en de invloed van Eritrea in Nederland.* <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail/2016Z24163/2016D49485>
Rosman, C. (2017, April 21). *Hoe de Lange Arm van Eritrea soms tot aan een Nederlandse voordeur reikt.* Algemeen Dagblad. https://www.ad.nl/politiek/hoe-de-lange-arm-van-eritrea-soms-tot-aan-een-nederlandse-voordeur-reikt~ad64b6ad/

[7] Ibid.

interpretations of real-life situations with the specific purpose of legitimizing something. This implies a process of purposeful meaning work, requiring me to take an appropriate approach in gaining knowledge on such a process. The epistemology that underpins this research is that of a *symbolic interactionist* approach. This entails that meaning can be found in situations and interactions, and that knowledge can be gained through exploring these interactions and the meaning attributed to them.[8] For this research, appropriate situations and interactions are found primarily in the online activities of the YPFDJ, since the group mainly spreads its message outside the diaspora on social media. The analytical lens of "collective action framing" will be operationalized to analyze how meanings are made in this environment, to gain knowledge on the complications I posed earlier. This is formulated in the central research question that guides this thesis:

How are injustice frames, as articulated by Dutch Eritreans organized in or related to the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice, legitimizing transnational authoritarian practices of the Eritrean regime from within the Netherlands from 2010 onwards?

To unpack this question, I will first provide a brief analysis of the Eritrean practices of transnational authoritarianism in the Netherlands, with the concepts of "legitimization" and "repression". Then, I will look at the articulation of injustice frames by the YPFDJ through the "core framing practices" of collective action framing and the concept of frame elaboration. Lastly, I will address how the YPFDJ legitimizes Eritrea's practices through the concepts of "active consent" and "passive obedience" by analysing traces of these concepts within the injustice frames and the effect of the frames. To structure this process, the following three sub-questions are formulated:

1. *What transnational practices of authoritarianism does the Eritrean regime employ in the Netherlands?*
2. *How does the YPFDJ articulate and elaborate injustice frames through diagnostic and prognostic framing?*
3. *How does the YPFDJ use injustice frames to ensure active consent and passive obedience among Dutch Eritreans towards the transnational authoritarian practices of the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands?*

1.1 Chapter outline

The three sub-questions will provide the analytic backbone of this thesis, with each question being answered in an analytic chapter. Before engaging in analysis, Chapter 2 comprises the academic debate in which I situate my research puzzle, by identifying what is known and what this puzzle contributes to the state of knowledge. This chapter also defines the analytic framework that links collective action framing with transnational authoritarianism. Chapter 3 addresses the methodology used to perform this research, by describing the research method, what data was collected and why, what "telling sources" are for this research, and how this data was analyzed. I will also shortly reflect on the limitations of my research method, and how that affects the conclusiveness of this research. In Chapter 4, I will briefly elaborate on the empirical context of Eritrea and the Eritrean diaspora. By describing the recent history of the country, the diaspora, and the current situation in Eritrea, the narratives and findings of the following chapters will be easier to place and interpret for the reader. In Chapter 5, I will describe how the Eritrean regime engages with Dutch Eritreans through practices

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[8] Mason, J. (2018, January 2). *Qualitative Researching.* Sage Publishing. Page 8.

of transnational authoritarianism, guided by the concepts of "repression", "cooptation, and "legitimization". Chapter 6 will analyze how the YPFDJ constructs a repertoire of interpretation by articulating and elaborating injustice frames, using two main narratives as examples. In Chapter 7, I will describe how the YPFDJ engages in a framing contest as a solution to the identified problems, and how they "rally around the flag" of the regime in face of perceived injustices. In Chapter 8, I will synthesize these findings to analyze how these frames legitimize the Eritrean regime and its practices by constructing collective identities, showing public "active consent" with the regime, and ensuring silent "passive obedience" amongst the majority of Dutch Eritreans. At the end of this thesis, I will provide a discussion and conclusion that address the implications of my findings, the strengths and limitations of this research, and questions for future exploration on the topic of injustice framing.

2. Theory and analytic frame

In this chapter, I will discuss how I use the theories of collective action framing and practices of transnational authoritarianism to analyze the narratives, images and practices of the YPFDJ. The core analytical concepts I use are "injustice frames", "core framing tasks", and "legitimation". First, I will situate these concepts and their respective theory in an academic debate, also relating both fields to the study of identity formation. Here I will note the current state of knowledge of these theories, how these theories have evolved, and what gap in the literature I address through applying these theories to my empirical case. Then I will describe the definition and application of these theoretical concepts and elaborate on my use of these concepts in this research.

2.1 Academic debate

This research is situated in the literature on collective action framing, transnational authoritarianism, and identity. It seeks to demonstrate that these analytic concepts intersect to account for the empirical situation at the core of my study. On collective action framing, Benford & Snow describe framing processes in their hallmark article as an active and dynamic process of reality construction by signifying actors.[9] Framing is described as a meaning-making process by social movement organizations, resulting in collective action frames that mobilize adherents and demobilize opponents. Benford argues then that frames, when flexible and inclusive enough, become master frames when other social movements adopt them in their own campaigns. Social movement theorists originally developed this concept to explain cycles of protests without favourable political opportunity structures.[10] However, Benford argues, the concept further evolved into accounting for a repertoire of interpretation of a social movement across time and space, to ensure continuity of ideology within a social movement.[11] In this research, the repertoire of interpretation is the leading definition for a master frame, since that helps me break down the unique frame of the YPFDJ that developed and evolved over time.

This thesis analyses this master frame as an injustice frame, a concept introduced by Gamson. He describes how many frames centre around injustice, called "injustice frames", in the sense that a frame identifies an injustice or issue, its victims, and the actor to be blamed for it.[12] This mode of interpreting the world proves to be a powerful frame for many social movements, allowing them to mobilize for collective action such as protests. Collective action framing theory thus places a large emphasis on *mobilization, action* and the *justification* of collective action. Snow argues that not all frames serve to mobilize for action, and that some also seek "consensus mobilization", ensuring a shared acknowledgement of grievances and goals.[13] I argue that, rather than mobilizing or ensuring consensus, the frames of the YPFDJ primarily seek to *justify* an existing situation. In this thesis, I would thus like to expand the scope of injustice framing beyond mobilization to explore how these framing processes can also serve to mobilize fear, obedience, silence, and toleration of the status quo.

[9] Benford, R., and Snow, D. (2000) Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, (26), 611–39. Page 614

[10] Benford, R. (2013). Master Frame. *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm126

[11] Ibid.

[12] Gamson, W. (1992) *The social psychology of collective action.* In Morris, A., and Mueller, C., (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (p. 53–76). Yale University Press. Page 68.

[13] Snow, D. A., Vliegenthart, R., and Ketelaars, P. (2019). The framing perspective on social movements: Its conceptual roots and architecture. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi, and H. J. McCammon (Eds*.), The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2nd ed., pp. 392-410). (Wiley Blackwell companions to sociology). Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577.ch22. Page 397.

Collective action framing is not the only suitable theoretical framework to look at meaning construction within the empirical context of this thesis. In the academic field of international relations, securitization theory studies how actors frame issues as security threats through speech acts, enabling extraordinary means to deal with these issues.[14] While this is an interesting lens to use in researching transnational practices of authoritarianism, and how the Eritrean regime legitimizes its crackdown on external criticism, I do not address in this thesis how issues are framed as security threats by the YPFDJ. Rather, I address processes as meaning construction by the YPFDJ as a social movement, and how it negotiates or enforces its interpretation on other actors. This process of legitimizing a harmful status quo also points me towards critical discourse analysis, as used by scholars such as Norman Fairclough. CDA in short, employs a constructivist approach to uncover how language serves to produce and reproduce relations of power, dominance, and social inequality.[15] At first glance, this framework fits the topic of this thesis quite well, since it addresses how the YPFDJ discursively legitimizes a harmful status quo. However, I believe collective action framing to be more fitting since it is about the *struggle* for meaning at its core, through mobilizing and countermobilizing interpretations, which I will demonstrate as one of the main processes in this thesis. The sources in this thesis do not illustrate a substantive and coherent ideology, as often implied in CDA, but rather a consistent mode of interpretation by the YPFDJ to frame social life.[16] I believe this can be more fittingly analyzed through frame analysis and the concept of injustice framing. This is not to preclude the principles of CDA, which I find very appropriate for this thesis, but rather to use the more fitting concepts of collective action framing critically, keeping the link between frames and power structures in mind.

Regarding these power structures, I will link the meaning-making processes of the YPFDJ to the goals and practices of the Eritrean regime. Authoritarian regimes, such as the Eritrean regime, seek to stabilize their rule through different means. Johannes Gerschewski describes this process of ensuring stability as the "three pillars of stability"; repression (actual or threatened use of physical sanctions), cooptation (capacity to tie in strategically relevant actors) and legitimation (guarantee active consent or simple obedience).[17] Whereas Gerschewski writes about these regimes as distinct regime types demarcated by their border and populations to rule, Marlies Glasius takes the step to "de-territorialize" authoritarianism.[18] She argues against understanding authoritarianism as a static regime type, which should rather be seen as practices constituting a mode of governing people both in the country and those who fled or emigrated outside of it.[19] The core question posed by Glasius is about how authoritarian states rule their populations abroad, not at home. Glasius takes the pillars of Gerschewski to illustrate how authoritarian regimes also seek stability from populations abroad. This is what related scholar Gerasimos Tsourapas goes on to describe as "transnational practices of authoritarianism".[20] Where Gerschewski, Tsourapas and Glasius emphasized the state and its efforts abroad to secure stability, I would like to explore how diasporic community organizations such as the YPFDJ secure stability *within* the diaspora for the regime. Glasius allows for such an analysis since she concedes that ensuring stability is not only a physical or practical endeavour, but also very much

[14] Buzan, B., Waever, O. and De Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis.* Lynne Rienner Publishers.

[15] Amoussou, F., and Allagbe, A. (2018). Principles, Theories and Approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL),* 6 (1), 11-18. Page 13.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Gerschewski, J. (2013). The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes. *Democratization,* 20 (1), 13–38 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860>. Pages 14-15.

[18] Glasius, M. (2018). Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices: A Framework. *Globalizations*, 15 (2), 179–97 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2017.1403781>. Page 186.

[19] Ibid., page 183.

[20] Tsourapas, G. (2020). Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics. *International Studies Review* <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa061> Page 4.

discursive and imaginative.[21] It is this lens that I will take and try to expand beyond the state.

