Introduction

The role of a democratic parliament, apart from legislating, is to ensure oversight on behalf of the respective voters. Over the years the functions of legislation have been effectively undertaken in most parliaments, be they democratic or quasi-democratic. This is because in most countries, not only in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, legislative process starts with the executive and parliaments usually act as a rubber stamp, passing into law what is proposed by the government. There are various reasons for this, but a full discussion on the issue is beyond the limits of this paper. Be that as it may, the oversight role has always lagged behind.

This paper will look into the various factors that hinder this critical role and will examine what can be done to empower parliamentarians to undertake an oversight function, which is central to their very purpose of being ‘representatives’.

The paper will further look at the oversight role drawing from various parliaments, both inside and outside the Commonwealth, narrowing this eventually to the SADC region. We shall also focus on the experience of the SADC Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF), an organ representing over 1,800 parliamentarians in the SADC region and which is currently in the processes of being transformed into a full-fledged parliamentary structure.

Basic conditions for oversight

The democratic, civilian oversight of a state’s security forces is essential for the effectiveness of the security sector. Furthermore, the much lauded principle of ‘good governance’ is a by-product of parliamentary and civil oversight of the functions of the executive.

Today, more than ever, the world is conscious of the protection of human rights, and without any exercise of the oversight role, there is a danger, to different degrees, of the security and the military overstepping their mandates into civilian rights, however subtle this may appear to be. This paper will
therefore review accountability mechanisms concentrating on the oversight by the parliament. Indeed:

- Exercise of the oversight role presupposes the existence of a good, democratically enacted constitution and subsequent domestic, regional and/or internationally accepted treaties and relevant protocols. In a country or situation where there is no democratically posited constitution, it would be difficult to conceptualise even the possibility of an oversight role. A good number of SADC countries have democratic constitutions, and those that are just emerging from civil war are in the process of putting in place democratic institutions, including constitutions.

- The said constitutions basically recognise major tenets of democracy – that is, the principle of separation of powers. Recognition of the need for checks and balances between the three pillars of the state – that is, the executive, the judiciary and the legislature – is a prerequisite for the exercise of an oversight role, be it inside and or outside parliament.

- The existence in a respective country and/or region of democratic governance presupposes a strong multiparty structure and consequently a strong opposition in the house or chambers, as the case may be. The existence of a strong multiparty structure in and of itself is a significant factor in terms of checks and balances. It therefore plays a powerful oversight role – in the case of security issues, both in the house and/or in the standing parliamentary committees – leading to vigorous debates in these structures. As a general principle, a proactive, well-resourced, bipartisan parliamentary committee should be effective in examining all aspects related to the security branch of the executive. Many parliaments in the region are, however, generally constrained in expertise, resources and capacity.

- The existence of well structured, all encompassing Standing Orders governing the proceedings in the house and/or chamber are essential. These Standing Orders give all members of parliament (MPs), irrespective of their party size and representation, the ‘right to be heard’ albeit that the majority may still have ‘their way’ in the final democratic decision-making process. Standing Orders should provide equal opportunity to all MPs, the right to question time, adjournment motions, private motions, private members’ bills, and equal speaking time on the floor. When properly utilised these opportunities provide ample possibilities for individual MPs to perform their oversight role. The problem, however, is the high turnover of new parliamentarians after general elections. These instruments are therefore not well known to MPs, in some cases both old and new MPs. Another problem is the lack of reading culture among many parliamentarians who as a result fail to use the available opportunities provided by the existing instruments, however inadequate they may be.

- Well informed and committed members of the relevant oversight committees – that is, the Public Accounts committees and the Security and
Defence Portfolio committees, as well as any committee by any other name charged with these responsibilities – is required. In order for these committees to perform optimally, a properly trained and qualified parliamentary staff is needed. Efforts should always be made to avoid factors that have a negative impact, such as the appointment of members into oversight committees based on personal contacts or pecuniary considerations, rather than on pure merit. One may have to assess the situation. In Nigeria committee chairmen are appointed by the senate president in consultation with the senate party leaders who are the main players; and the effectiveness of the committees depends on them. In fact, there is much conjecture that “many chairmen were appointed on the basis of loyalty rather than related experience”. Evidently, the selection of competent and qualified members to the oversight committee will enhance the effectiveness of the oversight function of such a sensitive sector. This lesson should be a major challenge to all parliaments in the SADC region.

