

The Eritrean ‘Fourth Front’: Festivals as a tool to control the diaspora

[Riots broke out](#) in The Hague on 17 February 2024. It is the latest in a string of clashes around the world involving pro-democracy and pro-government Eritreans. The latter group organises festivals, proclaimed to be cultural festivals, but which pro-democracy Eritreans state are in reality propaganda events; places where high-level Eritrean officials visit, where diaspora Eritreans go under pressure and threats, where military propaganda and hate speech are spread, and where Eritreans have to pay money to the Eritrean government. Now, a picture is emerging of a highly coordinated effort by the Eritrean government to control the diaspora, which it calls the ‘Fourth Front’, through militia-like structures, including Eri-Blood and Eri-Mekhete.

What is the Fourth Front?

The Fourth Front, abbreviated as 4G, is a military operation with a military command structure, in which there are also a first, second and third front referring to respectively the Western Defense Front, Central Defense Front and Eastern Defense Front, inside Eritrea, responsible for military control in the country; with the Fourth Front being the military defense front outside the country in the diaspora. This is supported by intelligence, propaganda and financial instruments and all other military capabilities, and falls under the military command structure. Pro-government Eritreans also openly refer to the diaspora’s role in the [“fight of Eritrea’s development”](#) as the [Fourth Front](#). Pro-democracy Eritreans have increasingly linked references to 4G to violent movements and militia, including [Eri-Blood](#), [Eri-Mekhete](#) and others. The Fourth Front is to defend the dictatorship of the PFDJ and ensure any challenge to it is taken out at the root.

The modus operandi is reported to include training of militia which are in some way forced by different means to participate. This can include militia from other ethnic groups. This tactic has been used by Eritrea in [regional wars in the Horn of Africa](#), but is also used in the Fourth Front. That means that other ethnic groups are involved and receive incentives, training and/or instructions and information that involves them as actors in the operation.

The modus operandi also involves the inclusion of a coordinated disinformation campaign, following the structure as depicted below:

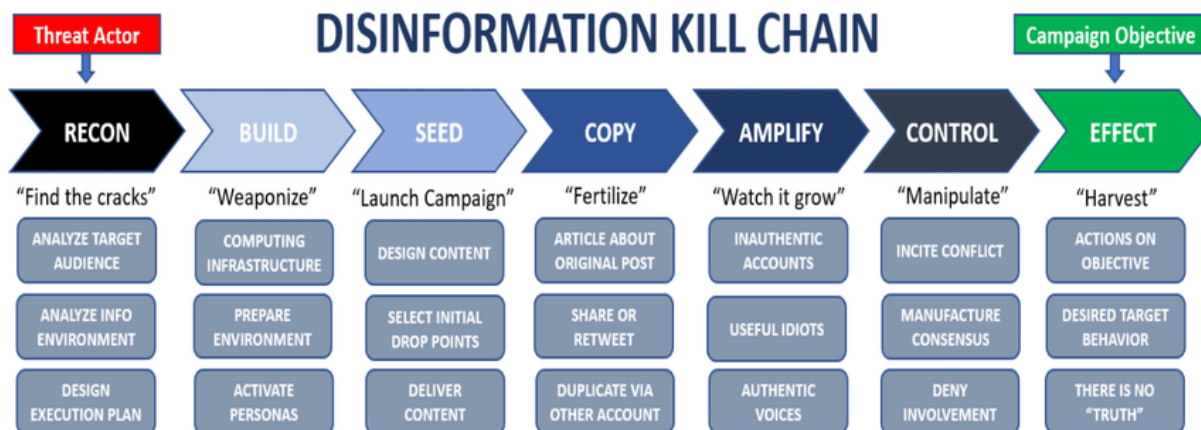


Figure 1. Disinformation Kill Chain Model. Source: The MITRE Corporation

How does it operate the festivals?