Lastly, on a broad level, this thesis also touches upon the construction of collective identities through social movement framing, specifically diasporic identities in this regard. Martin Sokefeld warns against essentialist notions of diasporic identity and the idea that people simply belong to a diaspora because of a shared country of origin.[22] Rather, he defines diaspora through a constructivist lens as "an imagined transnational community", mobilized by social movement actors through political opportunity structures and *framing.[23]* This relates to what is called *collective identity construction* by social movement theorists. Benford and Snow highlight how identity processes are fundamental to understanding social movements and framing.[24] Gamson elaborates on this linkage by arguing that social movement participation involves enlarging one's personal identity into a collective identity, for fulfilment and self-realization. Framing then affects this through attributing characteristics to groups of people and suggesting relationships between them, apparent in the everyday "identity talk" of social movements in public activities.[25] Concretely, Snow introduced the concept of "identity fields" to group these characteristics by distinguishing between protagonist and antagonist identity fields, which relate to how a movement identifies itself and its opponents.[26] The core point these authors make is that framing contests and shared recognitions of enemies and injustices are salient elements of frames in collective identity construction and give meaning to social movement participation. Several authors have thus linked framing and identity, but how does identity relate to the legitimation of an authoritarian regime? Throughout this thesis, I will explore how the YPFDJ constructs notions of identity that legitimize regime practices, through conflating Eritrean identity with regime loyalty.

In sum, there is a large state of knowledge on discursive processes, identity construction and authoritarianism. My contribution to these bodies of literature lies first and foremost in connecting existing insights on framing, authoritarianism and identity to explore how non-state actors engage in a meaning-making process to sustain a transnational system of repression. This means that I seek to demonstrate more clearly how these concepts concretely link to each other, and how they can be mutually supportive. My other contribution concerns my analysis of a non-state actor that supports transnationally supports a repressive regime. The field of transnational authoritarianism often limits its analysis to states themselves and their strategies, without focusing on the crucial legitimizing function of civil society, and the dynamics within such groups. Framing theory also often addresses injustice frames in relation to underdog social movements, fighting against forces or actors larger than themselves. I seek to demonstrate that this powerful frame is also effectively and uniquely employed by supporters of a status quo.

2.2 Practices of transnational authoritarianism

The framework of transnational authoritarianism by Glasius will is used to analyze the transnational political situation in which the YPFDJ and the Eritrean regime operate. As discussed, Glasius demonstrates how the three pillars of Gerschewski (legitimation, cooptation and repression) can also

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[21] Glasius, *Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices,* page 188.

[22] Sökefeld, M. (2006). Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora. *Global Networks*, 6 (3), 265–84 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00144.x> Page 266.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Benford and Snow, *Framing processes,* page 626.

[25] Ibid., pages 631-632.

[26] Hunt, S. and Snow, D. (1994). *Identity fields: framing processes and the social construction of movement identities*. See Larana et al 1994, pp. 185–208 Jasper JM. Page 199.

be applied to a transnational setting.[27] In this thesis, legitimation will be a central concept to frame the functions of the YPFDJ narratives. I define legitimation according to Gerschewski:

*"Legitimation is defined as the **process of gaining support**. It entails efforts that seek to guarantee **active consent**, compliance with the rules, **passive obedience**, or mere toleration within the population."*[28]

The highlighted terms are dominant in my application of this concept since these are the most prominent indicators of legitimation in my data. The process of gaining support also links to one of the primary functions of collective action frames, justification, which is why legitimation is a useful concept that covers both my analytic argument and empirical context.

Furthermore, I will apply the concept of "cooptation" to elaborate on why the YPFDJ is an important political actor for the Eritrean regime in relation to the diaspora, and why the organization was founded in the first place. The definition used is that from Gerschewski:

"The capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite"[29]

Furthermore, I will use the concept of repression to study how the YPFDJ is able to physically ensure passive obedience among Dutch Eritreans. The definition used for repression is:

*"Repression is the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state (note by Glasius: or transnationally, across borders), **for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities**."*[30]

This purpose of repression can be linked to the analytic concept of "counter-framing" by Benford & Snow, which I will elaborate on in the following paragraphs. While discursive and not physical in nature, counter-framing also serves to demobilize or neutralize opponents.[31] I will demonstrate in this thesis how physical repression and discursive counter-framing can mutually support each other. The point here is that these constituent concepts of transnational authoritarianism help me analyze the purpose and effect of the YPFDJ's meaning-making processes, emphasizing how the group **legitimizes** these transnational practices by the Eritrean regime. In this thesis, I will use these concepts to argue that these three mechanisms intersect to result in legitimization. Since this theory also points to discursive practices of legitimation, I will use the framework of collective action framing to concretely analyze *how* the YPFDJ engages in discursive legitimization.

2.3 Collective action frames

To unpack and analyze the online narratives and images of the YPFDJ in the Netherlands, I will use the analytic frame of collective action frames by Benford & Snow. According to these authors, "collective action frames" are action-oriented sets of beliefs that inspire mobilization from supporters, convert bystanders and neutralize opponents.[32] Looking at these functions of collective action frames, the link with legitimacy, cooptation and repression could be directly made. In that sense, analyzing framing processes could help me unpack how legitimization and cooptation are discursively constituted. Social movements construct interpretations of social life through "core framing tasks", namely diagnostic,

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[27] Glasius, *Extraterritorial authoritarian practices,* page 183
[28] Gerschewski, *Three pillars of stability,* page 18.
[29] Ibid., page 22.
[30] Ibid., page 21.
[31] Benford and Snow, *Framing processes,* page 626.
[32] Benford and Snow, *Framing Processes*, page 614.

prognostic and motivational framing.[33] Diagnostic frames identify a problematic situation or condition in need of change. Prognostic frames identify a solution to the problem, and who the responsible actor for the solution is. Lastly, motivational frames provide a reason to mobilize for change, like a "call to arms". I will argue in this thesis that the frames of the YPFDJ do not serve to motivate and mobilize for change, but to legitimize and existing status quo, either through active support or passive obedience.

The connection and alignment of events, issues and experiences in a compelling unified fashion through these framing tasks is what is called "frame articulation" by Benford & Snow.[34] In my research, I will more specifically use the concept of injustice frames as the dominant lens of meaning through which the YPFDJ articulates its frames. The reason for this is the plentiful number of explicit and implicit references to injustice I encountered in my exploratory research of my topic, making injustice framing an appropriate analytic concept in this regard. I define injustice frames as follows, based on Benford & Snow's discussion on injustice framing;

Injustice frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs that identify an injustice, the victims of the problem/the injustice and attribute the source and blame of this injustice on culpable agents and/or sources of causality.[35]

While this description of injustice frames clearly indicates the diagnostic nature of the frame, I will use the concept to argue that the YPFDJ articulates a "master frame" of injustice, specifically a repertoire of interpretation as mentioned in the literature review.

Furthermore, I will use the concepts of "counter-framing" and "frame elaboration" to argue that this repertoire of interpretation also includes a consistent proposed solution of rebuking opponents, almost regardless of the circumstances. Benford and Snow define counter-framing as "*attempts to rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person's or group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework.*"[36] Frame elaboration is then "*involves accenting and highlighting some events, issues, and beliefs or ideas more than others, such that they become more salient in an array or hierarchy of movement-relevant topics or issues.*".[37] I will use these concepts to analyse how the YPFDJ defends itself through negatively framing its opponents, distracting from the contents of criticism against the organization itself.

This chapter addressed the academic debate in which I position this thesis, and the analytic concepts I use and link together to frame and interpret the online activities of the YPFDJ. In short, I will use the framework of transnational authoritarian practices to analyse *why* the YPFDJ engages in meaning-making, while collective action framing is used to understand *how* the YPFDJ engages in framing. The following chapter will address how I designed my research partly based on the indicators that the definitions of these concepts provide me with.

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[33] Ibid., page 615.
[34] Ibid., page 623.
[35] Ibid., pages 615-616.
[36] Benford and Snow, *Framing processes,* page 626.
[37] Ibid., page 623.

3. Methodology

To answer these research questions, I set out a qualitative research plan. In the following chapter, I will describe and reflect upon the research design I constructed, including the sampling strategy, data analysis and limitations to this design.

3.1 Research method

Since I explore the meaning-making processes of the YPFDJ, a qualitative research method is needed to answer my questions. This means my research design must account for the ontological nature of the questions I ask related to framing, which addresses themes as symbolic interactions, signification and agency. The question I ask implicates a layered qualitative understanding is needed, instead of researching the statistic salience of the phenomenon.

To answer this puzzle and address these themes, I gained knowledge through studying symbolic interactions of the YPFDJ. This epistemological approach departs on the implication that meaning is found in situations and interactions, and that knowledge can be gained through exploring these interactions and the meaning attributed to them.[38] As I will describe in the following paragraph, this epistemological approach thus forms the basis of my data collection choices and sampling strategy.

3.2 Data collection

To collect data on symbolic interactions, and the latter part of my question that addresses transnational practices of authoritarianism, I divided my data collection in two phases. In the first phase, I made an index of possible situations and environments in which I could explore the symbolic interactions of the YPFDJ. Since personal interviewing was not possible, which I will elaborate on when I address limitations, I explored public and open-source cases of framing. I found that the online space of social media and news outlets provided me with rich and varied narratives and images to observe and collect. The YPFDJ was surprisingly vocal and present on both social media and in Dutch newspapers, enabling me to focus my data collection on online open sources on platforms such as cTwitter, Facebook, Youtube and news outlets. I like to think of these platforms as the primary "exhibits" of YPFDJ meaning-making, as well as "arena's" when the framing turned to counter-framing against other actors. This approach to social media as "framing space" is also mentioned by authors such as Demmers and Bernal.[39] Demmers calls an analysis of social media in this regard as "indispensable to any conflict analysis", which affirms my approach in using social media as a primary source of data.

Regarding the transnational authoritarian practices of the Eritrean government in the Netherlands, I chose to collect data from secondary sources. The scope of this topic is simply too big to focus on by collecting primary sources such as interviews and has already been thoroughly addressed in previous relevant and recent research. To explore these practices, I thus chose to collect findings from commissioned research on the topic by the Dutch government, and public investigation

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[38] Mason, *Qualitative Researching,* page 8.
[39] Demmers, J. (2017). *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction.* Routledge. Page 102.
Bernal, V. (2006). Diaspora, cyberspace and political imagination: The Eritrean diaspora online. Global Networks, 6(2), 161–179. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2006.00139.x

into the topic by news outlets and investigative journalists. These are then used to triangulate my findings from my primary data.

3.3 Sampling strategy

With these primary avenues for information in mind, I constructed a purposive sampling strategy to generate relevant and telling data sources to answer my research question and distinguish information that looked interesting but did not relate to the essence of my inquiry. In her book on qualitative research, Mason emphasizes how sampling should have a strategic purpose and not be ad hoc.[40] This is what Mason identifies as theoretical sampling and is what I used as a sampling strategy. In short, I identified significant aspects of my study to guide my sampling choices based on my analytic frame of framing theory, specifically injustice framing, and practices of transnational repression.

