CHAPTER 2
WEAK STATES AND THE GROWTH OF THE PRIVATE SECURITY SECTOR IN AFRICA: WHITHER THE AFRICAN STATE?
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Introduction

In recent years, specialised private companies have proliferated and expanded within the global security arena. They offer military and police services that were previously the preserve of the state. This phenomenon has changed the traditional role of the state dramatically in that it affects the state’s traditional monopoly on the means and resources of violence that distinguished it from all other social formations. More ominously, this trend occurred in tandem with mercenary activities’ taking on a corporate form and fishing in the troubled waters of Africa. The danger posed by these private military and police forces is that they operate beyond the realm of legal accountability and public oversight, thereby threatening the state within which they operate, as well as its citizens. Even worse, because these private forces are available for hire, they sell their services to whoever can afford them. In this way, they constitute a serious security risk in Africa.

This chapter looks at the reasons for the proliferation and expansion of the private security sector in Africa and focuses on how the rulers of weak states have contributed in this regard since the end of the Cold War. It addresses the neglected issues of ‘comprador states’ and the phenomenon of ‘imperialism by invitation’. The focus on weak states as a factor in the proliferation and growth of the private security sector is significant in the context of the current ‘securitisation’ of Africa, that is, the context of defining Africa as a security risk and a zone of conflict. This discourse entered the centre of international politics following the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in the United States when weak states were immediately factored into security analyses as terrorist abodes. Weak states as abodes of private military forces is not emphasised in this discourse despite posing an apparent threat to Africa’s security.

The weak African state is not an innocent political formation that requires humanitarian rehabilitation. Conceptualised from a security perspective it is a dangerous phenomenon. The rulers of weak African states have engaged in all sorts of complex survival techniques, including inviting into Africa those companies that sell military skills to the highest bidder. In a bid to outwit their
competitors at power games, leaders of weak states, such as Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Angola, have wilfully transformed their states into what one would term comprador regimes, that is, regimes that do not care about the welfare of their citizens but that serve as agents of foreign interests and foreign businesses (Rodney 1982:12–18). Closson (2006:1) conceptualises the weak state in security terms as ‘an arena for the operations of trans-territorial networks locked in a struggle for resources’. In weak states, sovereignty is highly contested ‘given that the weak state is an arena for local and global actors’. Sovereignty ‘belongs to many and is loosely sanctioned’ (ibid). In this scenario, rulers of weak states are actively engaged in what Michael Doyle (1986:8–12) terms ‘imperialism by invitation’ in that they openly invite powerful private military companies (PMCs), such as the now defunct Executive Outcomes, to help them deal with local rivals who, in turn, may have their own foreign connections and backing.

A traditional argument concerning weak states is that the ‘First World’ is complicit in the weakening of the ‘Third World’. This argument has dominated the analysis of global arms sales, debates on proxy wars waged by the superpowers during the Cold War, current economic debates on the protectionist policies of developed countries in the agricultural sector, and debates on international organisations and transnational corporations implicated in bribing scandals in developing countries. This approach is sympathetic to weak states and presents them as victims of external manipulation while ignoring the dangerous agency of the leaders of these states, and in particular, how they invite private military forces to operate in Africa and engage in African conflicts. Weak states cannot be regarded merely as orphans of the Cold War who are falling prey to the machinations of PMCs and private security companies (PSCs) or as victims of powerful global forces that sap their strength deliberately and compromise their sovereignty and stability in order to exploit resources such as minerals and oil. Robert Rotberg (2002:127) has noted the following:

Failure and weakness can flow from a nation’s geographical, physical, historical, and political circumstances, such as colonial errors and Cold War policy mistakes. More than structural or institutional weaknesses, human agency is also culpable, usually in a fatal way. Destructive decisions by individual leaders have always paved the way to state failure.

The importance of Rotberg’s argument is that it captures the often-ignored human agency and the role of leaders, such as Siaka Steven of Sierra Leone, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Mohamed Siad Barre of Somalia,
in the weakening of their states. These leaders were responsible for the instrumentalisation of disorder that opened the gates for private military forces to intervene in their countries. If weak states were ever victims of powerful forces that compromised their sovereignty and stability, they must be understood as willing victims presided over by weak but cunning leaders who were able to operate within complex global commercial networks for personal interest, personal gain and regime security. These complex global commercial networks include inviting PMCs into Africa to prop up failing regimes. In this way, weak states and their weak leaders are a major cause in the proliferation and growth of private military forces in Africa. A look at the survival strategies of many leaders of weak states therefore constitutes another avenue for explaining why the private security sector has grown so rapidly in Africa since the end of the Cold War.