- It is essential that conditions are conducive to the flourishing of both print and electronic media, supported by good media laws. Investigative journalism is an effective tool of civic oversight, complementary to other watchdog organs. These are also usually a good source of preliminary information to MPs. It is not only the number of newspapers and journals that matters, but also the quality of journalism in any given situation.

Civil–military relations

Broadly speaking, the security and defence sector is meant to include military and the paramilitary forces, the intelligence services, the police force, border guards, customs and immigrations services. These are broadly grouped as the military services, depending on the specific national legislation. Security services are as old as the states themselves and, indeed, function the world over. While differing in scope and accountability, they have in common a mode of operation and a mandate to ensure internal and external security. To a certain degree it is this mandate that makes their operations rather secretive.

It must be noted that lack of security for any state or for its citizens is a major obstacle not only to the life and identity of the particular nation state, but more so to its development. It has been rightly stated that: “… if states are to create conditions in which they can escape from a downward spiral wherein insecurity, criminalisation and under-development are mutually reinforcing socio-economic, governance and security dimensions must be tackled simultaneously.”

It is also true that the security and defence organs are the biggest consumers internationally of the larger proportion of national budgets. Yet, this is done under circumstances of strict secrecy and confidentiality and normally under the pretext of national security interests. In most countries security and defence
organs’ budgets are not openly debated on the floors of national assembly chambers, except perhaps for trivialities.3

Oversight therefore plays a critical role in containing any abuse, misappropriation, and even decisions that may not be largely in the interests of the respective nations, despite their *prima facie* appearance. A positive trend, however, has been set in the case of the South African Parliament’s Committee Chairman, Tony Yengeni, although its effectiveness was put to test when it was over-ruled by the Deputy Defence Minister Ronnie Kasrils, who insisted that “certain military information should remain confidential”. One wonders, whether this should be the case even to the representatives of the people, and in particular to people who have taken an oath of service, such as parliamentarians.4 The same resilience to transparency was also shown by Defence Minister Joe Modise who in August 1997 attacked the press for trying to publish details of a proposed large arms sale to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.5

Alleged high-level corruption in arms deals is, however, currently being investigated by a number of oversight bodies. The Public Accounts Committee has in fact called for an “independent and expert forensic investigation” into claims against the purchase of equipment for the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The oversight bodies have expressed serious concern over the “rather lax provisions for conflict of interest in the tendering process”.6 Also involved are the auditor-general and independent anti-corruption bodies.

The case of South Africa is a positive pointer and a challenge to the entire SADC region. Interestingly, it is not only in developing countries where parliaments seem to be by-passed when it comes to security and defence issues. In the United Kingdom (UK), for instance, the Parliamentary Table Office will not permit questions in the House on MI5 and MI6. The UK and Canada are further known to be the only North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) states where ratification of treaties does not require the formal involvement of the legislature.7 Chairman of the UK’s Defence Committee, Bruce George, said: “… [the] UK has one of the least accountable security and intelligence services in the Western world … unlike the legislatures of other states, Commons select committees have very little formal power”.8 According to George, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan are the only countries with worse committee systems.9

There is a conviction in contemporary society that there ought to be an assurance of accountability and transparency in institutions that have traditionally operated in secret. This feeling is even stronger in the former Eastern satellite states, which were more closed. At a conference held in Helsinki from 30 June to 2 July 1995, hosted by the Centre for National Security Studies and with the theme ‘Security services in civil society: Oversight and accountability’, it was categorically stated that:

“... without such control, the security services will of necessity degenerate. We must find ways to exercise control that will not
inhibit the legitimate operations of the security services, for example in combating drug trafficking. On the other hand, we must limit their operations. Our challenge is to develop controls that are strong but not excessive, controls that will prevent the degeneration of the services and at the same time make it possible for us to live in safety.\(^{10}\)

This is the challenge to the SADC region. As we shall see later in this paper, the situation described above is in many ways similar to that which pertains in our region; hence the need for an oversight role both inside and outside parliament.