The Fourth Front is a tool for the PFDJ to strengthen [‘national identity’ and ‘national consciousness’](#). The youth wing of the party, Young PFDJ (YPFDJ), often plays a prominent role in the organisation. Youth from the diaspora, usually born there, frequently receives a VIP welcome when they travel to Eritrea. The latest group of [Eritrean youth from London](#), for example, met with General of the Eritrean Defense Forces, Philipos Woldeyohannes. One of the youth commented: “I’ll try to share [what I have learned in Eritrea] with refugees who haven’t had the same opportunity as us. We will also try to bring back those who are out of line by telling them the truth.” In addition, the youth is also expected to fight the PFDJ’s battles online, according to an [article on the visit](#): “The youths discussed in detail with the intellectual youth members of the Eritrean Defense Forces how they can work together to combat false slander against the people and government of Eritrea on social media.”

Festivals are the key tool to translate this vision of the government to the diaspora, to people either loyal to the PFDJ or afraid of it. Although the festivals are portrayed as non-political celebrations, promotions and videos at such festivals show otherwise. During the war with Tigray, in which Eritrea played a prominent invasive role, the festivals were used to promote [war propaganda and hate speech](#). The festivals are also used to [collect funding](#) on top of the 2% tax that the diaspora has to pay to the PFDJ, and to check [people’s loyalty](#) to the PFDJ. During the festivals, the diaspora is briefed on the message it should spread about Eritrea. In 2023, [governors of Eritrea’s regions](#) came from Eritrea to address the diaspora in all kinds of events.

What happened in The Hague?

In another event in The Hague that did not receive as much attention in the media, which [took place last November](#), a proclamation of war was made by the pro-government Eritreans: [“Holland is the new Mekelle”](#). The meaning being: the war in Tigray is over; The Netherlands is the new front. The actions in The Netherlands were thus announced previously, with the warning that Eritrea wants to have full control over any opposition, comparing the war in The Netherlands with the war that Eritrea fought in Tigray, Ethiopia, which allowed them control over any opposition there to the Eritrean regime.

The ‘New Year’s celebration’ planned in The Hague on 17 February was a well-organised event. The location was kept hidden until the last minute. Pro-democracy Eritreans had been following the event for days to find out how they could warn authorities and organise a protest - but as they did not know the location, this was complicated. Even as pro-government party-goers were on the bus, only the bus driver was passed a note with the address. The pro-government Eritreans attending the festivals were [waving Eritrean flags](#) and wearing shirts with the text “today Sha’ebya, tomorrow Sha’ebya”, in which Sha’ebya is another name for the PFDJ. The party inside was protected by police from the protest going on outside. Following the events, Dutch parliamentarians asked a [range of questions](#), and called for a thorough investigation into the violence and the long arm of the Eritrean government in the Netherlands. Pro-democracy Eritrean organisations such as Foundation Eritrean Human Rights Defenders [condemned the violence and called for peaceful protest](#).

The 4G disinformation campaign was in full operation following the protests, with pro-PFDJ Eritreans claiming that [Ethiopians from Tigray](#) were responsible for the protests, rather than pro-democracy Eritreans. This was [strongly condemned](#) by the Tigray community.

Clashes at other festivals

The militaristic attitude of 4G is also visible from festivals in other countries. For example in Tel Aviv, Israel, in September 2023, over 100 people were injured after clashes when 'blue wave' protesters clashed with pro-government Eritreans. Videos appear to show the [violence was instigated](#), as the pro-democracy Eritreans were protesting peacefully. Injuries also occurred in [Giessen](#), [Stockholm](#) and other festivals.

Following the clashes in Israel, [videos of attacks](#) by regime supporters were circulated on social media. Multiple [killings](#) took place. Pictures and videos also circulated showing the Eri-Mekhete militia [training](#) ahead of the festival in Tel-Aviv.

Transnational repression and foreign intimidation of diaspora by the PFDJ

Eritrean diaspora and refugee communities have been under surveillance and intimidation by the pro-Eritrean government sympathisers for many years, demonstrating the strength of the [long arm of the Eritrean regime](#) far beyond Eritrea. The phenomenon of targeting the nationals of a country residing abroad by the structures linked to a government apparatus can be summarised under the term [transnational repression](#) (or transnational oppression).