For my first sub-question about injustice framing, significant aspects where the identification of a problem or injustice, the identification of the victim(s) of this problem, and the attribution of blame for this problem. Furthermore, prognostic framing was indicated by a proposed solution to these problems. The main group of my study, and thus the most significant actor, was the YPFDJ or signifying agents related to the YPFDJ. Following these criteria, I constructed a database of YPFDJ telling sources on social media such as Twitter (n=60), Youtube (n=10), Facebook (n=15), openly accessible blogposts (n=8), and news outlets (n=20).[41] I stored these sources directly onto NVivo, a program for qualitative text analysis which I will elaborate on below, since it allowed for direct imports of social media posts.

For my second sub-question that relates to legitimization, significant aspects entailed a public show of active consent, toleration for the regime and its practices, and merely passive obedience with the regime. I could trace this active consent in my social media samples, but passive obedience and toleration are not very public attitudes. Rather they are more uneasy, preferably silent and not seeking attention. Therefore, I sampled commissioned research reports by the Dutch government and articles from investigative journalists (n=10)[42] where they confidentially interviewed people who were passively obedient towards the regime, or people from the community who could elaborate on that attitude of obedience among Dutch Eritreans. The government-commissioned research by DSP Group is the most notable and extensive of these samples. These sources allowed me to paint an image of how legitimization works and analyze how it comes to be and how injustice framing influences this process.

Following this strategy, I came to the point that I reached data saturation. I generated a very rich and sometimes contradictory database which provided me with enough material to analyze and build my argument. Gathering additional online sources would mostly bring me more of the same data, instead of providing an essential perspective or dynamic that I felt I missed.

3.4 Data analysis

After having constructed my database in NVivo, I started on my analysis of the sources. Since Ragin describes analysis as the "breaking down of phenomena into their constituent parts and viewing them in relation to the whole they form"[43], I started looking for patterns, themes, and recurring indicators

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[40] Mason, *Qualitative Researching,* page 58.
[41] "n" refers to the number of posts, articles, or clips from each source.
[42] "n" refers to the number of articles and research reports.
[43] Ragin, C. (1994). *Constructing social research: the unity and diversity of method.* Pine Forge Press. Pages 55-56.

of my significant aspects in the sources. This was done through coding in NVivo, which entails highlighting pieces of text in your data with "codes" to categorize themes and identify patterns. My approach here was mixed: On the one hand, I used the concepts of my analytic frame to construct my coding tree in NVivo, based on the general indicators of the concepts such as problem identification and blame attribution. On the other hand, I used the descriptive categories the YPFDJ provided me with in its posts to build on this coding tree and make sub-headings under the larger conceptual categories. This latter part is called open coding, in which categories are deduced from the data analysis. This also meant that some data did not fit the categories of my analytic frame but were still relevant to illustrate and build my argument. An example of this is context information about the history of the YPFDJ. This part of my data analysis was mostly about the categorization and structuring of the data.

After this general categorization and breaking down of my data, I started looking at the content of my codes to explore possible explanations for the data and contradictions within the data. Doing this helped me see patterns and links between seemingly different posts of the YPFDJ and construct a birds-eye view of how the YPFDJ engages in meaning-making. I triangulated this with second-hand interviews with experts and the rich data from the DSP-research. This enabled me to build my arguments.

3.5 Ethics & Limitations

There are multiple limitations to the data collection method I employed and my position as a researcher. First, I am an outsider to the Dutch-Eritrean community, and so far, I have been unable to triangulate my findings with people from this community. This prohibits me from gaining knowledge or experiences specific to being Dutch-Eritrean and a member of a diasporic community. This access problem also exists because of the reported hesitance among Dutch Eritreans to speak about the regime and its practices in the Netherlands out of fear of implicating themselves.[44] I collected second-hand interviews with these people that provided several insights, but the questions asked in those interviews did not always relate to questions that are relevant for my study.

Second, I was unable to contact the YPFDJ themselves to elaborate on their worldview and the practices of the Eritrean regime, since the group is very suspicious of journalists and academics. Numerous journalists and academics have been threatened, sued, and intimidated for their work on the Dutch-Eritrean community and the YPFDJ, which led me to take a "safe distance" and focus on the online, openly accessible discourses of the YPFDJ.[45] As mentioned before, this "safe distance" could hamper me in really grasping what the YPFDJ is about and how they see the world around them. Interestingly, this lack of interviews and focus on online discourse led me to see contradictions between the responses of the YPFDJ in previous interviews and their online behaviour. I will elaborate on this in my analysis.

The lack of direct interviews with YPFDJ members or Dutch Eritreans in general required me to be more honest to myself about the biases and assumptions I have about the topic, since direct triangulation was not possible. The main limitation in this is my hesitance and inability to contact the signifying actor, the YPFDJ. This impacted my sampling strategy in the way that my perspectives on the topic were limited to what the YPDFJ has already publicly shared, or other people have mentioned

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[44] DSP groep Amsterdam. (2017). Niets is wat het lijkt: Eritrese organisaties en integratie. *Tilburg University.* https://www.dsp-groep.nl/wp-content/uploads/16pverit_Niets_is_wat_het_lijkt-DSP_2016.pdf. Page 21.
[45] De Bruyne, M. (2016, July 1). *Rechtszaken en 'twittertrollen' moeten critici Eritrea afschrikken.* Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.nl/wordt-vervolgd/rechtszaken-en-twittertrollen-moeten-critici-eritrea-afschrikken

about it.

In terms of ethics, only approaching my topic through open-source research requires me to consider the conclusiveness of my findings and position as a researcher. Who am I to speak on the situation of people I am not familiar with and have not spoken to? Given the described practical and safety issues in approaching either regime supporters or Dutch Eritreans in general, I tried to find as many second-hand sources and interviews as possible with these groups to triangulate my findings. Moreover, using social media posts as primary data confronted me with a complicated consideration on informed consent. On the one hand, my "participants" are not aware of the use of their personal but public posts in this research. It is too easy to use social media as "public property", waiving users' privacy rights due to their agreement with often unreadable terms and conditions of the platforms. On the other hand, due to safety reasons mentioned above, I have chosen not to ask the consent of members of the YPFDJ from which I sourced social media posts. The aggressive nature of the online injustice framing and hostility towards academics and outsiders is above all one of the main topics of this research. To study these processes, and respect the privacy rights of online users to a degree, I've chosen to ensure the anonymity of the users in this research wherever possible by not including their names.

4. History of injustice: The YPFDJ and the Eritrean liberation struggle.

Delving into the rich narratives and symbolism of the YPFDJ can be overwhelming and disorienting without the proper context knowledge. The group often refers to Eritrea's recent history, specifically the independence struggle and fight against Ethiopia. The group itself, and how it came to be, is also situated in the specific context of the Eritrean diasporic experience, and the ties between Eritreans abroad and the regime. That is why this chapter will provide the appropriate context for the analyses and arguments of this study.[46] First, I will focus on the Eritrean War of Independence and subsequent conflict with Ethiopia. Then I will shortly describe the state of the Eritrean regime in the present, and its infamous actions both at home and abroad. Subsequently, I will focus on the different waves of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands and the characteristics of each wave. Lastly, I will focus on the history of the YPFDJ and how the group serves some crucial needs of the Eritrean regime.

4.1 The Eritrean War of Independence and conflict with Ethiopia

In recent history, Eritrea was an Italian colony until the defeat of Italy during the Second World War, after which the country became a British protectorate. In 1952, the British chose to let Eritrea be merged in a federation with its neighbour Ethiopia. Growing discontent with this arrangement among Eritreans led to the rise of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), starting an armed struggle for independence from Ethiopia in 1961. For nearly 30 years, Eritrean independence fighters fought against Ethiopia in a war of attrition, with the latter containing the rebellion with Soviet support. In 1977, current president Isaias Afewerki became the leader of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a successor to the ELF. After the Soviets withdrew their support from Ethiopia, the EPLF and other ethno-nationalist militias within Ethiopia managed to defeat the Ethiopian regime. The Eritreans, led by the EPLF, then declared independence from Ethiopia in 1991, after a referendum with Afewerki as their president. Eritrea was recognized as a sovereign state by the United Nations in 1993.

Quickly hereafter, another conflict arose with the new Ethiopian government about the border between newly independent Eritrea and Ethiopia. President Afewerki sought to conquer disputed border territories and decided to invade Ethiopia in 1998. Again, an intense war of attrition took place, displacing many Eritreans and Ethiopians. While a ceasefire was agreed upon in 2000, the conflict sporadically erupted until 2018, when the new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initiated a peace plan with Afewerki. This means that Eritrea, both as a region and a country, had been almost continuously at war with Ethiopia for nearly 60 years. Multiple generations of Eritreans grew up with this conflict, leaving a mark on Eritrean life ever since.

4.2 Current regime

The current regime in the one-party state of Eritrea is the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, formerly the EPLF, led by Isaias Afewerki. The PFDJ is the only party legally permitted in Eritrea, and elections have been indefinitely postponed since independence. After declaring independence, Afewerki and the EPLF gained power by having achieved Eritrea's liberation in the armed struggle. The liberation struggle is a powerful narrative and history that the PFDJ uses to legitimize their claim to

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[46] This entire section: Last, C., and Markakis, J. (2021, March 10). Eritrea. *Encyclopedia Britannica.* https://www.britannica.com/place/Eritrea

power, which is a frequent characteristic of victorious liberation movements.[47]

The regime has been accused of large-scale human rights violations by governments, NGO's and regime critics alike.[48] A prominent example is the indefinite mandatory military conscription for both men and women. Afewerki installed this conscription under the pretext of the threat of Ethiopia. The end of this conscription period is arbitrarily decided upon by army commanders known to use the conscripts as forced labourers. Many Eritreans have fled the country for this reason, with the risk of being shot by Eritrean border guards. Other problems include the lack of any free press in the country, leading to Eritrea being at the bottom of the list of the Press Freedom Index, below North Korea.[49] Critics, community leaders, and journalists are often detained without trial, in inhumane conditions in the desert.

Not only does the regime repress Eritreans within the borders, but Eritreans abroad in the diaspora also feel the pressure of the regime.[50] The regime demands a "diaspora tax" from Eritreans abroad of 2% of their yearly income. This tax is one of the primary sources of income for the impoverished country. The regime also targets critics abroad through numerous means of pressure. I will elaborate on this transnational pressure later in this thesis.

4.3 Diaspora

Due to the war with Ethiopia and the human rights abuses, many Eritreans have been displaced and have fled to other countries over the years. That is why large Eritrean communities exist in Europe, Asia and the US, although exact numbers in relation to domestic Eritreans are lacking. In the Netherlands, around 20.000 Eritreans are estimated to live here.[51] This Dutch Eritrean community is made up of different historical backgrounds and reasons for fleeing. The first "wave" of Eritrean refugees came to the Netherlands during the independence struggle, with the first refugees arriving after 1980. These Eritreans often fled the violence from Ethiopian forces or were connected to the Eritrean Liberation Front, which is why most of this first generation is supportive of the current regime that inherited the liberation. According to Dutch Eritreans interviewed in a government-commissioned research, this generation also raised children in the Netherlands with the ideals of the liberation movement.[52] According to a German research institute, this second generation of Eritreans internalized the liberation narrative and promises of the PFDJ due to their upbringing.[53] That is why many of these young European Eritreans strongly relate to the country, and organize themselves to learn about Eritrea in organizations such as the YPFDJ.

