Abstract

The creation of stronger states in Africa is central to the success of conceiving, designing and implementing agendas that seek to enhance peace and human security. Most states in Africa exhibit chronic privatisation of violence by informal security actors, and this is symptomatic of the difficulties of state building more generally. Security sector reform (SSR) as a tool for peacebuilding and human security on the continent must therefore be part of a wider effort to address the problem of state weakness as well as respond to the crucial (in)security that is presented by informal actors such as militias and vigilante groups. This has become crucial in the light of the human security predicaments that informal security actors represent. This article uses the cases of Nigeria and South Africa to show how the current institutional approach to SSR ignores the critical importance of the nature of the state and the structural conditions that undermine the state-making process in Africa in both analysis and practice. It argues that the governance of privatised violence is central to the need for SSR in Africa and that the enhancement of state capacity is the key to the success of that governance.

Introduction

There are various definitions of SSR, although there is general agreement that it is concerned with changes that are necessary to promote effective and efficient provision of state and human security within a framework of democratic and good governance in the security sector of the state (Hanggi 2004:6). The goal of good governance in the security sector involves two major components: establishing democratic control over security forces and enhancing their operational capability to perform their legitimate function of protecting citizens from physical violence. SSR in sub-Saharan Africa has become an essential tool for development, most especially because it is concerned with human security as opposed to the traditional notion of national security. This linkage has become unavoidable in a region that has continued to fall farther behind the rest of the world in the quest for peace and development. More particularly, given decades of authoritarian repression, political instability and protracted violent conflicts, human development in sub-Saharan Africa has been hampered by pervasive physical insecurity and violence. Yet the relative academic weight given to the provision of physical security versus greater democratic control over decision making in the security sector provides an important debate within...
the literature of SSR (Brzoska 2003:23) While some writers have emphasised the primacy of democratic control over security forces, others view this as only a tool for a broader goal of promoting the physical security of citizens. In sub-Saharan Africa, where human security is most lacking, far greater emphasis has been placed on the governance of the security sector than on the provision of physical security for citizens. This is not surprising given the infamous legacy of abuses by African security forces and their political misuse by post-colonial rulers until recent times.

During the 1990s, democratic governance spread on the African continent, notwithstanding the democratic reversals witnessed in particular countries (Freedom House 2006). Since the beginning of the millennium, this process has also permitted a gradual improvement in the governance of the security sector as the main focus of SSR, even if this process has been painfully slow. Yet a corresponding improvement has not been seen in the physical security of citizens, particularly the poor: for them security is one of the most important concerns for sustaining and improving livelihoods (Narayan et al 2000:27, 36). While many of the internal armed conflicts of the early and mid-1990s have been resolved and while state violence has receded considerably, citizens have continued to face physical insecurity from non-state threats (Human Security Report 2005: 4, 24, 68). The inadequacy of state protection from these threats has generated its own insecurity as citizens are forced to take the law into their own hands. Given the environment of improved democratic governance, a crucial challenge for SSR is how to bolster physical security as a precondition for human security and sustainable development.

Given the environment of improved democratic governance, a crucial challenge for SSR is how to bolster physical security as a precondition for human security and sustainable development. Premised on the assumption that security cannot be governed unless it is available in the first place, this article takes the improvement in the provision of physical security to be a crucial priority for SSR in contemporary Africa.

In discourse and practice, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, SSR has been state-centric. This is firstly because it is a sector of the state that is being reformed, and since SSR is a governance issue that touches upon other crucial sectors of the state, the state constitutes the central referent of SSR. Second, security is the most crucial concern of the state because it has first to survive to be able to pursue other goals. Yet although the state enjoys external sovereignty under international law (and norms) which guarantees its legal equality to other states, its ability to approximate the goal of providing adequate security for its citizens (a core objective of SSR) is a direct function of its domestic sovereignty. This internal sovereignty is in turn dependent on the extent to which the state has succeeded in claiming the monopoly of control over the means of violence within its territory as a sine qua non of statehood. This point is important because SSR, both in theory and practice, seeks to improve the delivery of security as a requisite condition for human development, and assumes that security is a public good to be provided by the state. This is an extension of the political philosophy of the social contract, by which citizens in the anarchic state of nature traded their inherent right to bear arms and to protect themselves from the violence of others in the society for collective security provided by the commonwealth (Hobbes in Cohen 1972:406-7). By doing so, citizens were exercising the confidence that the state in turn would possess the authority and capacity to monopolise the means of violence on their behalf in order to protect them adequately.