**Major intrinsic principles of security and defence organs**

The performance of the oversight function is complex. The most complicated in this respect is the monitoring function, which is exercised by all parliaments in the SADC region at different levels and to different degrees. In the case of the security and the defence organs, this function involves:

• organising open and/or closed sessions for questioning security and defence officials on their respective activities, and in some cases even questioning their intentions and procurement procedures, which are highly complex matters on which parliamentarians may not necessarily be experts;
• undertaking routine or special hearings on any subject on which the government plans to have new legislation on security and defence matters, and in some cases even initiating such reforms through private member motions.
• mandating external independent institutions – a university or any such other think-tank – to carry out research on security and defence sector budgets and activities, owing to a parliamentary oversight committee’s lack of appropriate expertise;
• involving outside organs, such as the ombudsman or human rights commissions, to investigate the human rights records and performance of the security and defence sectors; and
• paying special visits to military units and bases.

Theoretically, and in a truly democratic society, the security and defence organs are expected to observe strictly the following principles:

• *Political neutrality.* The constitutions and/or the basic laws of most countries specify that: “Security and Defence personnel cannot be members of a political party or of any organisation with political tendencies”. The practice, however, indicates that this has not always been the case. The case of Romania, although somewhat extreme, is illustrative: “Since 1989 party politicians were appointed to operational deputy director posts within all of
the services resulting in diminished expertise among the leadership and the inflation of non-professional personnel at other levels”.11

• **Defence of the nation.** Under any multilateral defence agreement, the security and defence of the nation is the prime objective that cannot in any way be substituted. This is the main prerogative of the security and defence departments of each nation state, and likewise of any such regional grouping such as SADC. This prerogative, however, requires a well-funded, highly capable and flexible defence force in which the reserves and the industry play an integral role.

In a consultation process the Australian public expressed their view that “their defence force must be professionally trained, combat-ready, and technologically advanced”. This role has been properly expounded by the report on the White Paper on the defence situation in Australia.12

While looking into issues of accountability, transparency and general oversight issues – whether as individual nations or as a region – SADC cannot afford not to consider these matters.

• Since the functions of the security and defence departments require a certain degree of confidentiality, the departments ought to demonstrate an ability and willingness to manage their resources in an efficient and accountable manner. This is inherent in the very responsibility accorded them. Meticulous implementation of this principle should mitigate a public outcry and in a way minimise the need for detailed scrutiny either by the Parliamentary Committee or by organs of oversight outside of parliament. Unfortunately, in most cases, and in particular in the developing world, experience indicates the contrary due to manifold situations of abuse and excesses in the use of already scarce resources.

• It is generally argued that in most countries, the most immediate threats are not military, but rather illegal immigration, drug trafficking and now terrorism. A new phenomenon, which includes the SADC region, is participation in peacekeeping operations in the region and elsewhere. This includes peacekeeping field training exercises such as the ‘Blue Hungwe’ in Zimbabwe in 1977 and the ‘Blue Crane’ in South Africa.13

However, these operations consume large amounts of local resources and should be subject to strict accountability and transparency. Parliamentary oversight is therefore essential, although this area is relatively new and puts new demands on parliamentarians to be able to perform this function effectively.

**Security and defence in SADC**

The SADC Declaration and Treaty signed by the SADC Heads of State and
Government in Windhoek in 1992, called for:

“…a framework of cooperation which provides for … strengthening regional solidarity, peace and security, in order for the people of the region to live and work together in peace and harmony. The region needs, therefore, to establish a framework and mechanisms to strengthen regional solidarity, and provide for mutual peace and security.”