The overarching theoretical framework that informs the present analysis is that of the post-modernist constructivist turn in international relations theory, in terms of which structures and agents are viewed as constantly reconstructing and reconstituting each other. Both structures and agents/actors need not be taken for granted but deserve close attention (Biersteker & Weber 1996:31–32). In this paradigm the state is not understood as a given, pre-ordained political structure, but is conceptualised as existing as a paradox, subverted by violence and issues of identity as well as power (Ashley 1987). Statecraft is therefore not studied as a unitary actor, but as an arena of conflict in which a variety of actors and forces impact on the authority over the state, in the process affecting the level of control the government has within the territorial boundaries of the state (Ashley 1988). This approach is useful in facilitating what Cynthia Weber (1998) terms ‘sovereignty that is at the mercy of being simulated by state elites and regimes for purposes of survival’.

This article is organised in five sections. The first section is the introduction that sets the parameters of the issues under discussion. The second section provides the background, highlighting in generic form the factors that fuel the proliferation and growth of the private security sector. The third section focuses on the pertinent issue of the ‘securitisation’ of Africa in the discourse of the War on Terror that engulfed the world following the 9/11 disaster. The theory is commonly associated with what Rita Abrahamsen (2005) terms the ‘Copenhagen School of International Relations Theory’ (the Copenhagen School). There is a need to engage with this theory because it ends up reviving the dangerous and racist argument of seeing Africa as offering nothing but chaos, risk and threats to the supposed ‘peace zones’ of North America and Europe. It ends up justifying the proliferation of the private security sector as a saviour entity serving a continent that is supposedly still in a pre-industrial
age and that is existing in a Hobbesian state of nature where life is nasty, short and brutal. The fourth section grapples with the meaning of the weak state and the dominant discourse on this phenomenon. The fifth section deals with weak states as comprador regimes that wilfully invite the private security sector into Africa. In this section, I deal with the agency of the rulers of weak African states in inviting and using private security forces to maintain power. The concluding section picks up the argument of Michelle Small (2006) that the de-monopolisation of violence by the state contains inherent catastrophic dangers in terms of control, transparency and accountability of the security sector in general as it projects the implications of proliferation and growth of private security on the African state and African security architecture.

A comment on the methodological challenges involved in researching the connections between the phenomenon of proliferation and growth of the private security sector vis-à-vis the phenomenon of weak states is in order here. Firstly, the networks and linkages between weak states and private military firms form part of clandestine economic-military systems that are highly secretive - like all military operations. Secondly, the activities are largely covert, take place outside the law (making them very difficult to investigate), and are dominated by willing victims and willing perpetrators. Weak but cunning African leaders and rebel leaders, such as the late Jonas Savimbi of Angola and warlords such as Charles Taylor of Liberia, are intricately linked to the actions of private military firms in Africa. Thirdly, the linkages are constructed behind the façade of formal statehood. This means that for one to engage in an empirical investigation of this phenomenon, there is need for an extended stay in the state under study to observe the happenings at close range and to win the trust of the people before engaging in interviews. It is similar to investigating such criminal activities as gambling and prostitution where there are willing victims, and requires a combination of journalistic and historical methodologies to unlock the complexities involved. Since I have not yet done fieldwork, this article provides a conceptual and theoretical framework while introducing the neglected issue of how weak states and weak leaders are a serious factor in the invitation to mercenaries and private security forces to operate in Africa.

Background

Many scholars have examined how the end of the Cold War left numerous African states in a very weak position, having been abandoned by their Cold War godfathers and patrons. Some of the African leaders who, because of
external support, seemed to be managing to control and even to suppress internal threats to their power were suddenly left alone, bereft of internal legitimacy but also unable to eliminate or manage military challenges posed by armed local strong men as well as vocal civil society. During the Cold War, it was easy for weak leaders and their weak states to solicit loans and diplomatic and military support based on ideological orientation. With the end of the Cold War support for weak regimes in Africa dwindled drastically, exposing many African states to conflict (Jackson 1990; Migdal 1988; Michaels 1993; Ayoob 1995).