However, in spite of the legal equality of states, the capacity to wield the monopoly of legitimate violence within their respective territories (internal sovereignty) varies along a continuum between weak and strong states. In most of sub-Saharan Africa, the failure of the state to successfully claim this monopoly of violence has caused the abdication of its vital obligation
under the social contract, i.e. the provision of adequate security for everybody – public security. The inexorable consequence has been the retention of private means of violence as a guarantee of security, particularly in communities where this weakness is most felt.

State weakness in Africa generates a problem for SSR – the fragmentation of the security sector. There is a public sector of state security forces and the civil institutions responsible for their oversight, and a private sector of vigilantes, militias, private security companies (PSCs) and private military companies (PMCs) as well as other non-state armed groups. The private security sector is further divided into the formal and informal sectors. The former includes PSCs and PMCs, which operate within the legal framework and state regulation. The latter includes militias, vigilantes and shadowy armed networks located outside the law and control of the state. This article is concerned with the informal private security sector and the challenge it presents for SSR in Africa.

The privatisation of violence itself can be seen as the negative side of globalisation. The triumph of neo-liberalism as the new political and economic orthodoxy at the turn of the 1990s and its expansion since then have given impetus to a global trend towards privatisation. Governments, including those in developed countries, have increasingly closed down public enterprises and outsourced non-essential services to private investors as a way of making the state leaner and more efficient. This is particularly so in the security sector more recently, with the outsourcing of non-core military and security functions to PMCs (in conflict or post-conflict theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan) and PSCs. The remit of the Weberian state, which is defined as possessing the monopoly of violence, has consequently shrunk with privatisation, and an increasing ceding of space to non-state actors has become widespread. However, strong states have managed to retain their core functions and to regulate non-state actors with a high degree of success. In Africa, the inability of the state to firmly retain its core functions and to act effectively as regulator has meant that privatisation has not only reduced the scope of the state, but has also weakened its bargaining strength in relation to other forces in society.

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This article considers this phenomenon a pathology of the failure of a wider project of state making in Africa and a manifestation of structural factors embedded in the post-colonial state. Using the examples of Nigeria and South Africa, it seeks to show how the current institutional approach to SSR ignores the critical importance of the nature of the state and the structural conditions that undermine the state-making process in Africa in both analysis and practice. The central argument of the article is that the regulation of privatised violence is a necessary requirement for reclaiming the public monopoly of violence and a central rationale for SSR in Africa. Furthermore, it is argued that the success of such a project depends on the extent to which the capacity of the state is enhanced.

The Statist Assumptions of Security Sector Reform

SSR is rapidly evolving both in theory and practice, yet the assumptions underlying it still require clarification and legitimisation. These assumptions relate to both the object and subject of SSR – security and the security sector. The conception of security has undergone profound revision characterised as a widening and deepening (Hanggi 2004). The widening
of security deals with the inclusion of dimensions other than traditional military concerns, while the deepening of the concept relates to the recognition of levels of human political expression other than the state as critical referents. Three levels in this deepening process have been identified as international security, national security and individual security (Buzan 1991). Together the two dimensions in the reconceptualisation of security have led to the less ambiguous concept of human security, although the widening agenda has generated a debate over what to include and to exclude – the problem of securitisation (Knudsen 2001:355-368). This debate is beyond the scope of this paper, as SSR is clear on the type of security whose provision it seeks to improve, namely physical protection of individuals and communities from the violence of others by the state.