A second wave of refugees came to the Netherlands during the border war with Ethiopia, after 1998, or fled from the regime and mandatory conscription. Then a third wave of refugees can be distinguished after 2010, when almost 15.000 Eritreans sought refuge in the Netherlands until now.

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[47] Von Soest, C., and Grauvogel, J. (2017) Identity, procedures, and performance: how authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule. *Contemporary Politics*, 23 (3), 287-305, DOI: 10.1080/13569775.2017.1304319. Page 295.
[48] Amnesty International. (2019). *Eritrea.* Amnesty International.
https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/report-eritrea/
[49] Reporters Without Borders. (2013). *Eritrea*. RSF. https://rsf.org/en/eritrea
[50] Hirt, N., and Mohammad, A. (2018). By way of patriotism, coercion, or instrumentalization: How the Eritrean regime makes use of the diaspora to stabilize its rule. *Globalizations,* 15(2), 232–247.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2017.1294752
[51] DSP groep Amsterdam. (2017). Niets is wat het lijkt: Eritrese organisaties en integratie. *Tilburg University.* https://www.dsp-groep.nl/wp-content/uploads/16pverit_Niets_is_wat_het_lijkt-DSP_2016.pdf. Page 7.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Hirt, N. (2020, April 16). *The Long Arm of the Regime – Eritrea and its Diaspora.* BPB.
https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/305657/eritrea#footnode22-22

This is the second-largest group of refugees in the Netherlands after Syrian people. These people are often young, single men, who fled from the abuses of the regime. Due to their numbers, they make up the bulk of the Dutch Eritrean community. This most recent wave of migration led to tensions within the Dutch Eritrean community, due to regime supporters and refugees increasingly being at odds with each other at Eritrean events, on the streets, and in Eritrean churches.[54]

4.4 The YPFDJ

The Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the YPFDJ, is the international youth wing of the ruling PFDJ. The YPFDJ was founded in 2003 by the political head of the PFDJ: Yemane Gebreab. [55] The organization has chapters in all countries where the Eritrean diaspora is present, including the Netherlands. It was founded with the goal of involving second-generation diasporic Eritreans with Eritrean culture and politics and foster Eritrean identity in general.[56] Official activities of the YPFDJ include organizing Eritrean parties and leisure evenings and facilitate summer camps and internships in Eritrea. The most prominent activity is the yearly YPFDJ Conference, that is often held in Europe and North America. During these conferences, veterans of the liberation and regime officials are invited to speak to young Eritreans abroad about politics and motivate them to engage with Eritrea. Attendees of these conferences have testified that these officials are present to indoctrinate Eritrean youth with nationalist narratives, and align youth with the party ideology.[57] Moreover, Gebreab himself made clear on the 2015 conference that the main purpose of the YPFDJ was to gather intelligence on "enemies", in order to "fight and eliminate them".[58]

The reason young Dutch Eritreans are enthusiastic about joining the YPFDJ has all to do with a sense of belonging, according to former YPFDJ members interviewed in the DSP research.[59] Most people join in their adolescence, an age where their social identity is still being shaped. These respondents also mention that since young Dutch Eritreans face racism and discrimination, they are susceptible to the message of YPFDJ that makes them feel proud, exceptional, and important to the future of Eritrea. The PFDJ makes a conscious effort to align these foreign-born Eritreans with their party, by giving them privileges such as exempting them from military duty and training them to become the new political elite of Eritrea.[60]

To conclude, this group of Dutch Eritreans related to the YPFDJ is most vocal about Eritrean matters. The way they relate to the violent past of Eritrea and the current challenges they face, is not only a matter within the Dutch Eritrean community. Through demonstrations in the street, appearances in media, and prolific online activities, the YPFDJ engages in narratives about the Eritrean past and present. I hope this context chapter will help you as a reader to place these narratives, and the analysis of them in the following chapters.

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[54] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* page 8.
[55] Ibid., page 27.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., page 43
[58] Ibid., page 28.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., page 53.

5. The "long arm" practices of Eritrea

In the previous chapter, the history of Eritrea, its regime, diaspora, and the YPFDJ has been shortly described. In this chapter, I will describe what practices of transnational authoritarianism the Eritrean regime employs in the Netherlands.

5.1 Transnational authoritarianism

As described in the introduction, the Eritrean regime seeks to secure the loyalty of Eritreans living abroad. Glasius describes the practices through which authoritarian regimes try this.[61] First, regimes try to coopt strategically important groups that provide them with political power and financial support and can serve as a foreign extension of regime influence. Secondly, regimes try to repress critical voices and independent thinkers, through the (threat of) physical sanctions. Lastly, regimes try to secure loyalty by seeking active support or ensuring passive obedience. In the following paragraphs, I will assess how these practices are used by Eritrea in the Netherlands and expand on these concepts empirically by describing the central practical role of the YPFDJ in all these three practices. I will also illustrate how these practices are mutually linked and reinforce each other.

5.2 Cooptation: Securing the youth abroad

There are multiple reasons for authoritarian regimes to coopt populations abroad, and what strategic groups to coopt are in this regard. Firstly, an important goal of cooptation is ensuring financial support. A former finance minister of Eritrea who fled to the Netherlands testified about the importance of the diaspora for the financial stability of the regime.[62] He emphasized how dependent the impoverished country is on so-called "remittances", money transferred by diaspora members to their homeland. The diaspora, and especially Eritreans living in high-income countries such as the Netherlands, is thus seen as an important financial asset of the regime. To ensure this income, the regime installed a "diaspora tax" shortly after the independence of Eritrea. Not only does this tax entail a contribution of 2% of one's yearly income, but it also includes numerous informal fees and contributions which are collected at parties and social events.[63] For example, the YPFDJ Holland recently promoted a fundraising to support Eritrea in its fight against the coronavirus.[64] The degree of voluntariness of the diaspora in paying this tax is a hotly debated issue, both in Dutch media and parliament. Since I will address how the YPFDJ lends legitimacy to this tax further in this thesis, it suffices to say for now that government-commissioned research indicates that the tax is being collected through extortion and intimidation.[65] Consular services are denied when someone does not pay the tax, and there are numerous reports of Dutch Eritreans being threatened that their families in Eritrea will be harmed if they do not pay the tax.[66] In this way, the cooptation of the diaspora as a financially strategic group is

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[61] Glasius, *Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices,* pages 185-189.

[62] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* page 11.

[63] Ibid.

[64] YPFDJ Holland (2020, April 6). Facebook post.

[65] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* page 86.

DSP groep. (2017). *The 2% Tax for Eritreans in the diaspora.* Tilburg University. https://www.dsp-groep.eu/wp-content/uploads/The-2-Tax-for-Eritreans-in-the-diaspora_30-august-1.pdf

[66] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* page 14.

Adamson, F., and Tsourapas, G. (2020). At Home and Abroad: Coercion-by-Proxy as a Tool of Transnational Repression.

facilitated through practices of repression.

The diaspora is not only a source of financial support but is also seen by the Eritrean regime as the political future of the ruling party. More specifically, the diasporic youth is seen as a strategic group. This was emphasized by the right-hand of President Afeworki, Yemane Gebreab, when he said that "we must make the youth the centre of the PFDJ".[67] The need for a new generation of political leadership is one of the primary reasons for the foundation of the YPFDJ, according to Gebreab. According to ex-regime officials, the diasporic youth is targeted rather than domestic youth because of their susceptibility to nationalist narratives and romanticized image of Eritrea.[68] Eritrean youth abroad are seen as malleable in their identities by party officials, because of their age and their longing to a link with their roots when not physically present in Eritrea. The Eritrean regime tries to achieve this cooptation first and foremost through the YPFDJ, which seeks to instil a sense of national pride and nurture Eritrean heritage. Regime officials are often present at YPFDJ conferences and events to talk about Eritrean matters, which opponents of the regime describe as indoctrination. Furthermore, diasporic youth are persuaded with perks such as internships in Eritrea, administrative positions within the YPFDJ and even plots of land in Eritrea.[69] In sum, the regime tries to coopt the Dutch Eritrean youth as a strategic group out of the need for a political future. The regime not only "passes the torch" through promises of benefits, but also nurtures a nationalist identity within diasporic youth, with narratives of injustice playing an important role.

This process brings the question to mind of why Eritrean youth abroad supports the regime given the pressures other Eritreans abroad face. This touches upon the core of my argument; these practices that harm other Dutch Eritreans are seen as legitimate and just by the YPFDJ, since they are necessary in face of the perceived injustices facing the Eritrean nation. I will elaborate on this in more detail in the next chapter.

5.3 Repression

The Eritrean regime also seeks to deter Dutch Eritreans from voicing criticism and forming opposition, by threatening and intimidating these people to varying degrees.[70] Notably, the YPFDJ performs a crucial executive function in this repression.[71] First of all, the most abrasive forms of repression are the physical sanctions that outspoken critics and disloyal Dutch Eritreans face. Several incidents of violence are known to the police, in which the European Eritrean mob "Eri-Blood" beats up people at Eritrean parties who voice criticism towards the regime.[72] Threats of violence are also common, particularly by members of the YPFDJ. These will be described in the chapter about prognostic frames. Not only are these threats targeted towards critical Dutch Eritreans; Dutch journalists and academics writing about Eritrea and the YPFDJ have also faced numerous threats. To prevent their writing from being publicized, the former head of the YPFDJ Holland, Meseret Balhbi, sued them in several court cases for libel and slander. This imposes a high cost on those who write about Eritrea regarding time, money and personal wellbeing.[73]

Besides these visible forms of pressure, several Dutch Eritreans interviewed for the

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[67] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt*, page 103.
[68] Ibid., page 42.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., page 72.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., page 44.
[73] Modderkolk, H., and Bolwijn, M. (2016, January 27). *'Nu weet ik hoe het is om je geïntimideerd te voelen'*. De Volkskrant. https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/nu-weet-ik-hoe-het-is-om-je-geintimideerd-te-voelen~bdbe3104/

government research spoke about the extent of subtle means of repression, and invisible lines that should not be crossed.[74] This line is often not only about voicing criticism, but also a lack of attendance at official parties or a failure to pay the diaspora tax. Social isolation is a common practice that happens to anyone who crosses this line, in which regime supporters spread gossip about someone and make sure they are isolated from the Dutch Eritrean community.[75] Since most Dutch Eritreans are heavily dependent on community ties for their social and financial needs, it is very impactful to not be talked to by anyone from that community. According to interviewed Dutch Eritreans, most Dutch Eritreans are aware of these measures and feel more or less inhibited to speak up about these pressures.[76] Here it becomes apparent how much loyalty for the regime by Dutch Eritreans is linked to staying within the lines and knowing what happens when crossing these lines. This is where legitimacy (gaining support), repression (deterring activities), and identity construction intersect. In all these forms and shapes of repression in the Netherlands, the YPFDJ plays a crucial role in executing these practices.