The end of the Cold War inaugurated what has been popularly termed the ‘third wave of democracy’, characterised by long-serving African politicians being challenged by civil society to democratise and one-party regimes crumbling under the challenge from political figures riding the democratic wave (Huntington 1993). Countries like Somalia, Sierra Leone and Liberia crumbled into what became known as ‘failed states’ with various strong men fighting each other for power while tearing the whole state edifice into chaos and disarray. The question here is how some of the rulers of weak states tried to survive in the post-Cold War environment where there was little external support. William Reno (1997a:166) notes that the most hard pressed regimes reworked new ties with outsiders, especially Cold War clandestine commercial ties, to manage and manipulate outsider’s demands, rather than succumb to the ‘failed state’ paradigm. It was within this negotiation of new ties that the phenomenon of the private security sector intervened in Africa to fill the so-called capacity. This gap was opened by the weak states whose rulers needed protection from internal opponents and could not trust local military forces. According to Reno (1997a:167):

Rulers of some weak states use creditor demands to privatise state agencies and liberalise markets as excuses to hire foreign firms that field mercenaries. These foreign soldiers serve the joint interests of foreign firms and weak states’ rulers to control resources and deny them to independent strongmen.

What this indicates is that the post-Cold War international economy has resources that it deploys strategically in connivance with the weak but cunning leaders of weak African states. It is, therefore, important to theorise the concept of the weak state in the context of the search for security, and how the rulers of these states manage to construct such complex networks with foreign firms. It was within this politics that some African leaders deliberately mortgage African natural resources while using the security
firms’ military support to suppress political competitors and to procure weapons to sustain their weak regimes.

The Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), in a background paper on PMCs (DCAF 2006), tried to answer the question of why there is a market for PMCs. It provides general answers to the effect that in the case of weak states, private military forces intervened to compensate for lack of national capacity. PMCs offer high-tech skills in domains where national armed forces can no longer afford to train personnel or create attractive career opportunities. For example, in 1994 the president of Congo-Brazzaville hired a private military provider, Levdan, from Israel to provide security while he was busy dismantling those units loyal to the former president.

Weak African states and their leaders played a major role in facilitating the proliferation of the private security sector in Africa. Besides the phenomenon of weak states and weak African leaders, there were other important factors too such as the massive post-Cold war demobilisation of armed forces across the world and the post-apartheid demobilisation of some of the military units that had been active in destructive wars in Southern Africa. Herbert M Howe (1998:307) and Martin van Creveld (1991:32–35) identify four key factors in their explanation of the proliferation of the private security sector in Africa. These are: post-Cold War withdrawal of foreign patronage, the post-Somalia reluctance of the West and the United Nations to intervene militarily in Africa, heightened external demands for economic and political reform, and the changing nature of African insurgencies that have put additional pressure on already weak African governments. Michelle Small (2006:14) argues that

[with] violent challenges from below, from across, from above, and from the military-security apparatus itself, many African governments have turned to the PSI as a means to uphold and defend the state. Destabilising conditions have created a demand and a market opportunity for Private Security Services.

Small then proceeds to analyse the context of the emergence and proliferation of the private security sector and identifies a broad normative shift in international relations towards privatisation and the outsourcing of state functions. She notes that ‘inextricably bound up with the shift in market forces, [is] the growing and glaring malfunctioning and weakening of the state with regard to fulfilling its social contract’ (Small 2006:19).

In a recent article, Sabelo Gumede (2007:1) also grapples with what is termed the ‘marketplace purveyors of armed forces’. He identifies a number
of factors that have facilitated the proliferation of the private security sector in Africa. These include the general human insecurity in Africa and the marketisation of the public sphere.

However, what is more problematic than the reasons for proliferation is the issue of defining PMCs and PSCs. DCAF defines PMCs as businesses that offer specialised services related to war and conflict, including combat operations, strategic planning, intelligence collection, operational and logistical support, training, procurement and maintenance (DCAF 2006:2). Wairagu et al (2004:3) prefer to use the term industry with reference to private security. It is an industry that operates openly in the global market, and is fully organised along corporate lines. Singer (2004:91–93) tries to solve the definition conundrum by means of a classification system of military and security firms based on a hierarchy of services provided by them. He distinguishes between three types of firm: military provider firms (type 1), military consultant firms (type 2), and military support firms (type 3). However, Singer’s classification system does not solve the military versus security dichotomy, hence my preference for the more neutral term ‘private security sector’ to designate both PMCs and PSCs.