What SSR is not so clear about is its very subject – the security sector – and its relationship to the provision of security where the security sector is contested. In terms of the provision of security, individuals and communities as real actors have not received serious attention. This is rightly so because, on the basis of the social contract, the state exists solely to provide the delivery of a hierarchy of political goods (Rotberg 2003:3). At the top of that hierarchy is the provision of security since other political goods can be delivered only under conditions of reasonable security. The legitimacy of the state and its institutions (including security institutions) is therefore intimately linked to its provision of the physical protection of citizens (Kaldor 2000:2). The expectation of the state to fulfil this obligation is universal, and this is mainly due to the assumption that the state possesses the same basic attributes across space.

This assumption thus provides the basis for the conception of the security sector in statist terms, although it has been pointed out that the conceptualisation of the security sector has tended to fall into a state-centred and human-centred dichotomy (Hanggi 2004:6). The former focuses on the formal sector, while the latter seeks to incorporate the informal sector. Despite the state and human security notions of the security sector, in practice SSR has been typically operationalised in its state-centred notion to the neglect of the non-state security actors and their activities. Nowhere has this been more obvious than Africa where programmes of SSR, mostly driven by the exigency of post-conflict reconstruction, have been under way in zones of conflict. The examples that readily come to mind are Sierra Leone and Liberia (Ebo 2005; Fayemi 2004; Fitz-Gerald 2004). In these programmes, non-state security forces have at best been left to the parallel programme of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of former fighters, as an instrument for post-conflict peacebuilding.

DDR programmes in sub-Saharan Africa have been designed to remove weapons from society and to create the immediate social and economic environment that is necessary to discourage former fighters from recourse to violence after conflict. In the course of DDR, SSR programmes have also been introduced as a conflict prevention instrument, including the integration of former belligerents into a single national security force. Despite the implementation of DDR and SSR programmes in some post-conflict countries, privatised violence has remained a reality of social life, both because of structural weakness of the state and because informal security actors have largely been ignored in these processes.

With the exception of states in the Great Lakes and the Horn regions, countries lying outside conflict or immediate post-conflict contexts exhibit the prevalence of non-state security forces as endemic features of politics (Francis 2005:6).
The Nature of the State: A Priority for SSR Thinking

Most policy instruments introduced in the developing world, particularly in Africa, by donor countries and multilateral institutions have ignored the structural condition of the state. Such an analysis provides the critical physical and political space for those policies, and it is therefore examined in some detail here.

Rich historical analyses of the process by which the modern state came into being in Western Europe already exist in the literature. State making was essentially a process of monopolising the use of legitimate physical violence by which rulers of city-states, kingdoms and principalities took steps to attain Weber’s notion of statehood. Using the examples of England and France, Tilly (1990:39-69) shows that these state makers first had to contend fiercely with armed citizens, rival power holders and private armies in order to assert their authority across the territory they sought to control. They secured internal sovereignty by disarming their own populations (monopolisation of the means of violence) and by establishing and expanding their own armed forces (concentration of the means of violence). He observes:

"Armed men formed states by accumulating and concentrating their means of coercion within a given territory, by creating an organisation that is at least potentially distinct from that which governs production and reproduction in the territory, by seizing, co-opting, or liquidating other concentrations of coercion within the territory, defining boundaries and by exercising jurisdiction within those boundaries (Tilly 1990:131)."

This civilising process of removing violence from everyday life involved an intimate and mutually reinforcing relationship between taxation and military force. The taxation of property and income of individuals was concentrated in the central authority. The proceeds were then used to maintain the monopoly of force, which in turn maintained the monopoly of taxation (Elias 1982:ii, 104). Thus, the crucial coercive powers of the state were to tax and to command forces. The power to command forces involved both war making and policing. State elites employed war to ‘expand’ and ‘consolidate’ the ‘territorial and demographic domain’ of the state; they needed to maintain order in the territory and over the population where it had already been imposed through policing; and taxation was needed to support war and policing, and to ‘deepen the state’s penetration of society’ (Ayoob 1995:22-3).

