

The Political Topography of Private Security in Sub-Sahara Africa: Data from South Africa and the DRC

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This paper aims to question the way in which the privatization of security in contemporary African states should be understood. It brings to bare on this discussion data derived from fieldwork in South Africa and the DRC, and specifically argues that we should investigate ‘security assemblages’, that is, local security formations made up of networks of transnational, local, private, public, formal and informal actors. For one, assemblages involving private security companies in urban settings of one country in no way resemble those surrounding resource extraction sites in the same national territory. The paper specifically focuses on the way in which formal private security companies shape and are part of such assemblages. It highlights two aspects of this dynamic: firstly, how private security companies are an essential part of postcolonial state formation—they are key to upholding economic activity central to regime/government revenue—and second, how private security companies uphold and enforce rules that are conditioned by external preferences or regimes. They are furthermore often global players themselves, bringing corporate governance rules into local regulatory contexts. The case of security privatization thus underscores how understanding contemporary African security complexes needs to focus both on ‘local’ or national political dynamics but also global actors and players.