PMCs and PSCs share a common, distinguishing feature with mercenaries in that both are motivated primarily by imperatives of profit rather than political reasons. Secondly, both groups are very active in areas where there is conflict. This means that they make profit out of conflict and crisis. Previously, those forces that were motivated by the imperatives of personal gain were designated as mercenaries (Musah & ‘Kayode Fayemi 2000; Cilliers & Mason 1999; Arnold 1999). Holmqvist (2005:3) has argued that ‘[d]istinguishing contemporary private security actors from their mercenary forerunners is at once a complex and a straightforward task’. It is important to point out that mercenary activity is illegal under both the 1989 International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries and the 1977 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) -now African Union (AU) -Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa. However, both the United Nations (UN) and the AU definitions are vague with the AU convention specifically pointing to mercenary activity aimed at overthrowing governments and recognising liberation movements.1 PMCs and PSCs are not covered in these conventions. What is clear is that PMCs and PSCs operate like other ordinary commercial company with a corporate structure, legal status and corporate ties. Furthermore, many PMCs and PSCs operate as part of large industrial conglomerates that are capital intensive, benefit from a regular system of financing and operate in the international arena.
Private military forces today do not like to be described as mercenaries and make a strong argument that they act out of patriotic concern and a desire to maintain peace. This standpoint was clearly articulated by Eeban Barlow, the Director of Executive Outcomes, who stated: ‘Our company’s role in Sierra Leone—as it was in Angola—is to give support to a country moving towards democracy. No one could dispute the fact private military companies were a stabilizing factor in Africa’ (Hooper 1996:45). What is notable here is how PMCs strive to portray themselves as agents of peace, stability and democracy in Africa rather than mercenaries. In search of legitimacy and acceptance, they focus on making a quick impact by pushing rebels out of cities and areas with strategic minerals. Their quick victories are used to advertise their services.

The War on Terror and the securitisation of Africa

The issue of weak states and contemporary global security is widely discussed but mainly in the context of the US’s global War on Terrorism. Africa is factored into the US security analysis as a continent with the highest number of weak states conducive to terrorist operations. This point was explicitly argued by Robert I Rotberg (2002:127) when he wrote that

... [i]n the wake of September 11, the threat of terrorism has given the problem of failed nation-states an immediacy and importance that transcends its previous humanitarian dimension ... Although the phenomenon of state failure is not new, it has become much more relevant and worrying than ever before. In less interconnected eras, state weakness could be isolated and kept distant. Failure had fewer implications for peace and security. Now, these states pose dangers not only to themselves and their neighbours but also to peoples around the globe.

In this argument Rotberg is joined by Francis Fukuyama (2004:92), who wrote that ‘since the end of the Cold War, weak and failing states have arguably become the single-most important problem for international order’. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reiterated this train of thought when she declared that nations incapable of exercising ‘responsible sovereignty’ had ‘a spill over effect’ taking the form of terrorism, weapons proliferation, and other dangers (Garfinkle 2005:47–50). This thinking was influenced by the operations of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (Patrick 2006:27). Weak states are discussed alongside failing and failed states. Writing about the dangers posed by these types of states, Marina Ottaway and Stefan Mair (2004:1) had this to say:
Failing and failed states present a grave danger to international stability as well as to the well-being of their populations. Internationally, they can become safe havens for terrorist organisations, centers for trade of drugs and arms, and breeding grounds for dangerous diseases. Regionally, they can spill instability well past their borders and create a conflict dynamic affecting neighbouring countries. Domestically, they cannot provide security for their citizens or deliver essential public goods.

This characterisation of weak, failing and failed states and the dangers they pose was done in relation to the security concerns of the West who were said to be ‘poorly prepared to deal with [these]’ (ibid). The main weakness in the argument that connects weak states with global terrorism is that the security of Africa itself is not emphasised. What is emphasised is the security of Western nations. This was clearly noted by Rita Abrahamsen (2005:65–67) when she argued that Africa was being framed as a security threat to the West. Abrahamsen engaged with the crucial issue of how since 9/11 the Copenhagen School, with its emphasis on security as the outcome of specific social processes like underdevelopment and poverty, came to be espoused by the West and America when engaging with African issues. Traditionally, Africa was regarded as a humanitarian and a development problem, but after 9/11, Africa became a risk continent in a globalising world. Abrahamsen terms this ‘the politics of securitization of Africa, concretized through securitizing speech acts’, such as like former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s definition of Africa as a ‘scar on the conscience of the world’ (Abrahamsen 2005:55–80).

