

Article

## Low-tech Surveillance and the Despotic State in Eritrea

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### Abstract

Eritrea is one of the world's newest countries and, proportionally to its population, one of the most militarised. Inheriting a socio-economic situation devastated by 30 years of guerrilla warfare, the current government organised reconstruction efforts around the “*Warsay Ykäa lo Development Campaign*” including National Service conscription. Over the past decade, the Eritrean state has developed techniques of surveillance of conscripts through the production and distribution of documents (IDs, laissez-passer) that must be presented at hundreds of checkpoints deployed throughout the national territory. Since the duration of National Service has been extended to an unlimited period of time, these surveillance mechanisms have mainly focused on cracking down, identifying and preventing defection. Despite important limitations to its surveillance of conscripts, the Eritrean state successfully keep hundreds of thousand of conscripts working in the National Service for many years. I argue that the surveillance apparatus itself, in both its bureaucratic and its military formulations contributes almost on a daily basis to (re)producing various uncertainties, fears, beliefs and expectations that are the core of relative coercion in the National Service. Moreover, bureaucratic procedures and police interventions contribute to the perpetuation and actualisation of a despotic modality of governance, inducing in conscripts the perception of the existence of a highly authoritarian police state that is effectively omniscient despite their experiences of the low-tech surveillance.

**Keywords:** Eritrea; conscription; suspicion; checkpoints; police state; despotism; complicity

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### Introduction

This is an article about state surveillance of conscripts in Eritrea, a small country situated in the Horn of Africa. People whom I call conscripts are male and female individuals carrying out national duty as required by law: they are temporarily mobilised for military and civil purposes by the state. In Eritrea, this is called National Service (*hagärawi a gälglot* in Tigrinya). However, since 1998 and the two years war against Ethiopia, National Service has been indefinitely extended and no demobilisation program has taken place. Young Eritreans are still assigned to civil and military duties for an unknown period of time. In 2002, such extended mobilisation in National Service became the central pillar of the *Warsay Ykäa lo Development Campaign* (WYDC); an “[...] all-round reconstruction of a country devastated by war [...]” (Rena 2008: 102) I detail more about this below.

Since genuine demobilisation and release from national duty has been postponed for an undetermined period of time, many Eritreans have deserted and fled the country. UNHCR statistics show that a massive exodus to Sudan and Ethiopia started in 2004 amounting to 8,893 Eritreans registered in camps in both

countries during the year. Exile has even intensified since 2007 with more than 17,000 new arrivals each year.<sup>1</sup> The UNHCR estimated that “[m]ost of the new arrivals are young (aged 17-25 years) and of urban background. The majority of them are men, but there are also women of the same age group. Virtually all have claimed to be fleeing Eritrea because of military service” (2009: 9). Of course, this does not mean that all had been enrolled in National Service. Nevertheless the figure represents not more than 1/20 of the alleged number of conscripts in Eritrea usually estimated between 300,000 and 400,000 individuals (Bundegaard 2004: 47; Treiber 2007: 241).<sup>2</sup>

For its part, in order to counter desertion and to retain hundreds of thousands of conscripts, the government has progressively strengthened its surveillance techniques and its coercive measures. State control of conscripts is shaped in many different ways. This article focuses only on the most ubiquitous and observable of these, namely, checkpoints and others forms of paper control conducted by the Military Police. I shall explore and analyse the different modalities that shape this surveillance apparatus that attempts to perform an elementary sorting of citizens according to official nationalist ideology and policies promoted by the state. Although this works to a certain extent, surveillance conducted through the checking of individual documents has significant weaknesses.

Despite important limitations to its surveillance of conscripts, the Eritrean state successfully keep hundreds of thousand of conscripts working in the National Service for many years. If this is due to social, political and historical factors as well as the absence of viable alternatives in Eritrea for deserters or objectors, I argue that the surveillance apparatus itself, in both its bureaucratic and its military formulations, nevertheless contributes almost on a daily basis to (re)producing various uncertainties, fears, beliefs and expectations that are the core of relative coercion in the National Service. Bureaucratic procedures and police interventions contribute to the perpetuation and actualisation of a despotic modality of governance, inducing in conscripts the perception of the existence of a highly authoritarian police state that is effectively omniscient despite their experiences of the low-tech surveillance. Representations, fears and uncertainties are not only related to the apparatus of surveillance but are related to broader perceptions and experiences of the violence, arbitrariness, unpredictability and unaccountability of Eritrean political authorities. In other words, a pretence to surveillance embodies, performs and transforms broader modalities of control which define the current Eritrean statehood.

This raises the question about what we mean by “surveillance” of individuals and how we relate this concept to others such as “control” and “coercion”. David Murakami Wood has recently proposed a useful definition for the former: “Where we find purposeful, routine, systematic and focused attention paid to personal details, for the sake of control, entitlement, management, influence or protection, we are looking at surveillance” (Murakami Wood 2006: 4). Thus, surveillance implies the ability to access and verify personal information for identification, a (nuanced) sorting process and further decision-making. For the sake of clarity, I use verbs such as “to check” and “to verify” to speak about how surveillance works and therefore I reserve the verb “to control” to refer to one possible outcome of surveillance i.e. “to influence or direct [regulate] people’s behaviour”.<sup>3</sup> This latter has to be differentiated from coercion. Indeed, “to persuade (an unwilling person) to do something by using force or threats” (ibid.) is only one means of control amongst others. As I will clarify later, authorities rarely persuade or convince (future) conscripts to

<sup>1</sup> Figures and observations are retrieved from the *UNHCR statistical yearbooks* from 2003 up to 2009 for Ethiopia and Sudan available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c4d6.html> (accessed 12 December 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Yearly enrolment figures are unfortunately not available. However, common knowledge has it that between 15,000 and 20,000 High School students take grade 11 exams each year at the *Warsay Ykäa lo* school in Sawa military camps where they are at the same time conscripted into National Service. However, it is possible to argue that these new recruits who are only a fraction of the overall population enrolled each year replace those who have deserted. This shows that the Eritrean government has the ability and power to channel enough people into conscription at least for a period of time. Of course, this implies a relatively effective management of population through the school system.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>

undergo National Service in its current configuration by any justifications or national imperatives but rather oblige them to comply unwillingly. However surveillance does not necessarily aim to coerce or even to control people, I argue that the Eritrean surveillance apparatus plays an important role in coercing certain Eritreans even though it has significant limitations in achieving its primary goal, i.e. surveillance as it has been defined. Lastly, any given methods of surveillance, control and coercion are never complete or achieved but always must be considered as attempts which are more or less effective. Therefore, the desertion and exile which I mentioned previously do not compromise the idea that surveillance, control and coercion are somehow minimally effective in sorting citizens and maintaining a certain degree of mobilisation and social order in Eritrea.

## Methodology and outline

This article is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Eritrea (2005-2007) where I interviewed and lived with people who were enrolled in the National Service and working in civil institutions such as schools, ministries and other state offices. I was not able to enter any military facilities to carry out in-depth research among conscripts assigned to the army. During these two years, I was able to collect data on issues related (re)assignment, implementation of new regulations or legal proclamations, access to state shops, claims for certificates or permits, and dispute resolutions as well as various frauds and other means of “micro-resistance” related to state processes mainly in Asmara, the capital city.<sup>4</sup> I looked at how people, especially young adults in National Service, perceive the state, deal with state officials and cope with uncertainties that they encounter with state authorities while taking steps to obtain a service. In other words, my field research focused mainly on conscripts practices, strategies and representations related to bureaucratic processes. In a socio-political context delineated by what we can call a police state, which I partly describe in this article, gaining trust from informants is a lengthy complicated and fragile process but a necessary requirement for starting any ethnographic inquiry. Tension and suspicion, common to all ethnographic research interactions to some extent,<sup>5</sup> are intensified by numerous substantial risks perceived by informants and related to common state violence and surveillance. Gaining the confidence of my informants obliged me to put into action several principles and strategies to ensure them the confidentiality that they needed. At the same time, some of these principles restrained my ethnographic investigation. For instance, some of my informants allowed me to meet them only in certain places while others never introduced me to their friends or relatives. Generally speaking, it was rarely that I was able to follow my informants in all steps of their bureaucratic processes. In such a situation, I had to rely on some methodological principles to cover these limitations imposed on my investigation and in order to confirm and cross-check some data related to practices and events which I could collect only through interviews. I relied on three principles to obtain reliable and precise information. Firstly, I followed my informants as far as I could and waited for them. In such a way, I could collect information about a bureaucratic step immediately after they had experienced it. Secondly, I always let them speak freely about their experience before asking them about details or events they could have omitted. This allowed me to have their own perceptions, to know what was significant for them and to foresee what was sensitive for them. Thirdly, I conducted in-depth interviews and colloquial talks with people several times on each issue or event interesting for my research in different contexts. Thus, I could collect for each informant different versions of the same narrative-event, new details, new interpretations and reasoning. Collecting similar experiences in same state offices allowed me to triangulate information and to draw some implicit institutional norms and regulations as well as individual bureaucratic practices and discretionary power otherwise inaccessible to me. Given these extensive investigations, which I carried out with more than forty conscripts and deserters, I was able after some months to transfer some information about an office or a procedure from one to another without threatening their need for confidentiality. Of course, this capacity to share reliable