5.4 Legitimation

According to Gerschewski, authoritarian regimes seek the support of their population to survive and ensure political stability.[77] Glasius emphasizes how diaspora groups are especially important sources of this legitimacy, since disloyal diaspora groups could function as powerful lobby groups in their host countries against a regime.[78] The Eritrean government is thus invested in ensuring the loyalty of Dutch Eritreans, whether through active consent or passive obedience. What role does the YPFDJ play in ensuring this legitimacy?

As mentioned, the YPFDJ tries to ensure most Dutch-Eritreans fall within the line and do as they are told. This form of passive obedience benefits the regime politically and financially, since most Dutch Eritreans will pay their tax and not lobby against the regime. Moreover, a large part of the diaspora grew up with the ideals of the PFDJ and Eritrean independence.[79] This is why some Dutch Eritreans are willing to give the regime the "benefit of the doubt" when faced with critical reports about the regime. According to regime critics, these people rather support a stable but flawed dictatorship instead of vouching for change.[80] This can be seen as a middle ground between active consent and passive obedience, which Glasius describes as "toleration". This comes down to a politically indifferent attitude that shows satisfaction with the status quo.[81] Lastly, the regime also seeks active consent in the Netherlands. In the previous sections, it becomes clear the YPFDJ is one of the main sources of this support, and that the organization was founded to encourage regime support among youth. The YPFDJ shows this active consent with the regime through different means such as protests, conferences and activity on social media.

This active consent forms the bridge between the practices as described in this section and the discursive activities of the YPFDJ that will be analyzed in the coming section. In this section, I demonstrated how the Eritrean regime engages with its population abroad through practices of cooptation, repression, and legitimation, and to what ends. In all these three practices, the YPFDJ

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[74] DSP groep, page 72.
[75] Ibid., pages 74-75.
[76] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* pages 72-73.
[77] Gerschewski, *Three pillars of stability,* page 18.
[78] Glasius, *Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices,* page 188.
[79] Hirt, *The Long Arm of the Eritrean Regime.*
[80] Heijink, D. (2014, June 13). *De grote invloed van Eritrea op gemeenschap in Nederland.* NU.nl. https://www.nu.nl/weekend/3800904/grote-invloed-van-eritrea-gemeenschap-in-nederland.html
[81] Gerschewski, page 18.

functions as the practical manifestation of the regime in the Netherlands. Now that I have clarified what these mutually constitutive practices are and how the YPFDJ performs a *practical* role in supporting the regime, I will move on to how the YPFDJ *discursively* legitimizes these practices through its framing work. This phenomenon of discursive legitimation and the role of injustice frames stands at the core of this thesis. In the next chapter, I will address the two main narratives of injustice that the YPFDJ formulates online, to demonstrate how these are illustrative of a repertoire of interpretation.

6. Injustice all-around: the diagnostic frames of the YPFDJ

In this chapter, I will describe and analyze the articulation and elaboration of online narratives and discourses by the YPFDJ Holland, and individual YPFDJ members. While there are many online posts that evoke support for the YPFDJ or the Eritrean regime, it is difficult to distinguish if someone is a member of the YPFDJ. This image is also confirmed by respondents in the DSP research, which mention that membership or loyalty is often informal in nature, and that YPFDJ members do not always present themselves as such.[82] For this reason, I choose to include posts from all Dutch Eritreans that evoke support for the regime and/or the YPFDJ. While this could mean that I focused too narrowly on a loud and vocal minority within the YPFDJ, the consistency and frequency of the frames among almost all Dutch-Eritrean online actors are surprisingly high. This image of the YPFDJ and related individuals is also confirmed in the DSP research and articles from Dutch research journalists.[83]

Building on the concept of diagnostic frames, the concept of injustice framing is used to analyze these posts, which will then be broken down into 1) an identified problem or injustice, 2) the victim(s) of this problem and 3) an actor or actors blamed for this problem. I will demonstrate how two main narratives of injustice can be distinguished in the YPFDJ online activity, out of the patterns and main topics of contention within the frames. I will then argue how these narratives illustrate a repertoire of interpretation within the group revolving around injustice, using the concept of master-frames.

6.1 The unjust treatment of European-Eritreans

A major problem identified by regime supporters online is the unjust treatment of the Eritrean diaspora in the Netherlands. The most prominent, often mentioned, and illustrative example for them is the cancellation of their Dutch YPFDJ conference in 2017 by local authorities, as mentioned in the introduction.[84] To refresh the scene, the conference was banned because of public safety concerns regarding a counterprotest by regime opponents. Many regime supporters believe that the public safety concerns were used as an excuse, and that there were underlying reasons to ban the conference, as illustrated by a quote from a YPFDJ Youtube video:

"The reason of banning was simply political, preplanned with a foregone conclusion. This is part and parcel of the injustices that are being committed against Eritreans by Western governments and NGO's."[85]

In the posts of the YPFDJ, this cancellation is frequently linked to "racism", "fascism", "intolerance", and "the denial of democratic rights to Eritrean/Black Europeans".[86] This last point is especially salient in the posts of the YPFDJ, which emphasize how the basic human right to assembly has been denied with this cancellation. Multiple posts mention the hypocrisy and arbitrariness of the Dutch government in this, as illustrated in this YPFDJ petition against the court ruling of the cancellation:

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[82] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* page 43.
[83] Terlingen, S. (2014, June 3). *Aanhangers regime spinnen nieuws Eritrea.* Oneworld.nl
https://www.oneworld.nl/lezen/achtergrond/aanhangers-regime-spinnen-nieuws-eritrea/
[84] Multiple tweets and Facebook-posts (N=45)
[85] Quote from YPFDJ Youtube video: Haki Fetewo (2017, April 22). *Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees? – Eritrea.* [Video]. Youtube. Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees? - Eritrea - YouTube
[86] Social media posts (N=33)

"The rights to freedom of assembly and association are not rights you give to one set of Europeans and deny others. As European youth of Eritrean origin YPFDJ has the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association at all levels."[87]

Notably, the previously described posts identify the victims of the injustice in different ways, which is also traceable in other posts about this specific injustice. On the one hand, the YPFDJ makes a conscious effort to describe the victims as "Europeans", "European youth of Eritrean origin", or "Dutch Eritreans".[88] This is often in the same posts where the hypocrisy is pointed out that they do not receive the same rights as other Europeans. On the other hand, the victims are described as "black", "African-Europeans" or "Eritreans" when talking about the racism apparent in this injustice.[89] The identification of the victims thus seems to shift related to the arguments made in the frames of the YPFDJ. Common in all frames is the emphasis on "youth", "peaceful and patriotic youth", or "innocent children" being harmed, to emphasize the immorality of the act, while most pictured attendees were already adults.

Lastly, the online posts show quite a unanimous answer in who is to blame for the second-class treatment of Dutch Eritreans. One Youtube video encapsulates what is mostly said about the perpetrators of the cancellation:

"Whole sharade was preplanned by Dutch Mayor, dutch police and dutch court supporting so-called "refugees" beating up women and threatening to kill conference attendees."[90]

The Mayor of Veldhoven, Jack Mikkers, is often mentioned by name in this regard, including pictures of him.[91] The court responsible for allowing the cancellation is blamed for fascist behaviour in several posts, together with the police. The regime opponents that were protesting, for the most part recently arrived Eritrean refugees, are described in tweets and videos by the YPFDJ as "criminal", "violent thugs", and as "Ethiopians masquerading as Eritreans".[92] This characterization of Eritrean refugees is a recurrent theme in the framing of the YPFDJ, illustrating how pervasive an "antagonist identity field", as discussed in the theory section, can be.

Perhaps most importantly, one person in specific is blamed in many posts as the "mastermind" behind this conspiracy: Dutch academic Mirjam van Reisen.[93] Van Reisen is a professor who researched the human rights situation in Eritrea. Because of this, she is regarded by the YPFDJ as "anti-Eritrean". After Reisen posted on social media supporting the protests at the YPFDJ conference, numerous YPFDJ members saw this as a confirmation of her involvement in the cancellation. Therefore, an abundance of posts mentions the role of Van Reisen in this conspiracy, accusing her of setting up the protests and planning the cancellation together with local authorities.[94]

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[87] Tesfanews. (2017, April 27). *(Petition) We Condemn the Actions by the Mayor of Veldhoven*. Tesfanews.net. https://tesfanews.net/petition-condemning-veldhoven-mayor-ypfdj/
Social media posts (N=9)
[88] Social media posts (N=21)
[89] Social media posts (N=8)
[90] Fetewo, *Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees?,* Youtube. Holland Backing Potential Killer Refugees? - Eritrea - YouTube
[91] Social media posts (N=20)
[92] Social media posts (N=9)
[93] Social media posts (N=27)
[94] Social media posts (N=15)

6.2 Campaign of misinformation and sanctions against Eritrea

The second major narrative of injustice from the YPFDJ regards the criticism and sanctions against Eritrea and its representatives in the Netherlands.[95] The main problem that the YPFDJ identifies is twofold. On the one hand, critical reports written by investigative journalists about the YPFDJ in the Netherlands and its role as the "long arm of Eritrea" are mentioned by YPFDJ members as "slander" and "misinformation". In a statement by the YPFDJ following these articles, the organization mentions how it faces "baseless accusations and fabricated lies" to which it can "impossibly defend itself".[96] This also concerns the head of the YPFDJ personally, who frequently tweeted about the slanderous Dutch media and specific Dutch journalists.[97] He often mentions how he is grieved that Dutch media provide a platform to journalists critical about the YPFDJ, but "censor" contributions from YPFDJ members such as himself.

On the other hand, the Eritrean regime faces criticism and sanctions from Western governments because of the human rights abuse in the country. The YPFDJ sees this as a large problem, even highlighting the falseness of a specific critical UN report, called COIE, in its main background image on their Facebook page:
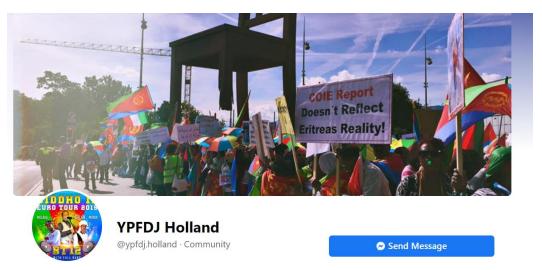

Image 1: Background of YPFDJ Holland official Facebook page.[98]

In several posts, the YPFDJ mentions how critical reports are used to support sanctions against the regime, and moreover serve to orchestrate plans of "regime change" in the country.[99] The YPFDJ laments the sanctions in multiple articles, saying they are designed to keep the country poor and underdeveloped. In YPFDJ blogs and state news channels of Eritrea, the main reason mentioned for this is spite and jealousy of the success of an independent Eritrea, by conspiring Western actors.[100] On an analytical level, a core injustice the YPFDJ thus identifies is the framing activity of opponents. I will address in the following chapter how the YPFDJ engages in reframing and counter-framing to rebuke these frames.