This statement was followed up with the establishment of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security. It is indeed as a result of this that the then South African President Mandela as the Chair of SADC at that time engaged in an intensive series of regional consultations in an effort to mitigate emergent sources of conflict in Lesotho and Swaziland, as well as assisting in finding solutions to the ongoing humanitarian and political tragedy in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC). Prior to this it is said that SADC leadership was reluctant to exercise regional leadership in issues related to preventive diplomacy and conflict management.14 In fact, according to Mark Malan and Jakkie Cilliers of the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa:

“The greatest deficiency within SADC arguably relates to the absence of integrated systems, processes and methods to deal with the issues of human rights and the advancement of democracy and good governance … This is clearly a contentious issue and one about which many SADC member countries are sensitive, not only due to the fact that a country such as Swaziland is perceived to be non-democratic, while others, such as Angola and Mozambique, are in slow transition from a state of devastating civil war … Countries, such as Zambia and Zimbabwe, have been accused of being undemocratic in election-related practices, while some see South Africa as drifting towards one-party dominance in the absence of an effective political opposition to the ANC … In other countries, such as Malawi and Lesotho, military and paramilitary intervention in politics remains a real threat ….”15

The above situation is complicated even further when it comes to issues of accountability, transparency and oversight. A few pointers to this complicated situation are mentioned below.

The establishment of SADC as well as its various departments and/or organs has been exclusively the prerogative of the executive. At most, parliaments have been involved marginally at the level of ratification where demanded by the nature of the treaty and/or respective protocol. Major decisions are taken by
representatives at the Summit of Heads of State and Government and by the Council of Ministers. There is very limited involvement of the representatives of the population. This is indicative when one looks at the situation in the DRC where it has been reported that: “… SADC allied forces would like to make it clear to the rebels and their allies that once attacked the SADC allied forces will retaliate in self-defence….”\(^\text{16}\) Under these circumstances, one would rightly question where and with what constitutional mandates were the “allied forces established”. In the absence of such explicit mandate, would the exercise of the oversight role be practical or possible?

Major decisions affecting not only the structure of the SADC organs but policy issues of a serious nature in the region, are made without the involvement of parliaments, but even more so implementation of some very strategic programmes, as attested to by the following statement of the foreign affairs ministers: “… that significant progress had been made towards strengthening SADC’s capacity to prevent, manage and resolve conflict in Southern Africa in a peaceful manner.”\(^\text{17}\)

How would a parliamentary committee perform an oversight role of a programme whose source of funding has not been identified and when the components of the programme are not even known to the parliaments of the respective SADC countries? Once recommendations of the Council of Ministers are approved by the Summit, there are no formal channels of transmitting the same to the respective national parliaments. In any case, most Council of Ministers and Summit sessions are held in-camera, as attested to on many occasions by briefs and communiqués.\(^\text{18}\)

The SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security does not seem to foresee any role for parliaments or civil society. Indeed the Organ’s objectives include:

“where conflict does occur, to seek to end this as quickly as possible through diplomatic means. Only where such means fail would the organ recommend that the Summit should consider punitive measures. These responses would be agreed in a Protocol on Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution.”\(^\text{19}\)

It seems from this that the role of parliament does not extend beyond ratification of protocols. Implementation decisions are made by the Summit, even for punitive actions, without recourse or any need for any approvals from the parliaments.

The SADC-PF – an autonomous SADC organ comprising some 1,800 parliamentarians in the region – indicates that in most parliaments, MPs are not familiar with the treaties and protocols, and usually only see them at ratification stage. Even then a whole document is not seen by all MPs, except for those involved in the relevant Standing Committees. Parliamentarians have also indicated that in most cases, even these treaties and protocols have not been
domesticated’ into domestic laws; a matter that further complicates the oversight by the relevant committees of the parliaments, since most members are themselves in the dark.