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<sup>4</sup> Bozzini 2011

<sup>5</sup> See for instance: Robben and Sluka 2007

information about state operations as well as illegal practices, i.e. entering thus a system of knowledge exchange, helped to tighten and secure many relations.

This article is divided into six parts. The first outlines some basic information about Eritrea, militarisation and the National Service. The second section presents a key part of the surveillance apparatus and its functioning: checkpoints and the limitation of permit checks. In the third and fourth sections, I depict the chaotic state measures taken to heighten the surveillance of conscripts since 2004 and I argue that one of the main outcomes of the apparatus is the production of uncertainties, suspicions and insecurity. The fifth section provides an analysis of various complex social processes and risk avoidance strategies generated by state instability that nevertheless contribute to extend the state “field of visibility” and refine state control of conscripts. In the concluding section, I argue that such low-tech surveillance and social control allow us to consider that (un)intended and dispersed despotic modalities of governance is what define the police state in Eritrea.

### **Eritrea and the National Service**

Eritrea is a recently constituted state in Africa. It gained its independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after three decades of guerrilla warfare against the Derg, the former Ethiopian military-socialist regime of General Mengistu Hailemariam (Connell 1993; Pool 1993). Since 1994, the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) has run the state and turned itself into a party, the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) (Pool 2001; Ruth 1997). This is the only political party allowed in Eritrea today.

The current government is deeply involved in rebuilding the country. Many efforts have been made to reconstruct infrastructure and agriculture, and many state institutions have been entirely reformed or newly constructed (Tronvoll 1998; Pool 2001). Since its independence, the country as a whole has also benefited from massive investments made by the Eritrean Diaspora who fled the previous regime. However, Eritrean migrants were already supporting the EPLF, financially and technically, during the “liberation struggle” (Ruth 2000; Styan 2007). At the end of the war, many of these individuals decided to return to Eritrea in order to start their own businesses. More importantly, national reconstruction boomed during the 1990s because of the implementation of effective policies. Firstly, the “liberation army” was not immediately demobilised and soldiers were redeployed in many ways and for many years, mainly to clear land mines and to rebuild basic infrastructures (Amanuel 2002). Secondly, the so-called EPLF-PFDJ transitional government introduced nationwide conscription, not only to defend their newly acquired sovereignty but also to carry out reconstruction and state-building (Gaim 2009a).

National Service became the main development device in Eritrea, mobilising tens of thousand of new recruits each year. Under National Service, both men and women aged from 18 to 50 must first undergo six months of military training before being deployed for an entire year in military units or to various areas of civil service or the public sector where they work as teachers, nurses or office workers in ministries or party-owned companies, to name but a few of the possibilities (O’Kane and Hepner 2009). National Service therefore includes both military and civil service, but those assigned to the civil sector continue to be classified as soldiers and can therefore be mobilised at any time to serve in the army in cases of conflict (Gaim 2009a). The less educated conscripts are deployed in the trenches set along the border with Ethiopia which still has not been demarcated on the ground. Those who have a secondary or high school educational background are deployed in state civil institutions or in the Party offices.

By law (GoE 1995/82), after completion of this year and a half of active service, everybody is then assigned into the reserve army until they are aged fifty. However, as already noted, since 1998 National Service has been indefinitely extended and no real demobilisation has taken place (except for some disabled men and pregnant women). Officially, this permanent mobilisation has been legitimised by the significant destruction which occurred during the war with Ethiopia and the current stalemate regarding

the border demarcation with Ethiopia and the peace process in general. Article 21 of the National Service proclamation enables the authorities to extend the active period of duty during a period of war or other circumstance requiring general mobilisation. Along with official discourses, popular representations often depict the post-war period as extraordinary and temporary and recognise to a certain extent that patience and popular sacrifice are needed even though a state of emergency is not formally proclaimed. Given this situation, which has been lasting for more than a decade, the Eritrean army has become the largest in Africa and proportionally, Eritrea has become the most militarised state in the world if we consider the number of conscripts in relation to the overall population and the percentage of the state budget allocated to military expenditure. Statistics published by the UNDP in 2005 rank Eritrea first on the military budget/GDP ratio, investing just below 20% of its GDP in the military; a figure far exceeding that of all other countries in the world (UNDP 2005: 176, 287). Military training has now been extended to at least one year as the last year of high school has been integrated into military training, and higher education has been organised in barracks behind fences and barbed wire. The former University of Asmara closed down in 2006. Most people in civil service wait 7 or 8 years before receiving a salary. Beyond any doubt, an all-encompassing militarisation of society, as defined by Lutz (2004) and Gusterson (2007), is currently ongoing in Eritrea.

This long lasting mobilisation of the population and the continuing militarisation of society are tightly correlated with the implementation of the *Warsay Ykäa lo Development Campaign* (WYDC) inaugurated in May 2002 by the government. Rena summarises the campaign as follows:

The main task of this campaign is to embark upon the all-round reconstruction of a country devastated by war so as to realise the deep aspirations of building a prosperous and stable Eritrea [...] These mainly focus on infrastructure renovation and development, agricultural intensification and modernisation, raising industrial output, mining schemes, the tourism sector, human resource development etc (2008: 102).

By human resource development Rena certainly means state and Party institution-building. Common knowledge has it that most of the street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980) is run by conscripts in the civil service. In a recent article, Gaim has argued that if conscripts enrolled in the WYDC are mobilised to work on state farms supplying the state-shops for instance, some are also working for privately-owned companies of Party members (2009b). In other words, the *Warsay Ykäa lo Development Campaign* looks like a crucial scheme to implement a command economy while many other measures have been taken against the private sector and the civil society since the end of the war in 2001 (Gaim 2009b). Currently, the state and the Party are in charge of almost all of the social, political and economic activities in Eritrea. The leadership strictly monitors and limits other institutions such as NGOs, IOs and foreign companies that usually are still active in Eritrea only through state-run programs.