The YPFDJ not only sees itself and the Eritrean regime as the victims of this campaign of misinformation, but the Eritrean "nation" as a whole, meaning each person of Eritrean decent, also in

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[95] Social media posts (N=38)
[96] YPFDJ Holland. (2016, June 30). Facebook post.
[97] Social media posts (N=15)
[98] YPFDJ Holland. (Date unknown). https://www.facebook.com/ypfdj.holland/. (Retrieved: 2021, May 8).
[99] Social media posts (N=7)
[100] Madote. (2016). *Eritrea: The Camel Marches while the Dog Keeps on Barking.* Madote.com. http://www.madote.com/2016/05/eritrea-camel-marches-while-dog-keeps.html

the Netherlands.[101] Bahlbi, the former YPFDJ leader, frequently mentions how every Dutch Eritrean is being criminalized and marginalized because of the critical reports about the YPFDJ and diaspora tax. This ties into the narrative of Dutch Eritreans being treated as second-class citizens, when Bahlbi mentions how Eritreans are "dehumanized", especially the "patriotic and enthusiastic youth that supports the YPFDJ".[102] Regarding the sanctions, several posts and signs in protests mention how "Eritrea is under attack". Interestingly, the Eritrean regime to which most of the sanctions and criticism are based, is equated with Eritrean people in general by regime supporters online. Hirt and Mohammed also note this conflation of identity and loyalty with the example of an Eritrean slogan: *nsu nehna, nehna nsu,* meaning "he is us and we are him".[103] The slogan refers to supposed unity between Eritrean leader Afewerki and the Eritrean people. This dynamic also sheds light on why anti-regime Dutch Eritreans and recently arriving Eritrean refugees are seen as "Ethiopians masquerading as Eritreans". The victim identification of the YPFDJ is thus strongly related to the construction of a collective Eritrean identity, and what the indicators for being Eritrean are. In the world of the YPFDJ, real Eritreans support the regime, and an attack on the regime is an attack on its people.

Lastly, the blame assignment apparent in the YPFDJ posts again shows a unanimous idea of who the actors behind this campaign are. An article on a pro-regime Eritrean blog neatly summarizes the assemblage of actors to blame for this campaign by referring to them as "a lucrative anti-Eritrean cottage industry" of NGO's, academics, journalists and governments.[104] Interestingly, academic Mirjam van Reisen is again mentioned as the coordinator of this campaign in several posts on Twitter, Facebook and signs in protests.[105] According to the same blog, her research department at Tilburg University publishes "anti-Eritrean" reports distributed to governments to advance sanctions against Eritrea and cause regime change.[106] Things event went so far that a YPFDJ member called her and a critical journalist, Martin Plaut, "vampires" on Twitter, during a period in which Van Reisen was personally threatened:

The two vampires, @martinplaut & @mvreisen, having sleepless nights to suck the blood of #Eritrea.

2:31 PM · Dec 21, 2015

♡ 4   ♡ 1   ⬆ Share this Tweet

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[101] Social media posts (N=11)

[102] Social media posts from Bahlbi (N=4)

[103] Hirt and Mohammed, *By way of patriotism,* page 238.

[104] Tesfamariam, S. (2018, June 22). *UN Human Rights Council Should Terminate Keetharuth's Mandate & Rescind all Reports on Eritrea.* Stesfamariam.com. https://stesfamariam.com/2018/06/22/un-human-rights-council-should-terminate-keetharuths-mandate-rescind-all-reports-on-eritrea/

[105] Social media posts (N=20)

[106] Ibid.

Image 2: Tweet portraying Van Reisen and Plaut as vampires.[107]

The Dutch government also takes centre stage in the frames of the YPFDJ, illustrated by a call to protest in The Hague that mentions how the government supports and funds a network of anti-Eritrean NGO's and journalists who orchestrate regime change.[108]

6.3 Repertoire of interpretation

Because of the flexibility of the YPFDJ in connecting issues and events across time and space, and the variety and recurrence of conspiring actors that are blamed in the frames, I believe these injustice frames illustrate a repertoire of interpretation. As mentioned in the theory chapter, Mooney & Hunt indicate that frames can evolve into a master frame when movements create a repertoire of interpretation across periods of mobilization, to produce ideological continuity within the group.[109] In this sense, other groups do not have to adopt a frame for it to be a master frame. I argue that the YPFDJ produces and reproduces a repertoire of interpretation constituted by two main elements.

First, on the level of problem identification, the YPFDJ connects and aligns different persons, issues, and events across time and space together in a narrative of injustice. Regardless of the specific diagnosis of the problem, the right to existence of the Eritrean nation, including Eritrean people abroad, is under attack by conspiring actors. I believe this is closely related to the hard-fought independence of the country, and the way that history is being kept alive by the regime and sympathizers abroad.

Secondly, on the level of blame assignment, the YPFDJ seems to blame a standard set of conspiring actors in their narratives. On a broad and historical level, the YPFDJ constantly blames a set of actors, including the United States, Ethiopia, "Western Powers" in general, former refugees and NGO's. In the timeframe of my research, this blame assignment fixates very specifically on Mirjam van Reisen. Whether the injustice is about sanctions, critical articles, or counterprotests by regime opponents, Van Reisen is blamed as the cause of these problems. This is what Gamson refers to as an "adversarial frame". He argues that without the specific naming & shaming of a perpetrator, the target of grief and anger by social movements remains abstract and vague.[110] To resolve this tension and to channel the emotional component of injustice, an adversarial frame mentioning specific actors is needed. I believe this is why Van Reisen is featured so prominently in the conspiracy-like frames of the YPFDJ, and it seems to work.

In conclusion, the YPFDJ and its adherents frame their perceived adversity in social life through a consistent repertoire of interpretation. The "Eritrean nation" is perceived by the YPFDJ as permanently under attack, by a recurrent set of conspiring actors seeking to undo Eritrean independence. This illustrates a repertoire of interpretation given that the same elements of this narrative keep returning, regardless of the topic or issue being framed by the YPFDJ. This repertoire then also serves to construct and delineate a collective Eritrean identity, based on loyalty. In the following chapter I will argue how this repertoire informs a standard set of solutions proposed by the YPFDJ.

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[107] YPFDJ member. (2015, December 21). Twitter. (Retrieved 07-05-2021).
[108] YPFDJ Holland (2018, March 13). Facebook post.
[109] Benford, R. (2013). Master Frame. *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm126
[110] Davis, P. (2009, February). How the media frames 'open access'. *Journal of Electronic Publishing,* 12 (1), DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0012.101.

7. Rally around the flag: the prognostic frames of the YPFDJ

Building on the analysis of the diagnostic narratives of injustice of the YPFDJ, in this chapter I will describe and analyze the solutions the YPFDJ proposes to these injustices, using the concept of prognostic framing. I will argue how the YPFDJ deals with injustices through a deepened commitment to the cause and use the concept of "counter-framing" to guide my analysis of the proposed solutions to the campaign of misinformation it experiences. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the YPFDJ also "reframes" its own claims in face of outside criticism and counter-frames. Reframing is defined as "attempts to ward off, contain, limit, or reverse potential damage to the movement's previous claims or attributes" by Benford & Snow.[111] I will conclude how these solutions of deepened commitment and engaging in "framing contests" relate to the injustice master frame of the YPFDJ, after which I argue how this affects legitimation in the next chapter.

7.1 #ISTANDwithYPFDJ

In the face of perceived injustice and misinformation, YPFDJ members often express their commitment to the organisation and its ideals. After the YPFDJ conference was cancelled on the 13th of April 2017, YPFDJ members and other regime supporters expressed their solidarity with the YPFDJ online through the hashtag #ISTANDwithYPFDJ. This hashtag lasted well into 2018, after the appearance of numerous critical articles and interviews about the YPFDJ being the "long arm of Eritrea". Phrases from YPFDJ members like "when the going gets tough, the tough get going" or "we stand for Eritrea" are illustrative of this commitment.[112]

The ongoing court case about the cancellation of the event and further critical articles about the YPFDJ culminated in the YPFDJ organizing a protest in the Hague on the 13th of March 2018. The goal of this event was to protest against the "bad treatment of Eritreans in the Netherlands", because "Eritreans in the Netherlands are being attacked based on false rumours".[113] This refers to the accusations against the YPFDJ by journalists, as previously mentioned. A 10-point program was shared on the YPFDJ official Facebook page, stipulating in detail all the injustices the YPFDJ would protest against.[114] These points are mostly mentioned in the previous chapter of diagnostic framing, ranging from the "animosity of the Dutch government against the Eritrean self-reliance principle" to "denial of the democratic rights of Dutch-Eritreans". This protest was a public show of commitment and solidarity with the Eritrean cause, as a way to stand up against the perceived injustice.

Several YPFDJ members filmed this protest and posted clips on social media.[115] To briefly describe, the protests were sizeable with at least more than 100 YPFDJ members attending, waving Eritrean and Dutch flags. Most members were dressed in the colour of the Eritrean flag or wore Eritrean attire or attributes. Interestingly, many members carried signs with statements about the injustices they perceive (diagnostic framing) and solutions to these problems (prognostic framing). Often, the diagnosis of the problem was linked to a solution within the same sign. For example, one sign stated that "self-proclaimed experts do not represent us" and that "people should talk with us, not about us". Other signs directly mentioned the practices of the regime that journalists and politicians were critical about, such as the 2% diaspora tax:

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[111] Ibid.
[112] Social media posts (N=13)
[113] YPFDJ Holland. (2018, March 2). Facebook post.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Social media posts (N=3)

> A peaceful and successful demonstration on 13 March 2018 at #The Hague (#The Netherlands) against the unwarranted & premeditated hostility to #Eritreans. #Eritrea #Dutch
>
> Tweet vertalen

Image 3: Tweet containing a video of the 2018 protest.[116]

The central sign in this still of the video reads "contributing 2% is my own decision". This corresponds with other signs in the video reading "I am a volunteer, 2% tax is my right" or "2% too much for Eritrean children?...We don't think so, it is about humanity". Other signs in these videos expressed the same indignation about the injustices and support for the Eritrean regime.

In short, one way the YPFDJ tackles injustice is through mobilizing and protesting, thereby actively showing consent with the regime and its practices in the Netherlands. YPFDJ members quite literally "rallied around the flag" and showed commitment to the regime, as illustrated in a tweet from a YPFDJ member:

"March 13th, 2018 marked a significant milestone that deepened the commitment of communal resistance of #Eritreans."[117]

I will address how this relates to legitimation in the following chapter.