Securitisation as understood by the Copenhagen School refers to a specific act of speech in which an issue is framed as an ‘existential threat’ that requires extraordinary measures, beyond the routines and norms of everyday politics. Buzan et al (1997:26) note that the ‘existential threat’ is dramatised and presented as an issue of supreme priority. The clearest example of the construction of a security threat is the American and British military intervention in Iraq against Saddam Hussein. In Africa the dramatisation is summarised as ‘terror thrives in Africa’s rich ruins’, which encapsulates the Western presentation, perception and narration of anything happening in Africa in terms of a threat to security (Abrahamsen 2005:65–70). In this discourse Africa is seen as a free trading zone for the underworld and constituting a threat to the Western and American zones of peace.

Huysmans (1998:569–589) makes the point that securitisation is not merely a question of representation, nor a symbolic act, but has clear political
implications. For instance, identifying Africa as a security issue is not an innocent practice because it changes the mode of engagement between the rich North and Africa. If approached as a security issue, Africa may encourage fear and unease, precipitating policy interventions of a more militarised and illiberal nature (Abrahamsen 2005:16). In this discourse, Africa is generally viewed like the Arabs and the Arab world-as associated with terror and terrorists.

It is therefore important to avoid securitising Africa in an endeavour to explain how the phenomenon of weak states in Africa constitutes an enticement for PSC and PMC operations. We need to be specific about the aspects of the weak state that make it prone to private military intervention. Furthermore, we must be vigilant against invoking the racist argument that deems weak states, such as Zimbabwe, Somalia, Liberia, Sudan, and DRC, as reflecting the African Hobbesian image of a nature state where there is no order and where citizens live in continual fear and danger of violent death. We also need to be vigilant lest we fall prey to the anti-terrorism mantra that seems to be defining the whole of Africa as a zone of chaos prone to barbarism, anarchy and arbitrary violence.

**Weak African states and the problem of defining state weakness**

Informed by the dominant rational choice model/neo-institutional and ideational paradigms, four broad approaches have been used in the study of weak states and their connection to international security. The neo-institutional approach is akin to the development-inspired ethos that focuses on the institutions within a state and the elite’s ability to govern (Brock at al 2005; Sorensen 2006; Jackson & Rosberg 1982; Clapham 1996). The second approach is the conflict-oriented approach. It focuses on regimes as abusers of the state and is dominant in post-colonial studies of the African state as a weak state (Clapham 1996; Reno 2000a). The third approach is the recent terrorism-inspired approach that attempts to provide a taxonomy of states, ranging from collapsed to strong, in an effort to determine when a state is on the brink of failure (Rotberg 2004). The final approach is the ideational approach that focuses on the state as a legitimate actor that is expected to provide its citizens with security and protection. It assumes state-society cohesion as the foundation of a state’s strength (Buzan 1991; Holsti 1996). All four approaches are compromised by their foundation in the Weberian instrumentalist approach, which causes them to focus more on the symptoms of state weakness than on the underlying causes. Here the concern is with the connections between weak states and the phenomenon of the private security sector in Africa.
The connections between weak states and the proliferation of private security sector in Africa are dangerous, complex and often hidden. The debate is complicated even further because state weakness cannot be taken for granted and is not homogenous throughout Africa. As noted by Rotberg (2002:131), ‘[s]ome rush to the brink of failure, totter at the abyss, remain fragile, but survive.’ He adds:

Weakness is endemic in many developing nations-the halfway house between strength and failure. Some weak states, such as Chad … exhibit several of the defining characteristics of failed states and yet do not fail. Others, such as Zimbabwe, may slide rapidly from comparative strength to the very edge of failure. A few … may suffer vicious, enduring civil wars without ever failing, while remaining weak and susceptible to failure (Rotberg 2002:131).

