

Beyond the Privatized Military

Rita Abrahamsen & Michael C. Williams

University of Aberystwyth

Despite the wealth of recent discussions of mercenaries and private military companies, one aspect of security privatization has gone almost unnoticed: the phenomenal growth of private security companies providing security services in non-military and non-conflict settings. While less spectacular than the attempt by the British ex-SAS officer Simon Mann and friends to overthrow the government in Equatorial Guinea in 2004 or the involvement in Iraq of private military companies like Erinys and Blackwater, the size, scope and rate of expansion of private security companies (PSCs) dwarf that of private military companies (PMCs).

Today, the global private security market is valued at US\$165 billion. The world's largest private security company, Group4Securicor, operates in over 100 countries, with over 400,000 employees. The second biggest company, Securitas, employs more than 210,000 people in some 30 countries, while Prosegur, a Spanish company, has a significant presence across Europe and Latin America. Companies concentrating on the electronic alarm market, notably ADT and Chubb, have also expanded their global reach. Although no clear distinction can be drawn between these companies and some of the more multi-faceted PMCs, PSCs are predominantly involved in security provision in non-military and non-conflict settings. But while seemingly mundane, the private provision of everyday services such as guarding, electronic alarm systems, patrolling, risk analysis and management has profound impacts on the politics of security. In fact, the growth of PSCs has significantly altered the landscape of security both locally and globally, leading to and reflecting the increasing commodification and politicization of security.

At first glance, the globalization and privatization of security appears as a classic example of the erosion of sovereignty and state power, as the state's monopoly over legitimate violence has long been regarded as a defining characteristic of sovereignty. Any image of a straightforward 'retreat of the state' is, however, too simplistic. To be sure, there has been an increasing fragmentation of the security field, with a multiplicity of different actors -- public and private, global and local -- now involved in the provision of security. But rather than an automatic erosion of state power, the result is the emergence of new networks of security in which the authority of the state and private actors is rearticulated through new technologies of

governance, coercion and control. This has numerous political implications in terms of how security is provided, for whom, and by whom, and also theoretically for how we think about the state and global security. Few countries are immune to the impacts of security privatization and globalization but the implications differ in time and space.

Cape Town, one of South Africa's premier tourist destinations, provides a striking example of a security landscape where public and private, global and local actors interact and combine in the provision of public security. The Cape Town Central City Improvement District (CCID) is an initiative of the Cape Town Partnership, a not-for-profit company founded by the City Council and the local business community in November 2000 with the aim of reversing urban decay and capital flight from central Cape Town. Today, the CCID collects about R15 million (or CAN\$1.86 million) annually from its ratepayers and approximately 50 percent of the budget is allocated to security. As part of this effort, the world's largest private security firm Group4Securicor, trading in Cape Town as Securicor, has been tasked with securing the public spaces of the city. Securicor's CCID security force consists of six patrol vehicles, ten horse-mounted officers and 60 foot patrol officers, providing a 24 hour security presence in the city centre. As a result, the presence of security personnel has increased significantly and Securicor's visibility on the streets far exceeds that of the public police who concentrate their efforts in the poorer areas where crime rates are highest.

But the security arrangements of Cape Town are far from entirely private. Instead, the CCID is a telling example of the shifting boundaries of the public and private, the global and the local in contemporary security provision. The City Council makes up one third of the Cape Town Partnership and Securicor works in close cooperation with the public police. The CCID/Securicor branded patrol vehicles include a City Police officer and are linked to the City Police control room by radio. The supervision of Cape Town's 170 close circuit television cameras is undertaken by Securicor officers in cooperation with the City Police. In addition, Securicor participates in weekly sector community policing forums to identify potential problems, share information and co-ordinate activities with the police.

The security arrangements of the CCID have important implications for who gets secured and how. Those who pay are able to play a powerful role in determining the security agenda with significant implications for access to public space and divides along social lines. While the exact achievements of the CCID in terms of crime

reduction are difficult to assess, there is a clear sense that the city is now safer. Some sources claim a 60 percent drop in crime in CCID, particularly in offences such as pick-pocketing, mugging and theft from cars. Urban capital flight has also been reversed. To the extent that the South African state relies upon income from foreign investment and tourism, not to mention the symbolic status of Cape Town as a “world-class” city, the private securing of public space can be seen as crucial.

But for some sections of the population, the altered politics of protection is experienced as an increasing restriction of access to public space, as a combination of public bylaws and private security enforcement serves to prevent the poor and the homeless from utilising the city’s public spaces. New restrictions have been passed relating to begging and vagrancy, and street children are regarded as a particular security problem. Although the CCID recognises that the causes of vagrancy and homelessness are social issues and cannot be solved by security measures alone, social services account for only eight percent of CCID’s budget. Moreover, the exclusionary aspects of the CCID are hard to dispute.

Lacking the eye-catching cachet of the combat active soldier on foreign territory, the expanded role of global PSCs are nevertheless crucial to an understanding of contemporary security, both locally and globally. Cape Town’s CCID may be unusual in its extensive integration of public/private, global/local security actors, but it is not unique. The CCID is the largest of approximately 15 CIDs in and around Cape Town, with similar schemes existing in Durban and Johannesburg and further afield in Toronto and New York. In numerous other settings, including oil and resource extraction, PSCs play a prominent role alongside public security actors. Such arrangements challenge traditional boundaries between the public and private realms, and local and global structures, and have considerable impacts on the day-to-day provision of security, as well as for broader issues of social stability and state legitimacy. In the CCID, significant authority over domestic territory resides with a global private security company. At the same time, in Cape Town, as almost everywhere else, PSCs have -- to a significant extent -- emerged at the instigation of the state and are part of state-led policies of outsourcing, privatization and public-private partnerships. As such, the growth and globalization of private security, in Cape Town and elsewhere, cannot be understood as a straightforward erosion of state power but rather understood and analysed as part of a broader transformation in global security governance.