7.2 Reframing

Besides showing support for the regime, the YPFDJ also tries to reframe its own claims in face of accusations and criticism by the media, to limit the damage to the movement's reputation. First, following up on the "talk with us, not about us" solution, the YPFDJ engaged in conversation with two members of Dutch parliament after a political debate calling for the investigation of the YPFDJ and Eritrean embassy as the "long arm of Eritrea". This conversation took place in 2016, after which the YPFDJ mentioned it as a "positive conversation".[118] The YPFDJ mentioned to be open to conversation

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[116] YPFDJ member. (2018, March 14). Twitter. (Retrieved: 07-05-2021)
[117] YPFDJ member. (2018, March 14). Twitter.
[118] YPFDJ Holland. (2016, February 18). Facebook post.

with anyone else who has "sincere" questions. While the contents of the conversation are unknown, I would argue that the YPFDJ tries to reframe itself as a transparent and open organization ready for dialogue.

The YPFDJ continued this line by publishing a list of "common misconceptions" about the YPFDJ to dispel these notions.[119] This article emphasizes how the YPFDJ is merely a cultural diasporic youth organization with democratic principles, open to anyone, whether Eritrean or not. Furthermore, the YPFDJ explains how the organization only shares an ideological link to the ruling party of Eritrea, the PFDJ, based on the ideals of independence and self-reliance. The YPFDJ emphasizes how there is no legal, financial or organizational link to the PFDJ, and how they are completely independent. The government-commissioned research with statements from ex-PFDJ officials shows evidence on the contrary, highlighting political and financial ties between the PFDJ and YPFDJ.[120] In conclusion, the YPFDJ laments the accusations against the organization and expresses it "will do anything to correct this wrong image in the media", indicating a clear intent to reframe.[121]

One last notable illustration of reframing activities is the online activity of former YPFDJ-leader Meseret Bahlbi. In his interviews with media and blogs, he takes a nuanced stance towards the Eritrean regime, and agrees with commenting followers that there is a need for long-term political change in Eritrea.[122] This is surprising given the intensity with which Bahlbi defends the regime on social media. Perhaps he is aware of his largely Dutch audience when participating in interviews on national channels, explaining his mild tone that could indicate a reframing of how supportive the YPFDJ is of the regime.

7.3 Counter-framing

"Enemies who don't tire and don't sleep, who try to bring our downfall … Therefore, our first objective – as YPFDJ and as Eritrean youth, and as community … is to conclusively defeat this hostility hovering over of our nation. That remains the job."[123]

This quote by PFDJ head Yemane Gebreab, speaking at a German YPFDJ conference in 2015, perhaps illustrates best the grim main solution the YPFDJ seeks regarding the injustice they experience. The YPFDJ in the Netherlands mostly "solves" the campaign of misinformation through counter-framing. In this effort, the YPFDJ tries to rebuke and undermine the interpretative framework of critical journalists and academics, thereby putting critics on the defensive and imposing a cost on opposing framing activities. This process of counter-framing, and previously mentioned reframing, is called a "framing contest" by Benford and Snow.[124] I argue that this counter-framing happens mostly through frame elaboration. In this mechanism, social movements emphasize and highlight certain topics more than others, so that in time some issues get rarely mentioned.[125]

This counter-framing and elaboration is most apparent in the numerous court cases the YPFDJ started against journalists, academics, news channels and papers. The YPFDJ elaborated on its injustice frame by not addressing the accusations and findings from these people. The organization made little effort to rebuke claims about the human rights situation in Eritrea and the role of the YPFDJ in

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[119] YPFDJ Holland. (2016, February 11). Facebook post.

[120] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* page 78.

[121] YPFDJ Holland. (2016, February 11). Facebook post.

[122] Bahlbi, M. (2016, January 30). *Een kat in het nauw maakt rare sprongen, karaktermoord is de nieuwe journalistiek.* Bahlbi.blogspot.com. http://bahlbi.blogspot.com/2016/01/een-kat-in-het-nauw-maakt-rare-sprongen.html

[123] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt*, page 103.

[124] Benford and Snow, *Framing processes,* page 626.

[125] Ibid., page 623.

intimidating arriving Eritrean refugees. Rather, they made the trustworthiness and credibility of its accusers the central issue in their framing. In the protest and on social media, the YPFDJ emphasized how these people know nothing of Eritrea, claiming they have never spoken to Eritreans nor visited Eritrea.[126] Furthermore, the YPFDJ sued its accusers for libel and slander, making the validity of the opposing frames the central issue of discussion between these two groups of framing actors.[127]

Through these legal actions, the sued journalists and others were forced to defend themselves in court, simply because of their interpretational frame. Although none of these cases succeeded, it did influence the journalists and academics. Besides the emotional impact of such actions on journalists, it also makes them somewhat more careful in their writing, as journalist Sanne Terlingen mentions:

"I already took care in respecting certain boundaries in my journalistic work. From now on, I will be more mindful of the way I formulate things."[128]

Furthermore, Van Reisen, who was also sued, mentions how the financial costs of these court cases can be quite large for the sued party, and she argues that the media has become more careful because of these cases.[129] It should be noted that Van Reisen and Terlingen agree that these court cases only ensured more attention to the practices of the YPFDJ and the Eritrean regime, thereby making this strategy counter-effective.[130]

Lastly, another method of counter-framing employed by the YPFDJ is described in the previous sections about the protest, in which regime supporters rebuke the accusation that the 2% tax is mandatory and enforced through extortion. They emphasize how this is a voluntary contribution.[131]

In conclusion, the YPFDJ deals with injustice through a public show of deepened commitment to its cause, and by engaging in a framing contest with critics to put them on the defensive. I believe these solutions are directly related to the repertoires of interpretation of the YPFDJ, that centre around injustice, struggle and the right to exist. The YPFDJ thus embraces the ideals of the Eritrean regime through rallying around the flag and attacking opponents. In the next chapter, I will argue and analyze how these diagnostic and prognostic frames serve a legitimizing purpose.

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[126] Social media posts (N=8).
[127] De Bruyne, M. (2016, July 1). *Rechtszaken en 'twittertrollen' moeten critici Eritrea afschrikken.* Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.nl/wordt-vervolgd/rechtszaken-en-twittertrollen-moeten-critici-eritrea-afschrikken
[128] Modderkolk, H., and Bolwijn, M. (2016, January 27). *'Nu weet ik hoe het is om je geïntimideerd te voelen'.* De Volkskrant. https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/nu-weet-ik-hoe-het-is-om-je-geintimideerd-te-voelen~bdbe3104/
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Social media posts (N=7).

8. Staying within the lines: discursive legitimation by the YPFDJ.

In the framework of collective action framing, social movements construct meaning to legitimate and justify their actions and ideas.[132] The concept of legitimacy also returns in studies on authoritarianism, which argue authoritarian regimes seek the support of their populations abroad to stabilize their rule. In this chapter, I will analyze how the YPFDJ as a social movement formulates injustice frames to support the Eritrean regime and its practices in the Netherlands. I will explore this legitimizing function by answering the final sub-question of this thesis:

How does the YPFDJ use injustice frames to ensure active consent and passive obedience among Dutch Eritreans towards the transnational authoritarian practices of the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands?

Using the different degrees of legitimation as described by Gerschewski, I will analyze the legitimizing function of the frames by distinguishing between "active consent" and "passive obedience" towards the practices.[133] Problematic in this regard is measuring "active consent" or "passive obedience", especially since Gerschewski does not provide clear indicators for these degrees of legitimation, or the success of these processes. However, I will use the concepts of Gerschewski since they help me grasp the subtleties within legitimation, and the different ways in which the YPFDJ discursively *attempts* to ensure legitimacy for the regime, within the context of injustice framing. First, I will describe the active consent of the YPFDJ itself, and how they seek to move other Dutch Eritreans towards consenting with the regime through conflating Eritrean identity with regime loyalty. Regarding more persistent non-supporters, I will argue that the YPFDJ seeks to ensure minimal passive obedience among them, through framing clear boundaries between Eritreans and perceived enemies. This functions as a credible threat given the practices of repression in the Netherlands.

8.1 Active consent: A hard core of support

The YPFDJ explicitly expresses support and active consent with the rule of the PFDJ and the practices of the regime in the Netherlands, such as the diaspora tax, "voluntary" fees at parties and the visit of regime officials. As mentioned in the chapter on the practices of transnational authoritarianism, the YPFDJ performs an executive and facilitating role in these practices. However, I will focus on the *discursive* legitimation by the YPFDJ in this chapter, given the framing approach I take.

First, the organization supports the regime by voicing active consent at its rallies and protests, such as in the Hague in 2018. Active consent is most apparent when YPFDJ members carry signs emphasizing their voluntariness in paying the diaspora tax, and repeating the legitimizing narrative of the regime that the tax is meant to rebuild the country and support Eritreans.[134] This also occurs when the YPFDJ posts fundraising calls from the Eritrean embassy on its social media; for example, the call for diasporic Eritreans to fund the fight against corona in the country.[135] These confirmations of consent should be seen in light of the criticism and accusations by Dutch politicians that this tax is illegal, extortive, and coerced.[136] The described counter-framing attempts by the YPFDJ serve to prove

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[132] Benford and Snow, *Framing processes,* page 614.
[133] Gerschewski, *Three Pillars of Stabilization,* page 18.
[134] Social media posts (N=7).
[135] YPFDJ Holland. (2020, April 6). Facebook post.
[136] Tweede Kamer (2016, December 15). *Debat integrale aanpak Eritrea en de invloed van Eritrea in Nederland.* <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail/2016Z24163/2016D49485>

otherwise and highlight its active consent with the tax.

Secondly, more fundamentally, the YPFDJ uses the cultural material of Eritrean history and the liberation struggle to conflate Eritrean identity with supporting the liberators of the country, now in power as the ruling regime. The DSP research indicates that many Dutch Eritreans of the "first migration wave" and their children, hold the beliefs and promises of the liberation movement in high regard, especially the self-reliance principle. [137] As such, the YPFDJ makes a conscious effort to appeal to these beliefs, and frames the regime's practices, such as the tax and mandatory service, as necessary for the future success and independence of the country and its people.[138] These frames are made more salient by highlighting the injustices that Eritreans face. This is what Benford & Snow describe as movements trying to culturally resonate with the beliefs and norms of their target group.[139] In this sense, the injustice frames of the YPFDJ are truly *collective* in nature, since they are intended to construct a *collective* identity based on *collective* experiences and goals.

In sum, the YPFDJ thus seeks to legitimize the practices of the Eritrean regime through expressing active consent in public settings such as protests and social media, and by appealing to a shared history among Eritreans to argue that being Eritrean means supporting the regime. However, how does the YPFDJ seek to ensure discursively that non-regime supporters stay in line with what the regime demands?

8.2 Passive obedience: the silent majority

To make sure non-regime supporting Dutch Eritreans abide by the rules, I argue the YPFDJ ensures passive obedience among them through ferocious counter-framing and its reputation of physically backing up on its discursive claims. This is enabled by the large presence of the YPFDJ in the imaginative space of the Dutch Eritrean community.