As Hepner has argued, not only does the Campaign institute a planned economy through relying on National Service conscripts labour but also the leadership seeks “to reproduce the discipline and self-sacrifice of the guerrilla fighter era among the post-independence generation” (Hepner 2008: 492). However, the intention to convey nationalist values and ideology developed by EPLF/PFDJ to the newer generation was already mentioned in the National Charter which the Party wrote down in 1994 and constituted already one reason for implementing National Service (Markakis 1995). In a more general stance, Dorman noted that the legacies from “the struggle” shape current policies of the post-independent state (2003). The very idea of inheritance and intergenerational relationship is found in the name of the Campaign itself: *Warsay Ykäa lo* refers to the conscripts as heirs (*Warsay*) of the freedom fighters also named *Ykäa lo*; “brave” or “capable” in Tigrinya and referring to their heroic deeds and resilience during the struggle for independence (1962-1991). However although *Warsay* is the official name for conscripts, they prefer to name themselves *a gälglot*, which simply means “service” in Tigrinya. Unwilling thus to have the moral status of followers, the conscripts distance themselves from the official ideology and from

the figure of the freedom fighter, and indeed they aspire explicitly to different standards of living (Treiber 2004). Even though public disapproval and open defiance of the government have been non-existent in Eritrea since 2001, many people make criticisms in private against the current policies and the leadership (Treiber 2009; Riggan 2009; Dorman 2005).<sup>6</sup> The political ambition to reproduce faithful soldier-workers in the image of the heroic and mythicised figure of the freedom fighter is clearly a fiasco. But the tensions with Ethiopia endlessly reported by the media and the official declarations that deserters are traitors nevertheless continue to legitimise mobilisation for some of the conscripts. For others, the very experience of being assigned within WYDC against their will is also what allows, to some extent, the reproduction of certain narratives about hardship and some values such as sacrifice and resilience that were promoted by the EPLF/PFDJ for decades in defining the Eritrean Nation (Bozzini 2011). Many Eritreans of an age to be enrolled in National Service therefore have ambiguous views about the leadership and often have fluctuating opinions about its official ideology and the national policies derived from it (ibid.).

The nationalist ideology of the EPLF/PFDJ has also considerably shaped post-independent formal citizenship. Except for the Eritrean Nationality Proclamation (GoE 1992/21) defining who is Eritrean from who is not, policies have shaped different categories of citizens. Again, crucial to the definition of the status of individuals is their involvement in the struggle either for political independence or for the reconstruction and “economic independence” or self-sustainability. Thus National Service conscription has defined two broad categories of Eritreans: those exempted from service and those who must serve. When officially started in 1994, exempted were those declared disabled, mothers, Eritreans living abroad but contributing financially, civilians above 30 years of age and last but not least freedom fighters. While all those exempted can access all rights in principle, those who must carry National Service as well as those currently enrolled have their citizenship rights limited. They are not allowed to have a passport and to leave the country, they can not have land allocated to them or to get official documents without prior formal authorisation. They cannot be employed and their mobility inside the country is limited. Deserters or objectors are denied any rights and cannot access state services. Thus, the Eritrean official concept of citizenship is intrinsically linked to enlistment and the fulfilment of National Service duties which also define who is a proper national subject. Controls at checkpoints and elsewhere are intended to sort those who are exempted from those who must serve their country and contribute to actualise daily the status of citizens and their relationship with the Nation as it is defined officially.

### **Checkpoints: The banality of minimal surveillance**

Checkpoints were first set up to control population movements during the war against Ethiopia, between 1998 and 2000. But since the proper demobilisation and release from national duty has been postponed, the Military Police has started to check people assigned to the civil National Service because they have begun to flee the country in such large numbers. Here follows a short description of what typically happens at such sites. A few kilometres out of Asmara [the capital city of Eritrea], at the edge of the eastern escarpments which fall 2000 metres down to the coastal desert, lie some small offices which take the form of two brand new white containers placed on either side of the road. In between them, a simple and almost invisible elastic cord stretches across the road. On the side of the road, a few soldiers are sitting in a quite relaxed way; they exude boredom more than anything else. When the bus reaches the barracks, some of them stand up. And immediately after that, the bus stops. The soldier standing in front of the vehicle begins to shout, admonishing the driver for not having followed the instructions on a new traffic sign showing that buses have to stop at the right side of the road; silence reigns among the travellers. The manoeuvre takes place and a second soldier holding a Kalashnikov enters the bus and snaps his fingers three times without targeting anyone in particular. Most of the travellers provide papers to the soldier, who gives them a quick look, checks to see if there is anyone who has not provided a document

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<sup>6</sup> Criticism and opposition to current politics is much more declared and public in the Diaspora (Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001; Bernal 2004; Hepner 2003, 2008, 2009)

yet and then snaps his fingers again at those who are late. The papers go back to the entitled travellers and the soldier steps out of the bus without having said a word. Another soldier lowers the elastic cord and the bus continues on its way. Discussion shyly resumes on the bus. No more, no less.

Checkpoints like this number in the hundreds in Eritrea. They are scattered along all roads and stand at the gates of every town. This deployment gives the state a spatial dimension throughout the national territory. Moreover, this ubiquitous presence does not remain unseen but on the contrary, it considerably increases the visibility of the state. Certainly, few African states can claim to have such an ostentatious territorial presence. Indeed, people travelling about 100 km regularly have to cross at least 3 or 4 checkpoints. This state presence and its ambition to control its territory and citizens could arguably encourage the view that Eritrea is a police state (ICG 2010; HRW 2009) or at least one that is deeply shaped and obsessed by security issues (Bundegaard 2004; Dorman 2005; Hepner and O’Kane 2009). However, state omnipresence was rarely questioned and challenged by my informants who even considered the state omniscient project as normal and legitimate during what they readily recognised, along official definition, as a period of “no war, no peace”. Beside such popular consent to the official perspective, the repetitive presence of checkpoints also certainly contributes to such routinisation and normalisation of state scrutiny.

The constant obligation to justify their right to travel represents a sort of inoffensive ritual of sovereignty for those Eritreans who have a valid document to produce while for others, the plethora of checkpoints considerably limit their movements across the country. As a result, it is rare for Military Police to stop travellers at checkpoints. In the two and one half years that I stayed in Eritrea, I only once witnessed such an arrest. Even during the war in 1999-2000, O’Kane noticed that the search for deserters at checkpoints were “fruitless” (2004: 96). Compared with the violence occurring at similar places in Israel (Kelly 2006) or in Sri Lanka (Jeganathan 2004) to mention only a few examples (let alone Somalia or Iraq), Eritrean checkpoints seem to be a refreshing moment in the company of the authorities. The existence of checkpoints coerce most objectors, deserters and those who fear to be considered as such, in to small areas, generally urban centres.

More active and fine-tuned sorting is carried out at checkpoints by Military Police focused attention: ID cards for exempted people such as freedom fighters and “aged” or demobilised civilians, military leaves for soldiers, and travel permits for those assigned to civil National Service. In Tigrinya, this social dichotomy between exempted and non-exempted is even semantically underlined: leaves and permits are generically called *mānqesaqäsi*, while *mānänät* refers to ID cards. *Mānqesaqäsi* not only inform the Military Police of the name and the assignation of the holder but also specify the route which the conscript is authorised to follow and the geographical area where he or she can stay. Both leaves and permits have a limited validity in time, which Military Police can also check. They are renewed by officials from the institution to which the conscripts are assigned. ID cards inform the Military Police about the name, the age and possibly about the military rank of the holder. ID cards can also specify status such as “demobilised”, “Ethiopian” or “security staff”. Finally, medical certificates can testify for a temporary or a more permanent exemption to serve.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to many other political contexts, the underlying political question asked at checkpoints in Eritrea – “are you an enemy of the state?” (Jeganathan 2004) – is not connected to prejudices about social background such as race, ethnicity or socio-economic class. In that sense, checkpoints not only make the presence of the state palpable but they also enact routinely and actualise citizenship statuses defined along the official ideology.<sup>8</sup> However, it is important to note that not all people have their documents

<sup>7</sup> Young mothers without “demobilisation ID” can also carry a birth certificate of their child to attest to their exemption to serve. Foreign citizens (beside Ethiopians who have a special ID) must provide a specific travel permit from the Ministry of Tourism or the state institution responsible for them (in my case: the now defunct University of Asmara).

<sup>8</sup> I underline other routinisation effects below as a crucial consequence of surveillance in Eritrea.

systematically checked in this specific hunt for deserters. In that sense, Military Police are vested with a certain discretionary power to assess who needs to prove a right to travel granted by the state. Military Police are thus making a guess as to who is of an age to be conscripted and they try to focus only on them. They will therefore only inadvertently bother a young mother, people above 40-50 years old or fighters. This illustrates that the initial stage of the sorting process, or even what fundamentally enable its operation depends on nothing other than basic and mundane identification competence about age and stereotypes regarding the status of people. If this is not specific to Eritrean checkpoints, it nevertheless invites us to consider that such kind of surveillance always involves what Jeganathan calls a precarious agreement between checker and checked (*ibid.*) in which the document plays only a part of the “game”. But because many manage to flee the country passing through several checkpoints, and very few are arrested at checkpoints, it probably means that people have found ways to trick the authorities and this calls into question the effectiveness of the Eritrean state surveillance apparatus. Indeed, despite the fact that sites of controls are omnipresent, state surveillance of conscripts is undermined by two important structural limitations of the checking *modus operandi*.