These three activities constituted the accumulation of power, which is the essence of the state-making project and which was made possible only by the initial monopolisation of violence (Tilly 1985:172). This is because the monopoly of violence gave early state makers in Western Europe the empirical sovereignty to establish the authority of the state and to impose its dominance within its territory and over competing centres of power (Job 1992:25) or competing foci of authority (Ayoob 1992:66) among the population. The provision of security for citizens is historically and intricately tied to the state-making enterprise of accumulating power, including the extraction of resources and generation of wealth for the common good within the national territory.

The provision of security for citizens is historically and intricately tied to the state-making enterprise of accumulating power, including the extraction of resources and generation of wealth for the common good within the national territory. The physical protection of citizens and the promotion of their welfare have been the core and interrelated functions of the state, and state elites have approximated these goals to the extent that they have been able to accumulate power.
Stateness – the quality of being a state – is the extent to which a state is able to wield firm control over standing armies and police forces while eliminating non-state controlled armies, militias and gangs (Migdal 1988:18). In practice, though, the ability of real states to approximate the Weberian ideal state has varied markedly, both in temporal and spatial dimensions. This empirical variation determines the classification between strong and weak states. Strong states have been able to wield a high level of social control, while leaders in weak states have been unable to achieve dominance in large areas of their countries and face impenetrable barriers (from tribes, multinational companies, etc.) to accumulation (Migdal 1988:35-49). It has been pointed out that weak states have not been able to surmount these barriers because their institutional capacity is weak. This capacity is divided into despotism power (the force to impose rule on the population), and the infrastructural power (the strength of the state’s bureaucracies and their reach within the territory). While effective infrastructural power gradually eliminates the need to exercise more than a modest degree of despotic power in strong states, weak states tend to be locked into the preliminary stage and are unable to move beyond the raw exercise of coercion to compliance through more peaceful means (Thomas 1989:182). This infrastructural power involves the ability of state elites to bargain with the competing foci of authority in society for compliance through the delivery of essential services, where the use of force proves unsustainable. The delivery of services makes it possible for the state to penetrate society and generate revenue through extraction of resources and taxation, which in turn enhances the capacity for service delivery.

In addition to weak institutional capacity, the lack of social cohesion in weak states also creates an insecurity dilemma by which ‘individuals and groups acting against perceived threats create an environment of increased threat and reduced security’ for all in the society (Job 1992:12; Sorensen 1996:372). Weak states are unable to create a domestic political and social consensus of sufficient strength to eliminate the large-scale use of force as the most important instrument for regulating society (Buzan 1983:67), and this is closely tied to the infrastructural power of the state. The inability to generate sufficient revenue not only makes it difficult for the state to meet the welfare and security needs of its populations but also weakens the capacity of the state to forge social consensus. This is most acute where the state is exclusionary and where segments of the population cannot easily have access to the public good. This de-legitimises the state and strengthens alternative centres of authority, which are able to deliver services to their local communities through informal mechanisms.

The new national elites in most sub-Saharan countries did not address the dualism of the colonial era – the coexistence of non-formal traditional institutions and formal state structures. Rather, they maintained what has been called the artificiality and remoteness of the colonial state (Azarya & Chazan 1998:112-114). This failure undermined the ability of the post-colonial state to meet expectations and prompted the disengagement of sections of the population from the state. One important form of this disengagement is the parallel systems or what Hills (1997:42-3) calls the parallel universe, which offers alternative outlets for needs that remain unfulfilled by official channels. An important element of these parallel systems is privatised violence, which in turn deprives the state of revenue and consequently weakens its capacity to accumulate.

An acute lack of institutional capacity, weak social cohesion and high levels of social exclusion define most sub-Saharan states. These conditions undermine the emergence or development of strong states in the region and create an environment conducive to the
thriving and proliferation of privatised violence. Sub-Saharan Africa has therefore failed so far to produce strong states which are able to provide and sustain the conditions of welfare and security for citizens, as is the case in the developed world of Western Europe, North America, and more recently, some countries of South-east Asia.