**Parliaments in relation to the executive**

The above premises are an indication that there is an inherent resistance on the part of the executive to relinquish some of its powers to the legislature. This phenomenon is, however, not limited to the SADC region. Some pertinent examples indicating this tension are given below.

The South African 1996 multiparty constitution states categorically that “… multiparty parliamentary committees must have oversight over all security services in a manner determined by national legislation or the rules and orders of parliament”. It further outlines other mechanisms to be used to exercise accountability and oversight including, *inter alia*, the public protector, the Human Rights Commission and the auditor-general. The powers of the rules and orders of Parliament are categorical and have clearly stipulated the mandate of the committees. The case of South Africa is therefore more flexible and open and creates a positive environment for committees to perform their oversight roles. But in most SADC countries committees remain a ‘rubber stamp’, as their roles are not guaranteed and enshrined in the relevant countries’ constitutions.

Yet even in the South African situation, there is still much to be desired. Committees should be allowed, for instance, to visit military bases and to use the information gathered to advise the executive and parliament on measures to correct a situation. Indeed, oversight involves monitoring, investigation and recommendations to the executive.20

Dr Green of the University of Bradford explains that even in well established democracies there are still imperfections pertaining to the control of the security sector. The British House of Commons, for example, has limited oversight of the British security sector, and the one limit it enjoys is as recent as the 1970s. In many cases where parliament enforces its oversight capacities, the executive sets up new bodies to circumvent legislative authority. Yet, as Swiss MP Gross puts it, democracy cannot be a gift; people have to fight for it, and oversight both inside and outside parliament is part and parcel of the democratic process.21

Oversight is not a goal in and of itself, rather it is meant to hold government accountable and to oversee that a balance exists between the security sector and society by aligning the goals and needs of the security sector with the goals and needs of the political leaders (society). Legislatures in most countries tend to be weak in relation to the executive. Yet, an effective mechanism is a prerequisite for parliaments to perform effectively and efficiently, without which they are not likely to act in the interests of society as a whole; and this role is performed
through oversight. Bruce George holds that: “the committees are weakened further, by too many members being dead-weights and only one or two members being heavy-weights … [the] appointment of members and even chairmen, through the committee of Selection, is a rubber stamp for the party whips”. In most SADC countries chairmen are indeed directly elected by the members, and this situation therefore does not quite arise. It is nevertheless essential to have capacity-building programmes for parliamentarians and respective committees. In fact, an inventory of organisations supporting these programmes is available online.22

To date, no single set of norms for civil–military relations exists, yet in a democratic society the following main principles should be applied to civilian oversight. Dr Hans Born classifies these as follows:23

• Parliament is sovereign and hence has the last say in security and defence policy. Parliaments hold the government accountable for development, implementation and review of security and defence policy.
• Parliament has a unique constitutional role in the authorisation and scrutiny of defence and security expenditures as well as in declaring states of emergency and states of war.
• The state is the only organisation in society with legitimate monopoly of force. This is delegated to the military, and the military must therefore be accountable to the democratic legitimate authority.
• Principles of good governance and rule of law are valid for all branches of government and this includes the security sector.
• Political and military leaders must be committed to a healthy division of labour, that is, political leaders must interfere as little as possible in military decision making and vice versa.
• The military should be considered exclusively as an instrument of national and foreign security policy.

Generally, both inside and outside the SADC region, the effectiveness and power of parliament in relation to the executive in a specific country depends on a variety of factors, such as the constitutional structure of the state (presidential or parliamentary), the influence of interest groups, the political parties, the functioning of parliamentary committees and the dynamics of the government’s policy sector, which parliament ought to oversee.

The SADC-PF experience and its contribution to oversight

As stated above, the SADC-PF is an organ of SADC. It is, however, very special in its nature as it consists of the elected representatives of the people of the SADC region. Its composition is made up of all the presiding officers of the region as well as three representatives elected by the national parliaments. The SADC-PF’s constitution makes it mandatory for its composition to include a
member from the opposition and a female member. The Forum is presently in
the process of transforming itself into a fully fledged regional parliamentary
structure.