For instance, Military Police rarely cross-check names written on permits with a National ID card or a database. In other words, they do not even try to verify whether or not the holder of a permit is the one entitled to it. Temporal and geographical validity are the only things checked at checkpoints. What seems important is only to have a valid permit on hand, nothing more. This implies that permits are not really individual; they can be shared and sometimes deserters use this easy trick to travel safely across checkpoints to see their family. Such absence of even basic informational cross-checking may explain why so few deserters are arrested at checkpoints. Moreover, another surprising limitation of checkpoints, of a structural kind, has to be mentioned. Since National Service has been extended to an indefinite period of time, a new category of citizen-conscripts has officially emerged. On an individual basis and after at least seven or eight years in service people are called to be demobilised but are not entitled to be released by the institution where they are still assigned. This kind of intermediary category of conscripts are not exempted to serve but they nevertheless receive a salary different from their previous pay (Gaim 2009b). Among others new entitlements, they also obtain an ID card that allows them to travel anywhere in the country. Of course, this considerably eases desertion for demobilised-but-not-released conscripts. Compromising the mission of Military Police in such a way is what may allow us to think that – in clear opposition to public discourses and the WYDC imperatives – the current government is also “committed” to let a part of the young generation flee the country for different economic reasons; limited resource to waged employment of all the young generations within the state, but also future remittances and the smuggling business managed in part by some officials being among the most evident ones. Although this is possibly an interpretation of such a measure, I would also argue that this does not necessarily imply that it is a coherent and deliberate project of the state. It is more likely the result of considerable internal tensions between officials and their different interests in controlling and generating resources and wealth.

Surveillance of conscripts in Eritrea is certainly not comparable to current fine-tuned western types of surveillance. However, Eritreans consider this apparatus as surveillance (in Tigrinya: control, *mqtstsur*) and believe sometimes that it is more efficient than it is in reality. We may refer to checkpoints therefore as attempts to surveil or as a low intensity surveillance apparatus. Indeed, given the two limitations that I have described, the Eritrean surveillance apparatus may not fit very well with the definition given before. As a matter of fact, the apparatus neither produces, retrieves nor controls much data about travellers. But discrepancies are obviously more a question of intensity of effectiveness than a radical difference in kind. The state apparatus may have all sorts of limitations, it nevertheless has the intention of surveying the conscripts. Along with official ideology, it has the purpose of sorting the “good” citizens from the others and it further regulates the movements of some of the former across the country. Accurate identification may partly fail in practice, but at least basic sorting processes still occur and produce coercive effects. Most of the time, deserters are strongly impeded from travelling and are obliged to stay idle in urban

centres, whilst conscripts dare to go past the limits imposed on them only if they plan to flee out of the country.

In Eritrea, permit verification has different functions from simply a limited kind of surveillance. If the primary intention of such apparatus is sorting, discriminating and controlling access, I want now to consider secondary effects that emerge from police controls and that can contribute to larger deliberate, as well as unintended, coercive processes. Among many other state projects, the limited surveillance apparatus plays a central role in contributing to, perpetuating and actualising certain representations about the state as a legitimate source of risk and dread. Minimal compliance is thus shaped to a large extent by individual strategies for coping with state-induced risks. I illustrate this in the next section by examining the surveillance apparatus as a privileged example of an operative despotic kind of governance people which expect from the state's institutions. As sites where state violence, instability and unaccountability are either performed or at least potentially performed, pretences to surveillance are indeed central to the recurrent destabilisation of conscripts and citizens at large in inducing beliefs and fears that are at the very core of the intensification of the control of the population in Eritrea. Checkpoints are the only stable sites where people of an age to be conscripted have their documents checked. *Mänqesaqäsi* controls happen also inside towns, and their *modus operandi* is much more volatile and violent than what can be witnessed at checkpoints.

### **The emergence of surveillance chaos: The rise of suspicion and insecurity**

Before the end of 2004, people assigned to civil offices did not have travel permits to show to the military police. They were showing instead their educational ID which surprisingly was enough to prove that they were either still studying or that they were assigned to civil facilities for National Service. Checkpoints and raids were still mainly targeting National Service conscripts assigned as soldiers during the war who had deserted. Here is a short description of police actions back in 2002:

Asmara has changed since the authorities decided to mount checks for young men and women who have not performed their national service. Some businesses which rely on young staff have been forced to close as their employees stay at home to avoid the soldiers [...] Small groups of Eritrean soldiers are now positioned on street corners calling over young people to check their identity cards [...] Now, with the war apparently over, it is pay-back time for those who missed or dodged the call up. On the streets, soldiers pounced on cars, taxis and buses checking for anyone whose identity card or military papers would reveal that they had not done the obligatory military service or that they were absent from the army without permission. Scores of other soldiers targeted homes, doing house-to-house searches in parts of Asmara. Those whose cards do not pass the inspection are often put into trucks, taken to a holding centre to check their status before being sent off to Sawa, Eritrea's national military training centre [...] In a country as small as Eritrea - with a population of three-and-a-half million - there are not many places to hide (Last 2002).

Some uninhabited buildings were progressively requisitioned by the army and transformed into barracks to host a considerable military redeployment in the urban centres and the capital city. Already trapped in towns by the checkpoints, deserters and objectors started to be hunted down by Military Police. Ever since, most of them hide at home and are maintained by families who receive remittances from abroad, while others are hosted at the place of a relative for whom they usually work. But with time, each of them develops some strategies to avoid Military Police and to earn some money. Some who run a small illegal business regularly change places and others do house work for relatives and neighbours, for instance. Since the GSM network has been set up, cell phones have become crucial for obtaining information about the changing positions of patrols and sentinels.

But round-ups have also intensified with the years. Since the WYDC was declared in 2002, many conscripts assigned to civilian duties worked out that National Service was becoming endless and they started fleeing the country, as statistics from the UNHCR shows clearly. To counter unintended breaches in the surveillance system, a massive round-up took place in Asmara throughout the month of November 2004. Military Police targeted hundreds of individuals currently assigned to the civil National Service. Despite the fact that most of them were assigned to offices in ministries or in the Party, they were all kept several days in detention outside the city in the prison camp of Adi Abeyto, near Asmara (*Gedab News* 2004). Due to an attempted escape, several of them were shot dead by guards. Military Police asked the state institutions to send some officials to the camp in order to certify that some of the detainees were effectively on active duty in their offices since Military Police did not have the means to find this out themselves.

This massive and indiscriminate round-up in Asmara in November 2004 is a perfect example of a *functional overdetermination*, defined by Foucault as a particular moment of an emerging apparatus: “[...] each effect [of the apparatus] - positive or negative, intentional or unintentional - enters into resonance or contradiction with the others and thereby calls for a readjustment or a re-working of the heterogeneous elements that surface at various points” (Gordon 1980: 195). Readjustments take place from time to time to correct the effects that the apparatus has itself created. The traumatic effect of this particular *functional overdetermination* obliges us to go back almost a decade and consider the legal process of the implementation of the National Service proclamation. Legally, it declares that enlisted individuals should be provided with a special ID card when they register (GoE 1995/82). However, the ministries entrusted to perform this task no longer function. Sawa Military camp<sup>9</sup> where all conscripts are enrolled became, in practice, the national registration centre. However, during their stay there, new recruits do not receive a National Service card. In fact, the National Service card provision never went further than the paper it was written on, while the questions of issuance, range of validity and acknowledgement of other cards, such as student ID cards, remained legally quite unclear. This lack of legibility regarding civil National Service participants was at the heart of this crisis.