Writing about discursive legitimacy, Glasius describes how authoritarian regimes seek to legitimize themselves discursively through controlling the imaginative space of cyberspace and media representations.[140] Imaginative in this context relates to how diasporic communities conceive themselves, the political situation in the country of origin, and ideas about homeland.[141] I argue that the YPFDJ has a strong control of the Dutch Eritrean imaginative space, through its offline and online framing work that is far more present than oppositional framing work.[142] Concretely, this means the YPFDJ is able to spread its interpretations of social life most effectively, by reaching a large part of the Dutch Eritrean community through social media and offline activities such as parties.

With this large presence in the imaginative space, I argue the YPFDJ seeks to discursively ensure passive obedience among the majority of Dutch Eritreans in two ways. First, through explicit counter-framing against opponents, such as academics and oppositional figures. These frames show a message to Dutch Eritreans that any critique will be met by a counterattack from the YPFDJ, as apparent in its prognostic frames. That this dynamic causes fear among many Dutch Eritreans resulting

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[137] DSP-groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt*, page 30.

[138] Social media posts. (N=14)

[139] Benford and Snow, *Framing processes,* page 622.

[140] Glasius, *Extraterritorial authoritarian practices,* page 188.

[141] Collyer, M., and King, R. (2015). Producing transnational space: International migration and the extra-territorial reach of state power. *Progress in Human Geography*, 39(2), 185–204. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132514521479. Page 190.

[142] Both in terms of numbers and depth, the YPFDJ is far more present on social media than oppositional actors. This can possibly be attributed to the YPFDJ being well-organized and YPFDJ members connecting their personal identity to support of the regime.

in their obedience to regime practices, is confirmed by respondents in the DSP research.[143] These respondents speak of "red lines" that many Dutch Eritreans do not wish to cross, such as speaking out against the regime or not paying the tax. Although the reasons for this often relate to repression and coercion, the control of the imaginative space by the YPFDJ could play an important role for these people to remain within these boundaries.

Secondly, the YPFDJ seeks to make Dutch Eritreans abide by constructing "out-group" identities of people who do not abide and backing up these claims with credible practices of repression. As mentioned about practices of repression, the YPFDJ engages in efforts to socially isolate non-loyal Dutch Eritreans through *framing* them. Refugees and anti-regime activists are framed as "Ethiopians pretending to be Eritrean" or "traitors", to dispel the notion that Eritreans could possibly be against the Eritrean regime. The DSP report mentions how many Dutch Eritreans wish not to be "guilty through association", causing the social isolation of people framed in these terms.[144] Again, these frames are inherently linked to *practices* of repression and isolation, which make the frames salient. The fact that being framed in a certain way can have physical consequences shows the effect of these framing activities. The frames of the YPFDJ are thus "resonant" in the sense that they strike a certain chord with their audience and targets. Benford & Snow describe how frame resonance can be affected through multiple factors, from which I want to highlight the credibility of the frame articulator. They argue that frame articulators can be seen as credible dependent on their status or expertise, and proven capacity to follow up on their claims.[145] This capacity is perceived by non-supportive Dutch Eritreans due to the status of the YPFDJ as an extension of the Eritrean regime, as mentioned by several respondents in the DSP research.[146]

In conclusion, the framing work of the YPFDJ has a certain "edge" for many non-regime supporting Dutch Eritreans because of the practices used in tandem with these frames, causing many of them to remain silent and abide by the rules of the regime.

To summarize, the YPFDJ uses injustice frames to ensure two forms of legitimation for the Eritrean regime and its practices in the Netherlands. First, the YPFDJ itself expresses active consent with these practices through online and offline framing work. The identification of the problem, actors to blame, and collective identity construction evoke a non-critical, supportive, and pro-active attitude towards the Eritrean regime. Second, the YPFDJ seeks to ensure passive obedience through framing non-loyal Eritreans as enemies and backing up these frames with physical consequences. Given the status of the YPFDJ and the record of transnational repressive measures of the regime, the frames of the YPFDJ are not experienced as senseless rambling from a toothless tiger, but threatening statements from a dangerous actor. It can be concluded that this dynamic causes the diasporic tax to be largely supported, whether pro-actively or not, within the Dutch-Eritrean community. The YPFDJ thus constructs identities around loyalty and support, making many Dutch Eritreans clear they need to abide or face the consequences of their disloyalty.

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[143] DSP groep, *Niets is wat het lijkt,* pages 72-75.
[144] DSP groep, page 29.
[145] Benford and Snow, *Framing processes,* pages 619-620.
[146] DSP groep, pages 42-43.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

Talking about this thesis with family members, friends, and colleagues often resulted in raised eyebrows. "Eritrea? Where is that?". Or; "Oh really? Is this all happening here in the Netherlands? Well, that should not be allowed!". I was only superficially aware of the situation in the country, and the fact Eritreans live in the Netherlands, which is why I got intrigued about this topic, reading news reports about the conference and debates on the "long arm of the regime". To learn about a small and obscure organization such as the YPFDJ and its aggressive online presence centred around injustices, inspired me to delve deeper and study what authoritarian regime supporters do in the Netherlands. To understand the relation between the YPFDJ and the Eritrean regime, I employed collective action framing theory as a lens to analyze how the YPFDJ discursively legitimizes the Eritrean regime and its practices in the Netherlands. In this effort, I formulated the main research question which I tried to answer through three guiding sub-questions.

In chapter 5, I used the concepts of legitimization, repression and cooptation to answer the first sub-question: *What transnational practices of authoritarianism does the Eritrean regime employ in the Netherlands?* Based on government-commissioned research, I demonstrated that the regime seeks to ensure the loyalty of Dutch Eritreans with the YPDFJ as its executive handle. Through the cooptation of diasporic youth in the YPFDJ, the regime tries to ensure financial income and a political future. Regime opponents and critics are threatened, so that other Dutch Eritreans refrain from doing the same. The role the YPFDJ plays in this, and the willingness it shows on backing up on its threats, ensure that most Dutch Eritreans abide by the rules and stay within the lines. I demonstrated the practical role the YPFDJ plays in these practices, before moving on to their discursive activities.

In chapters 6 and 7, I used several concepts from collective action framing to answer the following sub-question: *How does the YPFDJ articulate and elaborate injustice frames through diagnostic and prognostic framing?* In chapter 6, I argued how the two main diagnoses of injustice from the YPFDJ illustrate a repertoire of interpretation, implying the YPFDJ uses a master frame of injustice in its meaning-making efforts. This master frame then informs a standard set of solutions the YPFDJ employs in their prognostic framing, as I discuss in chapter 7. These solutions often centre on "rallying-around-the-flag", such as demonstrations, or engaging in framing battles with opponents. The YPFDJ thus mostly interprets social life through a lens of injustice, which results in a battle-ready attitude designed to bring the fight to opponents.

In chapter 8, I used the concept of legitimization to see how this master frame serves a legitimizing purpose: *How does the YPFDJ use injustice frames to ensure active consent and passive obedience among Dutch Eritreans towards the transnational authoritarian practices of the Eritrean regime in the Netherlands?* Analyzing the injustice frames through the lens of legitimization, I concluded that the YPFDJ itself functions as a source of active consent for the regime and seeks to conflate Eritrean identity with regime loyalty. The YPFDJ is also capable of ensuring passive obedience among Dutch Eritreans, given its reputation as a credible frame articulator. Through its aggressive counter-framing and role as manifestation of the regime in the Netherlands, the frames of the YPFDJ are surrounded with a threatening credibility of an organization capable of backing up on its threats. Both these processes result in the Eritrean regime being largely able to impose its diaspora tax and measures against critics without too much resistance.

Having answered these sub-questions, I return to the central research question:

How are injustice frames, as articulated by Dutch Eritreans organized in or related to the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice, legitimizing transnational authoritarian practices of the Eritrean regime from within the Netherlands from 2010 onwards?

The answer to this question is that the YPFDJ created a repertoire of interpretation in which the regime is always right. The group uses the physical and imaginative power of its threats to enforce this interpretation on other Dutch Eritreans, to make sure everybody follows the script and abides by the rules. The injustices apparent in the frames of the YPFDJ and way the YPFDJ deals with these show a kind of feedback loop of support for the regime. With each perceived injustice, YPFDJ members affirm their support for the regime and draw clear red lines not to be crossed by other Dutch Eritreans. On a larger level, the YPFDJ tries to construct a collective Eritrean identity around loyalty in face of injustice, disputing the "Eritreanness" of any dissenting Dutch Eritrean and treating them as traitors. This subtle but tangible and harmful effect of these injustice narratives shows how the imaginative dimension can have very real consequences for people.

This research thus shows the importance of legitimacy for authoritarian regimes. Where Glasius and Gerschewski approach this legitimacy through state-led practices, I would argue that bottom-up legitimacy is at least as important to study. It is Dutch Eritrean youth that still believes in the party's cause and the promises of independence, and lends the regime the indispensable support needed to survive. Although briefly touched upon in the DSP report, the question still looms of why these Western-educated youth feel intrinsically motivated to support an abusive regime like this. I would therefore argue more research is needed on the intersection between youth dynamics, the complex issue of identity in diasporic communities, and the political survival of authoritarian regimes.

Lastly, this research also confirms the power of collective action frames and narratives of injustice. I tried to argue that such frames do not have to be motivational or mobilizing for each audience in the traditional sense of calling to arms. While this holds up for the YPFDJ itself, I find the subtle messaging directed at Dutch Eritreans more interesting, with further questions to be researched. Numerous articles describe a culture of fear, anxiety, and silence within the Dutch Eritrean community.[147] Do injustice frames such as these legitimize a status-quo through mobilizing emotions such as fear or anxiety within people? If so, how do frames mobilize emotions, and what factors are important in determining this? Where do discourse and practice intersect to mobilize emotions in an audience? A framework of these processes would help for a better understanding of why some frames resonate and influence behavior, while others do not.

9.1 Reflection on research

A large challenge to this conclusion could be that I researched the most radical and active voices of Dutch Eritrean regime supporters, given the fact that social media is often filled with the loudest opinions. For reasons described in the methodology section, I could not talk with YPFDJ members directly about their support for the regime. While my analysis of the online discursive field provided a wealth of intricate data which I could mostly triangulate with other research, the conclusions of this research should be seen through the lens of a safe distance. This limits my research, since I assume that reasons to support a regime could be unexpected, intimate, and more personal than implied in my argument. I state this not to downplay the worth of open-source research in providing generous amounts of data and comparisons, but to acknowledge its relative inability of grasping subtleties which is more possible in real-life conversation.

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[147] Van Bokkum, M. (2016). 'Rapport: Eritrea intimideert diaspora in Nederland', *NRC.nl,* December 16. Available at: https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/12/16/__trashed-2-3-a1535270 (Accessed at: July 20 2021).

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