It is interesting that in his analysis Rotberg includes Zimbabwe as a weak state that is rapidly sliding into failure. Indeed, Zimbabwe is the one country in Southern Africa that has been growing steadily weaker since 1997. The news circulating in private e-mails and some electronic media is that since the beginning of the opposition’s confrontations with President Mugabe’s regime in March 2007, the regime has invited Angolan militias to help it fight the opposition. Even more disconcerting are the rumours of Chinese weapons and Israeli military instructors destined for Harare. If these rumours are true Zimbabwe will soon be using mercenaries to prop up an unpopular regime. An internal conflict between the state and its citizens is brewing in Zimbabwe (Hammar et al 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2006:49–81). So far, the situation in Zimbabwe is subject to too much speculation for one to make any definite link between the weakness of the Zimbabwean state and with the proliferation of the private security sector. What is beyond doubt is that Zimbabwe is today one of the weakest Southern African states with a clear potential to endanger the security of the region.

What needs to be emphasised is the fact that without a clear definition of a strong state it is not readily apparent what a weak state looks like. Rotberg (2002:132) notes that strong states are marked by their capability to control their territories and deliver a high order of political goods to their citizens. Secondly, strong states perform well according to standard indicators such as per capita GDP, the UN Human Development Index, Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, and Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Report. Thirdly, strong states offer a high level of security against political and criminal violence, ensure political freedom and civil liberties, and create an environment conducive to the growth of economic opportunities. Finally, strong states are supposed to be places or zones of peace and order.
After tabulating the key indicators of the strong state, Rotberg (2002:132) proceeds to contrast it with weak and failing states. Weak states are marked by tension, conflict and a perpetual sense of danger. These are some of the additional characteristics of weak states:

- Rise in criminality and political violence
- Loss of control over borders
- Rising ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural hostilities
- Civil war
- Use of terror against their own citizens
- Weak institutions
- Deteriorated or insufficient infrastructure
- Inability to collect taxes without undue coercion
- High levels of corruption
- Collapsed health system
- Rising levels of infant mortality and declining life expectancy
- End of regular schooling opportunities
- Declining levels of GDP per capita GDP
- Escalating inflation
- Widespread preference for foreign currencies
- Basic food shortages leading to starvation
- Rising attacks on fundamental legitimacy
- Rulers working exclusively for themselves
- Key interests groups showing less and less loyalty to the state
• People’s sense of political community weakens and citizens feel disenfranchised and marginalised

• Social contract between the people and the state is ruptured and forfeited

• Animosity becomes the order of life

A failing state and a weak state are one and the same thing. However, a collapsed or failed state is a different social formation altogether and, apart from Somalia, is hard to find. A failed state is a shell of a polity that remains only as a mere geographic expression, with borders but without effective means to exert authority within those borders. Sub-state actors take over what was previously the preserve of the state (Rotberg 2002:133–134). A weak state becomes a medium for the operations of trans-territorial networks locked in a struggle for resources, in which the networks replace legitimate channels of communication (Linz & Stephan 1996).

Patrick (2006:29) also grapples with the issue of defining weak and failing states. He explores weaknesses in the security, political, economic and social domains. In the security realm, he notes that weak states struggle to maintain a monopoly on the use of force. It is this weakness that becomes an enticement for the proliferation and growth of the private military sector.

Atiku-Abubakar and Shaw-Taylor (2003:168–185) carried out what they termed an ‘empirical profile of weak states in Sub-Saharan Africa’. Basing their information on the Minorities at Risk Database (MAR), which is maintained by the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland and supported by the National Science Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the US Institute of Peace, the Hewlett Foundation and the State Failure Task Force, they defined weak states as having a prevalence of structural inequality, the components of which include economic differentiation, cultural (or social) inequality and political inequality. They used this approach to try and predict inter-communal conflict in Africa. Their core argument can be summarised as follows:

[S]tate weakness can be described or captured by measuring structural inequalities within the state … Structural inequality is based on political, cultural and economic differentiation or inequality within states. In other words, political incoherence, ethnic stratification, and the unequal distribution of wealth are the core dimensions of structural differentiation in Sub-Saharan Africa. The proliferation of
small arms and light weapons exacerbates the structural inequalities of these societies. The influx of light weapons or small arms may be seen as an opportunistic social disorder facilitated by domestic structural vulnerabilities and contradictions. In fact, the proliferation of these weapons may be seen as undermining the state’s claim to the monopoly of instrument of coercion or violence (Atiku-Abubakar & Shaw-Taylor 2003:171).