Transnational repression refers to the systematic efforts by a government to target and intimidate individuals beyond its borders who are perceived as opponents of the regime. This phenomenon often involves authoritarian regimes employing a range of tactics, including surveillance, harassment, abduction, and even assassination, to silence opponents and maintain control. These repressive actions extend beyond the borders of the country in question, reaching into diaspora and refugee communities while utilising international networks to track and target individuals deemed as threats to the regime's stability. Transnational repression does not only affect diaspora and refugees, but it also poses societal problems to host communities, as well as presenting potential threats to national security and sovereignty of the host country.

The case of Norway

The need to combat transnational repression through adequate legislation and a cross-sectoral approach was identified by Norway in its recent [2023 report](#) by the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion. The report recognizes that acts of transnational repression can be exercised through violence, physical attacks, threats, harassment and discrediting, infiltration, restriction or conditional consular services, monitoring, and weakening and abuse of international frameworks. Several examples of Eritrean authorities and/or pro-PFDJ individuals targeting pro-democracy Eritreans were named in the report. That includes infiltration of PFDJ supporters in the diaspora organisations, exclusion, harassment, threatening and ostracising of Eritreans who do not support the PFDJ or who failed to pay 2% diaspora income tax. The riots that erupted in Bergen in September 2023 sparked [criticism of the Norwegian government](#) for not acting promptly despite having knowledge of the transnational activities of the PFDJ supporters. An earlier report highlighting the intimidation of Eritrean opposition groups by PFDJ supporters was issued in 2020 by the Norwegian Ministry of Education.

The case of Canada

Transnational repression has been also reviewed in the [Canadian context](#) through a paper by the Secure Canada and Human Rights Action Group, using an example of repression by

Eritrea. The report urged the Canadian government to adopt legislative changes, develop policies and increase protection mechanisms for victims of transnational repression. In light of the violence arising from cultural festivals organised by Eritrean pro-government supporters, the [Canadian government has been pressed](#) to address transnational activities by the Eritrean government through several [petitions](#).

The case of Sweden

[Sweden](#) has been one of the few countries that explicitly identifies the threat posed by foreign states against individuals residing in Sweden in its legal framework. In addition, the Swedish authorities adopted a broader definition of transnational repression by including individuals involved in social or political activism as potential victims of transnational repression, whether they are of Swedish or foreign origin. Despite that, Sweden has not established any specific procedures laying out accountability for transnational repression acts. Refugees and asylum seekers are often exposed to harassment by the authoritarian regime of the state where they come from. Establishing refugee status is done under the auspices of the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) which uses the services of uncertified translators for groups of languages that are not widely spoken. The Eritrean asylum seekers experienced threats and intimidation from the interpreters contracted by the SMA working on behalf of the PFDJ. Another example showed that those Eritreans who do not support the PFDJ do not have access to [consular services](#) which negatively impacts the refugee status determination process as well as family reunification process.

The case of the Netherlands

In the past, the Dutch government commissioned a [report highlighting the foreign influence of the Eritrean regime](#) on Eritrean communities in the Netherlands. Building on that, another commissioned report introduced a [comprehensive study](#) comparing the nature and the extent of 2% diaspora income tax in seven countries across Europe, namely Netherlands, Norway, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Sweden and UK. In all of these countries, the “2% Tax is perceived as mandatory by Eritreans in the diaspora and that non-compliance may result in a range of consequences, such as denial of consular services and punishment by association of relatives in Eritrea, including human rights violations”. In addition, Eritrean regime supporters do not direct their intimidation and repression only towards Eritrean nationals but often [also towards those human rights defenders](#) and activists who voice their opinion against the current regime.

Increasingly, the festivals organised by the PFDJ and its supporters are gaining recognition as a tool used in a wider strategy of transnational repression by the PFDJ. Although there is growing [awareness of the broader issue of transnational repression](#), many countries still lack the legislative framework to effectively deal with the threats of issues such as the Eritrean festivals.