**Stateness and the Privatisation of Violence in Africa**

The post-colonial state in Africa has displayed a weak, if not failed, transition from private to public monopolies of the means of legitimate violence – the first and necessary stage in the attempt to fit (as far as possible) into quintessential stateness. In most countries on the continent, regional power holders, power challengers, traditional authorities and armed bands have existed side by side with the state and have shared with the state in the use of the means of violence, with some degree of legitimacy. This is not just a problem associated with ongoing conflict or even immediate post-conflict environments. It is rather a defining and enduring character of the state in the region, regardless of its socio-political environment. In this section, the examples of Nigeria and South Africa, the two sub-regional powers in the continent, are used to examine the condition of state weakness in sub-Sahara Africa which permits the emergence of alternative security mechanisms and undermines the ability of the state to foster peace and development.

**Nigeria**

In Nigeria the state-making project, which began with the wars of pacification by British expeditionary forces against coastal chiefs from the late 1840s, failed to fulfil the fundamental elements of classical state making. By 1861 the Protectorate of Lagos was established as the nucleus of an expanding colonial state. This expansion saw the creation of two protectorates for the north and the south through gradual pacification and negotiations with traditional centres of authority in the course of the rest of the 19th century. The two protectorates were amalgamated in 1914 and called Nigeria. The colonial administration chose not to neutralise alternative centres of authority, but rather adopted the policy of indirect rule as a rational response to constant rebellion to colonial occupation and exploitation. Rather than support the emergence of strong state bureaucracies, indirect rule supported division as the various administrative units were made to coincide with the spatial distribution of the major ethnic groups (Ake 2000:99). This in itself demonstrated the failure of the colonial state to successfully establish public monopolies of violence and to fulfil the first-order condition for making a strong state.

These legacies were bequeathed to the post-colonial state right from independence in 1960. Within the first few years of independence, it became clear that the institutional capacity of the state, the idea of the state and national cohesion were acutely lacking. Between 1960 and 1966, intractable sectional rivalry for control of the central government, the electoral and census violence in the western region of the country and the Tiv Riots all featured the use of private violence by ethnic groups and political parties (Magyar 1996:306-307). They revealed the resilience of alternative centres of traditional authority and loyalty, with which the modern state failed to negotiate the terms of co-existence.

Lacking in infrastructural power, state elites responded to this challenge from regional power holders by deploying the state’s despotic power through the military take-over of
government in January 1966 to enforce compliance with the authority of the state. Recourse to the use of despotic power became a permanent status of the post-colonial state until the democratic transition of 1999. Although the military government succeeded in putting down the Biafra rebellion through the civil war of 1967-1970, it could not solve the problem of inadequate societal cohesion. The absence of societal consensus on fundamental issues of social, economic and political organisation throughout the duration of military rule led to many instances of communal violence.

Military despotism, communal conflicts and the failure of the police to protect people from crime combined to undermine the security of citizens. This in turn has served to undermine the legitimacy of the state in the minds of citizens. In these circumstances, alternative foci of authority were reinforced and some form of localised protection became necessary to provide physical security. With the end of military rule in 1999, the state began to repudiate its despotic power. However, it has not improved its infrastructural power to ensure compliance through more peaceful means, resulting in a net reduction of the state’s institutional capacity and the bold emergence of more structured and permanent vigilante groups and militias. The most notable among them are the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force and the Bakassi Boys. They employ unregulated violence to address the challenges of insecurity and socio-economic marginalisation they face. They are therefore examples of alternative centres of protection and are reflections of the fragmentation of authority in a state that is too weak to guarantee or provide citizens’ security.

The difficulties that the state encounters in the quest for the legitimacy to extract resources are played out in the ongoing crisis in the Niger Delta. The conflict, which is as old as post-colonial Nigeria, shows how the failure of the state to bargain with oil-bearing communities by addressing critical development needs has undermined the effectiveness of coercive power in the accumulation process. This crisis emerged simultaneously with independence, when Isaac Adaka Boro and his Niger Delta Volunteer Force launched a radical struggle for local control of petroleum resources. Although the state pacified the region through its superior instruments of coercion, the failure to address the structural conditions of underdevelopment, poverty, environmental degradation and social exclusion has helped to reinforce the resistance of the communities to state accumulation of economic power in ways that undermine their human security.