This legal loophole was certainly due to the outbreak of the war that might have easily suspended such bureaucratic implementation of the proclamation. Moreover, the state institutions have been considerably altered since the cease-fire. Multiple reforms and lack of co-ordination and co-operation amongst them should have probably postponed the resolution of such a problem until the Military Police decided to introduce a swift solution. Civil institutions began to issue temporary permits to their assignees to prevent future immobilisation of manpower. But new problems and limitations of surveillance arose almost instantly after this brutal restructuring of the apparatus. The unanticipated measures imposed by the army produced many *ad hoc* and different responses from civil institutions. Given the absence of prior agreement between the ministries and the military authorities, each institution established its own policy that resulted in a complete lack of standardisation of the travel permits. Several purges and restructuring of ministries during the following years amplified again the proliferation of the *laissez-passer* and thus complicating considerably the task of the Military Police. Such proliferation obviously kindles suspicion and doubts for the checkers. As long as standardisation and new clear comprehensive policy did not emerge, indiscriminate round-ups and arbitrary arrests happened frequently. During the two years that I spent in Eritrea (2005-2006), I saw or heard about round-ups almost every month. This was also the case in subsequent years. During the day or at night, Military Police, soldiers, and sometimes police, cordon off blocks. Those who do not have a permit, or appear to have a suspect paper, are brought to military camps or police stations for further verifications that can last for several days. Patrols and round-ups in towns threaten not only deserters but also those who comply with indefinite conscription. Servicemen and women have much more chance of being rounded up and spending several hours or days in detention than

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<sup>9</sup> This military camp is situated in the Western Lowland near the border with Sudan.

before, and not having a valid permit is a substantial risk that only few are willing to take. However, despite what appeared first as a measure to institute a firm control on civil conscripts, uncertainties are still related to the “reading” of documents, to their legibility and authenticity as evaluated by Military Police. Unintentional or deliberate, in all cases, this subsequent confusion regarding the permits of civil conscripts has considerably fostered uncertainties and insecurity amongst National Service draftees.

### **The unbearable lightness of bureaucracy and the amplification of state unaccountability**

For Eritreans who are effectively carrying out their national duty, the risk of being caught in round-ups or by patrols is furthermore strengthened because of some problems which they face regularly when they request their laissez-passer from the institution to which they belong. Having a valid permit while in the National Service is never guaranteed. Even though Military Police forced civil state institutions to issue permits for people assigned in 2004, less than two years later some offices were taking months to issue permits to freshly enlisted conscripts. These conscripts circulated with only their student ID cards, which nevertheless had been *de facto* invalidated by Military Police. This suggests that the new regulation introduced so urgently was still changing and taking new shape, though newly mobilised Eritreans were waiting anxiously to be granted at least a minimum security by their new hierarchy. Sources of insecurity and uncertainty for people in the National Service thus not only relates to the arbitrariness of military actions and the police state, but is also rooted in bureaucratic ineptness. Moreover, permits must be renewed frequently (almost every two months). Unfortunately again, these renewals are anything but automatic. Regularly, people assigned to civil duty are not granted new permits for days or even weeks, and thus risk being jailed by Military Police or deported to military camps as deserters. Clearly, it is in the interest of the state institution where the conscripts are working to issue a proper permit in order not to lose manpower, possibly for days. However, they do not provide servicemen and women with documents on a clear and regular basis, and this is for many reasons. I have grouped the main causes of this apparently irrational bureaucratic behaviour into three different categories: absenteeism, technical problems and changes in regulation.

Sometimes, officials in charge of issuing permits are not in their office for several days or weeks because they are attending a workshop, or because they are on leaves to attend family events and celebrations. Often in these cases, renewal processes are frozen, since delegations of authority have not been put in place. Other causes are related to technical problems such as lack of electricity or poor management of letterhead paper supply. For half a year in 2006, electricity was rationed throughout the country, state offices included. At that time, it was difficult to know when an office was going to be open for business. On other occasions, ink or paper was lacking. All these reasons might be considered trivial but for the fact that they put many conscripts at risk for days. In Eritrea, it can take a week to refurbish an office with paper. Consequently, people in the National Service are always anticipating problems when they have to renew their permits, which is frequently. Finally, internal regulations can change at any time without any advance notification. For instance, the geographical validity of permits is sometimes restricted to the town of assignment only, thus preventing conscripts from visiting their relatives. This kind of bureaucratic interference in providing permits to people carrying out National Service is pervasive. When internal regulations change within an office, this can also have an important effect on the daily functioning of the bureaucrats in charge of them. In these situations, it sometimes happens that every basic responsibility is frozen since no one yet knows the new regulations or they do not know who will be in charge of issuing permits after an internal reshuffle of posts. Bureaucratic purge also takes place unexpectedly. A new team of bureaucrats is then constituted and they usually change the rules and issue new kinds of permits of which Military Police will again be suspicious. Processes of re-assignment from one institution to another are not rare for people in the National Service. In such cases, people assigned face many problems in maintaining a valid permit. A transfer can take half a year to be processed and during that time people may have permits that are valid for only a week. Sometimes, they even remain without one, since no

institution recognises their current affiliation while in “transfer”. In other words, obtaining and maintaining a valid permit can easily become a Kafkaesque ordeal, since bureaucracy and its regulations are not standardised and changes of different kinds happen frequently. Such bureaucratic instability, and the *ad hoc* solutions it calls forth, intensify the suspicion of Military Police and trigger more uncertainty and fear for those who must have a valid permit to keep their already quite limited freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Such bureaucratic disorders are not experienced passively by conscripts. Strategies have been generated to secure one's everyday life in case of bureaucratic denial or obstacles to renewing permits. These strategies are related to falsification and fraudulent acquisition of permits. In Eritrea, *mānqesaqäsi* are intended to be legible artefacts providing information to Military Police. However, the very logic of inscription necessary for the retrieval and control of information (crucial in the functioning of bureaucracies and surveillance) institutes at the same time the limits of such technologies. As Das puts it: “[...] state writing technologies institute the possibility of forgery, imitation and mimetic performances of its power” (2004: 227). In other words, legibility produces almost automatically the potential for illegibility. Control articulated on legibility gives way to counter-strategies producing “fake” legible artefacts. Indeed, falsification has become the most common means for deceiving Military Police in Eritrea. The post-2004 *ad hoc* travel permits are even technically easier to forge and modify than the previous ID cards. Without a picture attached, permits are merely letters with a stamp and a signature from an official from the Ministry where holders are assigned. Thus, generalisation of such *laissez-passer* has not significantly enhanced the efficiency of civil National Service conscripts control.

More recently, it has also been easier to purchase real official permits from army offices. For several years, there has been a small but prosperous black market for different kind of military permits. One can buy an empty leave form stamped and signed in which it remains only to fill the blanks with the conscript's name, route, and the time validity. However, in 2007 such permits were still quite expensive. The cheaper ones went for 700 Nakfa (roughly 40 USD), that is to say, about a half of a monthly salary for a NS-exempted civil servant for a validity period which can not last for more than a few weeks. Moreover, some more complex techniques involve both falsification and a system of petty corruption to gain access to official documents which allow one to be demobilised or even to get a passport. However, falsification and fraudulent acquisition of *laissez-passer* are not only new important limitations of the current system of certification imposed by the army but they also inadvertently increase the level of suspicion that Military Police have toward people in the civil National Service. Military Police know that proliferation of permits also includes fake ones. Therefore we have to recognise that strategies that may be used by people of an age to be conscripted in order to secure their daily life contribute to strengthening the level of suspicion of Military Police and therefore accentuate in turn the likelihood of indiscriminate round-ups and arbitrary detention to crack down on these “irregularities”.