The SADC-PF has been in existence for seven years and has noted the
following:
• A number of regional treaties and protocols, including trade, security and
defence, and communication have been signed. A number of programmes
are already being implemented, spending taxpayers’ money from each of
the member states.
• Decision making is exclusively dominated by the executive, and the majority
of the population in the entire region are kept at bay and almost in the dark,
apart from scant pieces of information in the press.
• Even representatives of the population in the region (MPs) are largely
uninformed and are hardly ever involved in the various processes, except
when required to ratify treaties and protocols. A number of countries are in
fact lagging behind in the ratification process, and almost all fall short of
domesticating even the ratified protocols.
• Accountability and transparency would not be possible if decisions and
implementation of the same are left to the executive, without properly and
legally establishing oversight organs.
• The SADC-PF in its present structure would not be able to implement the
oversight role, in the fullest sense, without a representative structure.

It is for this reason that the SADC-PF is earnestly working towards its
transformation into a regional parliament. While this process is on course, the
Forum has taken some provisional steps to avert this situation and to institute,
at a lower scale, an enabling environment for the said oversight function of the
regional parliament. The SADC-PF has:
• undertaken capacity-building programmes for regional parliamentarians,
Forum staff as well as the staff of MPs. A number of capacity-building
training programmes have already been initiated in collaboration with
funding partners such as the UNDP, the Parliamentary Centre of Canada,
AWEPA and USAID;
• established an information technology (IT) department as a support service
to MPs and individual parliamentarians in the region with a view to making
information readily accessible and available to MPs. The Forum has provided
computers to parliaments according to their IT status and needs;
• prepared a handbook on standard electoral norms and practices to be
adopted by each national parliament for use in the region as a standard
document to gauge good governance, free and fair elections, and other
related good practices. The Forum is currently collating various pieces of
legislation in the region with a view to preparing harmonised legislation for
use in the region; and
is currently working on the establishment of a leadership centre which will provide various tailored training programmes to the 1,800 MPs and parliamentary staff in the region with a view to building their capacity.

The SADC-PF is already making an impact, albeit in a small way at present, and will contribute significantly to the oversight function in the region once it is fully operational as a regional parliament.

### Conclusion

Challenges facing oversight of the security sector exist not only in the SADC region, but the world over. The main problem of parliamentary oversight is to find the dividing line between parliamentary oversight and executive control. Parliaments should avoid ‘micro-managing’ the security sector, yet government must respect parliament’s constitutional duty to keep the executive accountable: a very delicate balance indeed.

In practical terms, this balance means that government must avoid excessive and unnecessary secrecy regarding security sector issues and must guarantee that parliament has access to all relevant information.

Parliaments have the constitutional duty to enact new laws for the security services in which the mandate, functioning, mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and financial control of the services must be inbuilt to avoid potential conflict and misunderstanding. A single critical function of parliament is to monitor the executive. Although not practiced in young democracies, and particularly not in the SADC region, this must be extended to include screening the mandate, operations, organisation and funding of the security sector. The ‘Collins Submarine’ case is a pointer to endemic problems in the nature of defence procurement, and this can be avoided with early intervention by parliamentary and civic oversight. In fact the report concludes:

> “... the most critical deficiencies in the management of these circumstances lie in the mechanisms of higher level national policy making to review inherently risky approaches at a stage sufficiently early to influence the direction of procurement programmes. What is now needed are procedures to ensure that parliamentary scrutiny and public accountability can play a role in such mechanisms.”

### Notes


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid, p 361.

7 Ibid.


9 Ibid, p 40.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.


15 For details see [http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/papers19/paper 19.html].


17 Ibid.


19 See [http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/monographs/no43/SADC.Organ.html].

20 For South African experiences see [http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/ASR/10no1/Nguculu.html].

21 Ibid.

22 See [http://www.dcaf.ch/pcaf/virtuallibrary/pcaflinks.html].


24 Ibid.