The success of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People to revive the struggle in the early 1990s and to permanently halt the operations of the Anglo-Dutch Shell Petroleum Development Company in all Ogoni communities since 1993 further demonstrates the limitation of the military instrument for achieving human security and development. It shows that the application of force to generate revenues and wealth has led to greater violence and insecurity for citizens in their communities. Even though the military government of the time managed to suppress the movement through the brutal hanging its leaders, the resilience of the struggle and the transformation from structural to physical violence have been a major barrier to development of the region. The emergence of the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force and a host of other similar armed groups in the late 1990s has seen the introduction of physical violence to the struggle. Violent kidnapping and hostage taking of oil company staff as a result of repressive exploitation contribute to fear and insecurity which further undermine both the potential for finding solutions and the conditions for development.
development. In spite of the large military task force currently serving in internal security operations throughout the Niger Delta, these groups have managed to frustrate state exploitation of oil through the use of violence against the multinational oil companies. The attendant reduction in oil production, which accounts for about 90% of state revenues, has the potential of weakening the economic base of the state and its ability to meet the human security and development needs of its citizens. In this way, too, more space is ceded to privatised violence.

**South Africa**

South Africa has a similar history in the state-making process, although it has made greater progress in the generation of national wealth and military capability in the post-colonial period. Following the Anglo-Boer war of 1898-1902, British colonial forces swallowed the inland Boer Republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State and established the Union of South Africa in 1910 (Cawthra 1986:6-11). The new state had the option either to negotiate the terms and conditions of exercising political power with the various loci of African traditional authority scattered across its vast territory or to neutralise them in order to exercise its dominance. The state chose neither, but rather sought to impose its authority to the exclusion of these forces; nor did it seek to eliminate the racial divide between the blacks and the whites. The result was the emergence of a state that lacked legitimacy and so was too weak to overcome the resistance of powerful black movements.

The emergence of the apartheid government in 1948 and the state policy of racial segregation accentuated the sharp divisions within South Africa. The deliberate socio-political and economic exclusion of the majority black population reinforced their resistance to the state and made it difficult for the state to acquire legitimate predominance across its territory. In response to this challenge to its authority, the state increasingly intensified the employment of its despotic power, resulting in the notorious massacres of black protesters in Sharpeville in 1960 and in Soweto in 1976 and many more acts of state violence (Alden 1996). The state’s lack of infrastructural power was demonstrated through the total failure of the policy of ‘winning hearts and minds’ introduced in the 1970s to pacify increasing black resistance. At this time, even the minimal idea of the state had started to wane considerably, exacerbated by the near absence of the state’s infrastructural power. The continued lack of state legitimacy led to the emergence of alternative centres of people’s power in the black townships in fulfilment of the call by the African National Congress (ANC) to render the townships ungovernable.

Civic organisations in the forms of community and street committees were formed to provide services, including protection and justice for citizens within areas of their jurisdiction (Alden 1996:155-7). Meanwhile the ANC armed wing mounted acts of sabotage and the civic organisations stepped up protests and demonstrations. The state never managed to eliminate this bold challenge to its authority until the collapse of apartheid in 1990. From the very moment the state was created in 1910, the vital state-making activity of maintaining order (policing) was restricted to the minority white sections of society. Left to their own devices, the vast majority of the population employed their own means of local protection. By the time apartheid and violent repression ended in 1990, the infrastructural power of the state, the idea of the state and social cohesion were virtually absent. Although the democratic transition...
of 1994 helped re-legitimise the state, it could not immediately expand its infrastructural power across the entire territory and over the population to secure sustainable, peaceful compliance. Under those conditions, party militias such the ANC self-defence units and the self-protection units of the Inkatha Freedom Party emerged as private security forces to provide protection for their communities in the violent post-election phase of the transition.