Such a situation that instills suspicion and effectively destabilises the population cannot be a direct kind of planned strategy designed and crafted from above, that is to say, from those who allegedly exercise state power at the higher level of the hierarchy. Building a deliberately inept bureaucracy and police forces seem excessively far fetched. It is nonetheless clear that certain policies such as regular office purges and reassignments as well as the frequent erratic announcements of the President are obvious deliberate attempts to destabilise individuals working in state institution as civil servants or as National Service conscripts. It is only cumulatively that such deliberate measures further destabilise routine procedures along bureaucratic channels. If bureaucratic changes inadvertently heighten suspicion and increase the fears and risks which people experience on a daily basis regarding the state and which constitute the causes of their self-restraint, this is certainly not a negative effect from the point of view of the political leaders who try to maintain themselves in charge despite their large delegitimation and the widespread popular disapproval of their policies. In other words, institutional ineptness may well induce the same

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<sup>10</sup> Detailed ethnography and related narratives are to be found in my Ph.D. dissertation (Bozzini 2011).

effects as those produced by deliberate strategies of destabilisation. Furthermore, if we consider that the instability of the surveillance apparatus fosters certain strategies such as the existence of a black market of permits which remunerate some officers of the army quite nicely, we can assume that it slows down certain reforms that would be useful for improving surveillance and controls. Sorting out all the various levels of intentionality that are meshed tightly together in such complex and ever-changing institutional processes goes beyond my empirical data and therefore can not be properly evidenced. But in one way or another, deliberate efforts of the leadership to destabilise and instil fear (as a means of holding onto power) not only cause limited *ad hoc* reforms, bureaucratic disorganisation and ineptness or other unintended effects and shortages of all sorts but also combine with counterstrategies and interests of various individuals to form systemic uncertainties, mistrust and fear. An all-encompassing mistrust related to state processes is one clear effect of this apparent and chaotic surveillance apparatus.<sup>11</sup> Current mundane bureaucratic volatile procedures constitute, among other state practices, a significant actualisation of broader violence and unaccountability related to the exercise of power in Eritrea that is deeply rooted in the political experience and history of the nation building (i.e. since the 1960s: repression from the Ethiopian regime and the EPLF guerrilla governance).

Moreover, the authoritarian repressive state governance is regularly experienced by those who are arrested as well as by those who powerlessly witness such raids. Trivialisation of police violence and sometimes indiscriminate arrests are not only (re)produced through repetition but also generated by unpredictability and by the inability or unwillingness to oppose such actions because of fears of repression. Raids are condemned by my informants and the rightness of police actions is also questioned but at the same time, most people of conscript age have become somehow uncomplaining, and are sometimes even unconcerned about the misfortune of their jailed friends of whom they readily make fun. Fatalism is one effect of the Eritrean police state. Thus, besides the routinised ordinary police encounters at checkpoints, a certain normalisation of Military Police raids and state repression also occurs even though the latter are definitely much more violent.

### State omniscience and popular complicity

Arbitrariness, ineptness and unpredictability do not only produce fears. They invite people to make sense of state actions and policy changes. If conscripts need to make sense of the chaos which they have to face while in National Service, they also and particularly need to envision future measures of the state institutions. Theories, trends or regularities are thus imagined in order to foresee repression and changes. For instance, some conscripts worked out in 2006 that round-ups were intensifying while the President was abroad and University graduates incorporated into the civil service believed that they were especially targeted by Military Police because their educational background made them especially menacing for the leadership. Nobody knows where and when the next round-up will happen since the effectiveness of military actions depends mainly on surprise, but Eritreans try *a posteriori* to read between the lines of police violence, interpreting the latest round-up as an action taken against a particular group of people. Afterwards, it becomes clear that round-ups targeted secondary schools to capture students considered too old to continue their studies, while others raids were considered to have especially targeted women because military officers were in need of new maids. At other times, Military Police surrounded some factories to crack down on deserters working illegally or it seemed that they start harassing religious objectors again. Other explanations favour the ideas of intentional but carefully concealed military police manoeuvres to eradicate irregularities that escape the surveillance *quadrillage*. In this way, technical and informational limits of surveillance not only play a crucial role in building an ever-growing suspicion about conscripts' ability to evade and cheat controls but also Eritreans of conscription age believe that such obvious dysfunction of the surveillance apparatus will not exist for long. They anticipate that such or such breaches related to control will be mended soon. As a result, some deserters do not dare to travel with

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<sup>11</sup> This is true not only for conscripts but also for Military Police and bureaucrats themselves.

someone's laissez-passer because they believe that Military Police have already or will soon change the rule about cross-checking with ID or by obliging people to have a permit with a picture. In these uncertain situations, legible artefacts make people believe that tight control might be carried out even though they themselves experience the limits of surveillance that I have described. Such practices of auto-control occur also in relation to plain irregularities such as the use of falsified permits or about buying genuine ones. In addition to the unpredictability of police raids, uncertainties are strengthened by the very fact that nobody knows where and when the effectiveness of control will be reinforced.

Of course, anticipations, predictions and practices of auto-control are strategies that reflect a deliberate desire to avoid state repression to the greatest extent possible. The consequences of being caught are considerable: beatings and torture, detention in overcrowded underground prisons for many months, inevitable diseases with access to almost no medical care, and reassignment after the prison term all durably jeopardise life plans and life *tout court*. Meant to maximise risk avoidance, these potential consequences are also what mainly generate conscript's docility and despair. As a cautious principle held by Eritreans of conscription age, control is therefore thought to be at least *potentially* effective. In other words, the "field of visibility" (Foucault 1979) under which these Eritreans are placed always has two faces: it is either actual or potential. Whereas the notion of field of visibility is firmly tied to Foucault's disciplinary model of power and allows the performance of "a calculated manipulation" (that is to say, an intentional plan) that produces homogenised docile bodies through the internalisation of moral and behavioural norms promoted by the surveillant (i.e. panoptical logic), I want to suggest that the Eritrean field of visibility generated by the surveillance of conscripts has quite a different effect. If homogenisation of subjectivities occurs it is certainly not along ideological lines defined by the EPLF-PFDJ leaders. The importance of desertion and the widespread silent antipathy toward the leadership (Bozzini 2011) both confirm that actually, obedience is coerced rather than subtly instilled. However it is also obvious that coercive measures suffer from various breaches that considerably weaken the entire authoritarian homeland policy structured by the WYDC. Rather than instilling norms or even routine behaviour, suspicion, uncertainties, insecurity and fears arising from the surveillance apparatus mainly lead conscripts accidentally to "infinite malleability" (Los 2006: 76). As for the totalitarian gaze, the Eritrean field of visibility imposed on conscripts *tries but does not succeed* in negating "individual subjectivity and agency" (ibid.). Unlimited malleability seems nonetheless a norm that is internalised and is clearly related to the widespread idea that one must always expect whatever from the state. In other words, this refers clearly to the unaccountability of the current state leadership and the actualisation of a particular "state of emergency" (Benjamin and Arendt 1968: 257). This is certainly closer to martial law or to a local/national version of what Bigo has called a "government by unease" (2006) than what fall under the "state of exception" defined by Agamben (2005). Yet, using the term government here may be misleading if we consider that the state of emergency is *not only* produced through state institutions. Indeed, unknowns and fears give rise to some specific beliefs and representations related to the state that often enter into collusion with (un)intended "government by unease". Conscripts' rumour mongering and conspiracy theorising are two important phenomena in this regard.

Given the unreliability of official media<sup>12</sup> and the chronic silence of the authorities regarding new rules and policies, rumours are an important source of information. Most of those exchanged amongst conscripts are related to surveillance, round-ups and new bureaucratic regulations. However, it is important to note that representations of violence and unaccountability of authorities not only occur in respect of surveillance of conscripts. Violence and the unaccountability of the state are indeed profoundly rooted in historical events and in insecurity related to the exceptional nature of military actions and the decades of guerrilla governance and warfare before Independence. Thus, arbitrariness, unpredictability and the silence of the authorities all have a much broader spectrum. They also occur in many state policies such as sudden and radical changes in other regulations, ministerial purges or reorganisation, private

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<sup>12</sup> Since 2001, press freedom has been suspended in Eritrea.

commercial licences seizure, new businesses prohibition or temporary obstructions to deliver state services and entitlements. Exchanging rumours about the state and its policies is therefore an important means of acquiring knowledge in Eritrea in order to mitigate as much as possible the consequences of ever-changing regulations. At the same time, however, such popular informal channels may also heighten fears and confusion. On the one hand, rumours constantly spread about fearful plans or changes that will take place in the near future. People are not spreading raw information useful to the reduction of state chaos but rather they are communicating highly charged emotional stories that often make people predict the worst. On the other hand, the proliferation of contradictory rumours and different and inconsistent stories about the same event or procedure heightens also the idea of an arbitrary, unaccountable and volatile state. In other words, rumour-mongering trivialises the absence of the rule of law in Eritrea.