The institutional weakness of the new democratic state also generated new forms of vigilantism, which employed violent means as a response to crime. The most notorious of these formations was PAGAD (People against Gangsterism and Drugs), which operated between 1995 and 1999 in the greater Cape Town area and which comprised mainly Moslems and people of mixed descent. Rising drug- and gang-related crime, the ineffectiveness of the official criminal justice system and unemployment in these communities fostered disillusionment with the democratic transition and further de-legitimised the state. PAGAD emerged first as a popular movement which sought to mount pressure on the state to take tough action against rising crime. Its activities included rallies and popular marches to key government offices to protest against the failure of the criminal justice system to handle the crime problem. It was the inability of the state to regulate the normal democratic activities of PAGAD that created the opportunity for Islamic extremists to penetrate and hijack the popular movement. The hijacking, radicalisation and structuring of PAGAD marked its transformation from a pressure group to an armed group engaged in urban terrorism. It not only openly killed suspects and bombed their houses; it also threatened the state by raiding police stations, bombing courts and murdering judges who dared to put its members on trial. Although the state has managed to eliminate such an extreme version of vigilantism as PAGAD, low-level vigilantism has remained a daily experience in South Africa where social inequality remains high and police capacity has not expanded sufficiently to deal with the high rate of violent crime.

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The state was able to overwhelm PAGAD because the capacity of the police was increasingly strengthened as greater resources and expertise were transferred to policing at the street level. New crime intelligence units were created, including a PAGAD unit in the Western Cape police, and specialised personnel were moved from the provinces to the stations where crime and vigilantism occur. This helped considerably to improve visible policing as a response to crime (which provided the rationale for PAGAD in the first place) and as counterforce to PAGAD operation.

Conclusion: Privatisation of Violence as a Priority Concern for SSR in Africa

The privatisation of violence – in particular informal sector violence – has been part and parcel of state making in Africa. This phenomenon is not restricted to Nigeria and South Africa; studies have shown that this is the case in many sub-Saharan states (Baker 2002; Francis 2005). Rather, it demonstrates the weakness of the African state and its failure to build bureaucratic capacity for effective service delivery in the state-making process, by which the state not only grows in economic productivity and military power, but also in its developmental capacity and in the extension of its legitimacy and authority across the whole of its territory by catering for the economic, social and security needs of the population.
Studies have also shown that in many sub-Saharan states, security has long been defined and provided by the state on an exclusionary basis and as a private good for the protection of the ruling elite and other special groups. It is in such cases that civilians are forced to provide for their own security, particularly in areas of territory not covered by state security provision (Bourne 2002:16-17). This in part has led to what has been termed the privatisation of violence.

Colonisation in Africa was not designed to create strong states, and the colonial authorities did not eliminate the obstacles to strong statehood in the region. The opportunity for real state making opened up with the end of colonial occupation as new national elites inherited states whose institutional capacity and social cohesion were too weak to provide secure livelihood and physical protection. The quest for strong and secure states in sub-Saharan Africa has yet to produce the developmental state which employs extracted resources and viable bureaucracies to provide human security for its citizens. This constitutes the security predicament of African states: as the cases of Nigeria and South Africa show, where this predicament is most severe, the privatisation of violence becomes most obvious.

Any effort to enhance human security in sub-Saharan Africa must therefore grapple with the key reasons that have been adduced for the difficulties these states face in trying to meet the physical and material needs of their citizens. For Ayoob, it is the unavailability of time and freedom to annihilate alternative domestic centres of authority and to coerce disparate populations into accepting its dominance. Going by the measure of classical state making as taking four or five centuries to arrive at strong statehood, post-1945 states are too young to be strong, although they ‘cannot indulge in the luxury of prolonging the traumatic and costly experience’ for centuries (Ayoob 1992:67; 1995:29). Contemporary state making cannot be based on an approach where those in power feel free to annihilate their opponents if the objective is human security, which is premised on the state guaranteeing and promoting human rights. For others, it is not time but the peculiar international political and economic context in which sub-Saharan states were born. This context is defined by the pursuit of narrow political and economic interests of powerful countries, which hinder the process of state making in weak states (Sorensen 2001:348-9; Krause 1998:32). For Kaldor (2000:4), it is the twin processes of globalisation and privatisation that undermine security in weak states. Globalisation and privatisation lead to corruption and clientelism, which in turn erode the tax revenue base of the state and consequently its monopoly of violence. The net result is the emergence of ‘organised violence, vigilantes, private security guards, and party-affiliated paramilitary groups’.