Moreover, the chronic silence of the authorities regarding new rules and policies is often understood as a deliberate strategy of “the state” aiming to destabilise the population. Proliferation of bureaucratic troubles and institutional chaos sometimes persuade people that arbitrariness and volatility are part of a hidden agenda set by the government. In the same vein, a predictive rumour that does not come true after some weeks or months is usually conceived as a fabrication of the government, deliberately aimed to misguide or confuse citizens. Such kind of alleged fabrications are generally called *bado sälästä* in Tigrinya, meaning “zero three” which is the code-name of the previous information agency and the propaganda office of the EPLF. At least for some measures taken by the state such perspective may be true, but what seems more important to acknowledge is that these emic representations about the state are also plainly promoting the state-related unease many Eritrean citizens experience on a daily basis. Making sense of everyday incoherence in such ways is nothing but assuming the existence of certain carefully concealed governmental plans – that is to say a conspiracy – instead of admitting the validity of other explanations based on the existence of a dysfunctional and limited mode of governance.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, organisational problems, institutional loose ends and incoherent governance if not other non-state-related activities might often thus become a fearful asset developed by the state leadership in the view of my informants. Accordingly, such perspectives that turn upside down the level of effectiveness of state institutions regularly need to be re-evaluated in the light of unforeseen changes. People thus reassess their interpretations but most of the time the idea of a hidden and coherent state master plot remains. Conspiracy theorising may be the result of various strategies of risk avoidance but again, such representations also increase significantly the mistrust of the state by conscripts. It generates specific perspectives about the state and its power, postulating that alleged hidden intentions of the political elite are successful in prioritising agency and fetishising causality (Silverstein 2002). Complex social processes that structure fears related to the state are therefore closely intermingled with make-believe, risk avoidance strategies and expectations. Some beliefs and strategies of conscripts enter into collusion, reinforcing and helping to foster the real or alleged “government by unease” by producing and diffusing a certain image of the state and its power and in crafting strategies and behaviours that contribute to jeopardising social relationships, trust and solidarity. In other words, individual interpretations and strategies related to surveillance, and the unintelligibility and unpredictability of state policy and bureaucracy all contribute to producing the image of an all-controlling state, even though everyone knows that the surveillance apparatus and state institutions more generally are technically quite limited.

Guessing about the ways in which state institutions come to know about something and start to change certain rules is a continuous topic of discussion amongst citizens. This kind of reasoning is intensified by conspiracy theorising about the state’s (hidden) measures and intentions, since mapping coherence and calculation call to mind the existence of rational choices based upon available and reliable information.

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<sup>13</sup> “Generally speaking, communicative practices of conspiracy theorizing employ a peculiar logic. As a mode of knowledge production, such practices remains profoundly ambivalent: they desire final truth while questioning its very existence, seek ultimate agency and intentionality while doubting the credibility of all agents, and search for unmanipulated facts while suspecting their origin and our ability to receive them in any unmediated fashion” (Silverstein 2002, 646).

Given the manifest limitations of the state in collecting information for the sake of control and repression, conscripts and deserters further elaborate explanations about how the state came to know about irregularities and hiding places in general or even about a particular individual. Therefore, strategies to avoid risks, representations of the state's hidden agendas, and fears invite people of an age to be conscripted to consider that state institutions can potentially know everything about them and at any time. Theories about state omniscience are numerous. For instance, rumours has it regularly that secret military databases are constantly fed with personal details of citizens, or that new computer networks will soon be put into service and will connect many different institutions, thus allowing continuous data transfer that will cripple deceptions and strategies of dissimulation (compare Los 2006 about the beliefs related to "the file" in communist Poland). Besides hi-tech fantasies, my informants also believed that officials may simply already have known such or such irregularities but were without the means, the time or even the zeal to fight back. Of course, some informants conjectured that this kind of postponement is deliberate and is aimed at taking the opportunity of preparing a spectacular manoeuvre that will terrify and demoralise again the whole population.

There is also a widespread belief in covert surveillance which is an obvious reality that has too many facets to be explored thoroughly in this article. Real or only presumed, informers (*ezni*, "ear" in Tigrinya), undercover agents (*säläy*) and even informal collaborators reporting back to the Military Police or to the local administration might be present in bars, at the University, in churches, and so on. Some agents are posted to report on house blocks or they are simply roaming in the streets. Sometimes, individuals coming back home after some months in jail are considered to be snitching on people. In these cases, rumours spread that the person might have made a deal with the police or the army in order to be released early (see: Treiber 2004; Bozzini 2011). In this respect, Kelly writes that: "Rumour and suspicion about collaboration and complicity spread, not because people do not know what their friends, neighbours, relatives, and colleagues are doing but because they are all too aware of what is possible or even necessary. [...] It is not just the unknown that produces apprehension but the all too knowable. Far from intimacy and knowledge creating a sense of warm familiarity, they can also lead to their own type of fear. [...] collaborators were feared and suspected not because they were beyond the moral pale and unknown but because they were all too understandable and all too recognizable" (Kelly 2010: 171). Whether or not we consider emic explanations reasonable, they all assume that information is collected by the state despite its patent incapacity to generate a regular and overt bureaucratic knowledge. As a result, a pretension of surveillance is partly fulfilled because of the general assumption that the state is omniscient in one way or another or has the means to know about everything and everyone in Eritrea. In doing so, such representations that try to answer to a state ineptness not only emphasise secrecy as a usual state policy in Eritrea and attribute a certain power to hidden institutions alleged to be involved in collecting data about the population, but they also contribute again and again to legitimate social distrust as a reasonable strategy in order to avoid serious troubles with state authorities. Real or only virtual, omniscience of the state is thus fantasised and performed in many different ways, intentionally as well as unwillingly by the conscripts themselves together with other Eritrean citizens. Omniscience of the state is still closely related to ominous perspectives experienced by all citizens. In such a volatile and incoherent bureaucratic context, complete lawfulness in respect of state regulations is unattainable for individuals. Everyone is indeed always in a situation where he/she can be easily accused of fraud or at least liable for some irregularities done by accident or caused by others. In such an uncertain and volatile situation, the field of visibility is strengthened and extended by two major social phenomena that are closely tied together.

The first is what may be called a kind of state fetishism (Hertz 1998). "The state" and its (hidden) plans as emic categories are often the main *actants* mobilised to explain the cause of all kinds of unexpected events and unjust decisions. In most narratives that I collected during two years of fieldwork in Eritrea, "The state" and its domestic and international policies are the cause of blind and cruel violence, relentless Human Rights violations and the cause of the destabilisation and the demoralisation of the whole

population in general, and the conscripts and deserters in particular. Of course, I do not want to argue against the very existence of protracted violence and abuses in the post-independent Eritrea led by the EPLF-PFDJ. But I want to underline that very often in narratives, it is the state and its leadership, that are considered to be the only source and cause of such an inadmissible and depressing state of affairs. Other *actants* such as a particular civil servant strategy or even the systemic chaos of the bureaucracy are then merged with state intentions and Presidential orders for instance. Rumour mongering and conspiracy theorising are clearly producing an excess of meaning related to state agency and power while its institutions seem to function much more with limited effectiveness, ineptness, and lack of means and appear to produce more unintended consequences and effects than calculated ones.