The privatisation of violence in sub-Saharan Africa is a symptom of the weakness of the state; as such it is the most formidable challenge to SSR in the region. As far as improving the provision of public security for citizens remains the central security predicament in the region, addressing the roots of private violence and enhancing state regulation of the private sphere must be seen as crucial concerns for SSR. Domestic and external efforts at promoting the goals of SSR in the region must therefore begin with helping the region to make that vital transition from weak to strong states. At the domestic level, state elites need to re-engage the social forces which have disengaged from the state as a result of unmet expectations. This can be done only through improved service delivery, particularly in the areas of protection, access to justice, income generation and job creation. This is particularly crucial for the marginalised majority of the population and vulnerable groups. In areas where the state is unable to provide this protection, it must be willing to co-opt and support informal institutions provided that it firmly regulates the activities of such groups.
The redirection of resources and expertise also requires greater attention, although this issue has been over-emphasised to no great effect. Police services in most African states are corrupt, under-equipped and still lack the professionalism to command popular confidence and respect. Even though inter-state conflicts are almost obsolete on the continent, governments still spend far more on the defence sector than on internal policing. A crucial need is to bolster the capacity of the state to tackle social exclusion which drives crime, fosters the de-legitimisation of the state and helps to create parallel systems. Patrimonial politics and official corruption have been endemic features of politics in Africa, and they are the key drivers of inequality and social exclusion. Privatised violence as a survival mechanism will not go away unless a more equitable distribution of the common wealth becomes a high priority for African leaders.

The African Union and the African Peer Review Mechanism of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development have a key role in influencing African leaders to tackle social inequality. This is important because neo-patrimonial politics allows leaders to shore up their power base, which they may not be willing to compromise through the redistribution of wealth. The Peer Review Mechanism provides a diplomatic vehicle for good practices to spread within the region, even though it is a voluntary process and there are no guarantees that state elites would always accept its moral authority.

The international community also has crucial roles to play in building the capacity of the state in Africa to deliver human security. The dwindling share of Africa in global trade has further weakened the strength of the states in the region. A more sincere approach to the international conflict prevention efforts in Africa would be to enhance the revenue base of its states by fast-tracking negotiations for fairer trade. The international community can also help in the fight against corruption and patrimonial politics. A much bolder approach to international assistance that encourages transparency on the part of partner countries on the continent is essential in dealing with corruption. However, more often than not, it is the pursuit of narrow political and economic interests of powerful nations that encourages the impunity of corrupt leaders in Africa. The donor community has a responsibility to ensure that development assistance (including SSR assistance) to Africa is not diverted into the pockets of state elites or exploited to weaken state bureaucracies in order build their personal power base. Development assistance must try to help liberate state bureaucracies from patrimonial politics in order to make capacity building result in effective delivery of human security and development objectives.

The governance of the security sector in Africa must take account of the root causes of the growth of the informal security sector and the dangers it holds within the context of state weakness. Unless SSR is designed within, or builds upon, a broader agenda of transforming sub-Saharan states into stronger states as a necessary condition for human security and development, the weakness of state structures will continue to provide the space for privatisation of violence and insecurity for their citizens.

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Endnotes

1 A more focused work on the distinction between the commercial and the informal sub-divisions of the privatisation of security can be found in Ero (2000).

2 Max Weber’s ideal type of the state is a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Gerth & Wright Mills 1946:76).

3 The concept of transition from private to public monopolies is borrowed from Kaldor (2000:3).

4 Interview with the Director of Nyanga Police Station, Cape Town, in November 2005.

References