The second phenomenon that extends the field of visibility under which Eritreans are submitted has to do with the countless cases in which social tensions are in one way or another subjected to a social process of *étatisation*. In such a situation where every citizen can be liable for irregularities or fraud as protagonist or associate, denunciations to the authorities or simple blackmailing have become a means to defend or to promote one's personal interests. Therefore, popular collaboration and collusion with state control and means of repression extend beyond fearful rumour mongering or informal collaboration with the Eritrean intelligence agency. Collusion and complicity by ordinary citizens in the consistent generation of the Eritrean police state is stimulated by many capillary actions driven by numerous intentions. This appalling social phenomenon has been boosted by a new measure put into practice since 2005 to contain desertion and to generate incomes for the state and state officials. Since that time, family members, generally the parents, of a known deserter of the civil service have been threatened by indeterminate prison terms without trial and investigation in due form. Release from jail occurs when the family is able to pay a fine of 50'000 Nakfa to the authorities (about 3500 USD). None of my informants knew exactly how the state carries out its investigations on the families, and they came quickly to assume that neighbours or rivals could easily have reported to the authorities in exchange for a part of the fine since they were noticing that not all families of deserters were fined. Arrests of family members of deserters shows dramatically that a capillary and intimate threatening social surveillance was also a significant performing part of the Eritrean police state.

What generates the field of visibility of the state is thus largely transcending state institutions. Dissimulation is therefore not only performed towards state institutions and known agents, but is largely extended to other types of social relations. Dissimulation and social mistrust are the two main causes of the fragmentation or atomisation of social ties in Eritrea. Bureaucratic surveillance is therefore only a limited and specific part of what creates uncertainties and insecurity for Eritrean citizens. It is indeed connected to something much larger and more ominous: a node within a much larger complex of practices of control that is historically deeper rooted and socially more capillary-assembled than if we only consider checkpoints and apparently indiscriminate round-ups. The alleged omniscience of the state (or at least its potential omniscience) may be a widespread idea in Eritrea certainly because all Eritrean citizens acknowledge that collusion with the state, complicity and collaboration with the regime happen all the time. Individual opportunism derived from a myriad of possible intentions and feelings is therefore combined with the larger complex of WYDC and the ideological pressures of authoritarian nationalism, the history of violent struggle, and the unaccountability of the state to constitute the fragile power of the political leadership and the dispersed effectiveness of the Eritrean state.

### **Low-tech surveillance and despotic governance reloaded... and extended**

Eritrean surveillance of conscripts certainly represent a good illustration of the following general assertion: "While surveillance regimes are designed with particular purpose in mind, they often evolve in unanticipated ways" (Haggerty 2006: 28). Pretence to surveillance works to some extent in the sense that it allows some kind of basic sorting to be carried out, based on citizen status. But more importantly, limited effectiveness of attempts to surveil and coerce Eritreans who are of an age to be conscripted is

somehow much more productive if we consider that beyond primary intentional goals that are limited, deceived and crippled by dysfunction lie secondary effects, mostly unintended, but that nevertheless perform and encourage certain forms of control. These secondary and unanticipated effects produced by the surveillance apparatus are the development of specific uncertainties and insecurities that are experienced by conscripts and deserters. Destabilisation, unintelligibility and uncertainties produced by the surveillance apparatus in Eritrea are of three types. The first one concerns the lack of effective information control by the state. The status of people of an age to be conscripted often remains obscure for the state despite the massive deployment of control. The state compensates for this by taking erratic decisions and by using repression to crack down on desertion. The second kind of unintelligibility has to do with the lack of coordination and cooperation among institutions, as is the case in the causes and consequences of the late 2004 round-up. This is the case also when procedural changes take place and create trouble among institutions or between offices, troubles that sometimes last for weeks. Such lack of coordination fosters not only erratic and unpredictable bureaucratic changes but also bureaucratic aporia (due to re-assignment for instance). The third type of uncertainty is related to information about state regulations. Intentionally, very little official information is given out to the population. People in the National Service do not understand and foresee the regulations that they face due to their unpredictable changes and the lack of systematic and clear enforcement. Because all these three logics concern not only Eritreans of an age to be conscripted but are also part of the working experiences of bureaucrats and Military Police, uncertainties are deployed in a systemic fashion that continuously destabilise the apparatus. However, this kind of systemic uncertainty is not only related to surveillance of conscripts but is widespread throughout the whole state administration. Contrary to what could be expected, the bureaucracy creates destabilisation rather than a clear and stable framework for its citizens.

Unpredictability, instability and unintelligibility of the state measures produce legitimate fears among people in the National Service and specific representation about the state. In this respect, the surveillance apparatus (among others state institutions) contribute to actualise a certain political imagination amongst Eritreans of an age to be conscripted. For them at least, the state is understandably represented as authoritarian, unaccountable, volatile and violent; in other words: frightening, because it seems clearly that the political leadership, represented as all-powerful and capricious, is ready to do whatever it can, at the cost of individual basic freedom, in order to keep sovereignty intact and to continue to hold state power uncompromisingly. These representations and fears are in turn what generate controlling strategies which largely overcome the state institutions and their capabilities but nevertheless support them. For instance, anticipation, distrust, strategies of risk avoidance and other forms of auto-control generate a limited coercion and at least minimally docile citizens. In other words, production of beliefs and fears serves the state and further incites certain behaviour to spread amongst the population. In doing so, the surveillance apparatus contributes to actualise and perpetuate the larger forms of control that are based on a long history of state violence on the one hand, and which was, on the other hand, also certainly performed already by the current political elite in Eritrea before independence through a certain modality of governance developed within the EPLF guerrillas. According to some sources (Connell 2005; Hepner 2009; Gaim 2008), the EPLF deliberately instilled fears, distrust and social division among fighters during the armed struggle for independence as a means not only of maintaining strict control of the revolutionary movement but also of maintaining the leadership firmly in power during three decades.<sup>14</sup>

As Lyon has argued, the way in which surveillance or control is articulated and is exerted may inform us of the kind of political regime or the modality of governance of which attempts to surveil is a part (Lyon 2007). The way in which surveillance generates a state of unease particularly amongst Eritreans of an age to be conscripted indeed encourages us to consider the Eritrean state as despotic, that is to say, exerting a despotic kind of governance articulated mainly on authoritarianism, unaccountability, unpredictability and

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<sup>14</sup> This may well argue in favour of the existence of current state measures deliberately crafted to produce unease among civil servants and the population.

arbitrariness that generate insecurity. Fear is the instrument used by the despot to control population and maintain himself in power (Montesquieu 2002). Administrative or bureaucratic despotism is the exercise of unlawful and arbitrary power accompanied by the threat of violence (Spittler 2004; Olivier De Sardan 2004). However, despotism may be a deliberate modality of governance if we consider that the current political leadership in Eritrea encourages the application of crude violence, undermines the rule of law and destabilises the population. In many ways, my analysis shows that often the manifestation of despotism is also unintentionally generated by an ensemble of institutional ineptness, confusion and limitations. Despotic governance is what defines this particular state of control where elements of surveillance, institutional ineptness and widespread arbitrary repression play a central role in promoting dissuasion and self-control as the main patterns of limited social and political control. Therefore, deliberate measures induce and collude with unintentional and unanticipated effects to constitute a complex and systemic despotic state that is furthermore supported by certain widespread behaviours heightening confusion, distrust and anxiety. This collusion of non-state actors with the repressive regime by using opportunistically its repressive apparatus for their own interests is nothing more than a manifestation of dispersed despotism (see Hansen 2005, Tarlo 2001) specifically stimulated in specific political contexts (Rev 1987). Ironically, dispersed despotism contributes to filling the gap of the state's incompetence itself and reinforces the power of the state. In other words, complicity and collusion with state governance both contribute to some extent to the maintenance of the state as it is, despite the fragile and limited effectiveness of its formal institutions.<sup>15</sup> By way of conclusion, it seems important to remember that an extremely competent managerial regime, with financial, material, and bureaucratic means to maintain a state of control are not always what has defined police states. This last point is of course nothing new, since Arendt (1968) has already convincingly pointed at it in respect of key historical figures of police and totalitarian states. Still, much closer to the contemporary Eritrean case, the extreme fragility of police states cannot be better illustrated than by the way in which popular insurrection in the Arab world has managed to challenge police states such as Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Yemen during 2011.

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<sup>15</sup> However, determining if the Eritrean state is a quasi-state (Jackson 1990) or may be tagged as failed, collapsed or shadow state is largely beyond the scope of this article.

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