Though prone to making sweeping generalisations about the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa, Atiku-Abubakar and Shaw-Taylor’s attempt to come up with an empirical profile of weak states in Sub-Saharan Africa was important. Ultimately, however, they admitted that ‘the overall construct did not perform well in predicting inter-communal conflict’ (Atiku-Abubakar & Shaw-Taylor 2003:182). The main weakness of their approach is that it became too structural and too statistical as they sought direct correlations between their model and the actual realities of inter-communal conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Chazan et al (1999:66) identified a number of indicators of state weakness around their concept of ‘relative weakness of government’. The key indicators they isolated included scarcity of resources, politicised patterns of social differentiation, over-expanded state structures, insufficient state legitimacy, inadequate state power, and lack of adaptation of institutions to local conditions. Because of these factors, the weak African state is marked by its inability to organise and exploit material and human resources for the benefit of citizens. A weak state is unable to mobilise even its citizens for productive purposes and finally it fails to come up with and implement policies for greater societal growth (Englebert 1997; Dia 1996; Chabal & Daloz 2001). In the face of these weaknesses, leaders of weak African states become dangerously enterprising by issuing an open invitation to PMCs, such as Executive Outcomes, to enable them to hang on to power.

**Weak states, comprador regimes and the private security sector**

As long as weak states exist the efforts to regulate the private security sector in Africa will remain a mammoth task. A closer look at the politics of weak states, and particularly at the survival tactics of the leaders of weak states, reveals the crucial issue of who invites private military forces to operate in Africa. At the time that South African legislation against mercenaries, such as the Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Bill of 1997, began to bite, the founder and director of Executive Outcomes expressed that he was not all
that concerned because ‘[t]hree other African countries [had] offered [them] a home and a big European group [had] even proposed buying [them] out’ (Zarate 1998:11). This statement was very important because it meant that while some African states like South Africa were busy trying to regulate and even abolish companies associated with mercenaries other African states were inviting the same mercenaries to their countries. The emergence of Lifeguard in Sierra Leone immediately after Executive Outcomes was legally challenged and closed in South Africa indicates that Executive Outcomes did not die; it metamorphosed and relocated to Sierra Leone, where it took a new name. Lifeguard was made up of many of Executive Outcomes’ former employees, maintained some of its old corporate ties, and operated in its former zones (Singer 2004:535).

Sierra Leone is one example of a comprador state in that in the face of extreme state weakness, the leaders of this West African country invited Executive Outcomes to the country. The initial deployment of this private military outfit was for the purpose of securing the capital city and mineral areas that were falling into the hands of rebels. Since the arrival of Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone, the leaders of that country have found themselves heavily dependent on shared interests with foreign businesses. This entailed the state being transformed into an agent of foreign imperatives. Michael Doyle (1986) coined the concept ‘imperialism by invitation’ with specific reference to a situation in which leaders of weak states recruit or invite outside help to deal with local rivals. On this topic, William Reno (1997b:182) wrote that: ‘in the era of formal imperialism, partnerships with foreigners centralised power in the hands of the collaborating faction that controlled the distribution of economic opportunity.’

All of this happens as the leaders of weak states use a foreign partnership to compensate for the lack of great-power patronage (Reno 1997b:227). In the period from 1995 to 1996, the Sierra Leonean government depended entirely on private military forces provided by Executive Outcomes as the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) that had been fighting against the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF) were encroaching on the capital city. The fact that after the rebels had been cleared out of the diamonds fields, the beleaguered Sierra Leonean government signed over huge diamond concessions to foreign private firms aligned with Executive Outcomes (for example, Branch Energy), led Herbert M Howe to consider Executive Outcomes a ‘re-colonising force’. This is how he put it: “Recolonisation” involves highly advantageous concessions, support for pro-EO politicians, and the permanent retention of foreign security personnel’ (Howe 1998:318).
In January 1996, the International Crisis Group (ICG) sent a mission to Sierra Leone. It unearthed a myriad of complex links among security firms, mining houses and mining concessions (Harker 1998:2). The mission even concluded that the crisis in Sierra Leone was not the ‘rebel war’ but weak governance and economic mismanagement punctuated by complex involvement of PMCs. Sandline International, a big private security company, was involved in the conflict that pitted President Kabbah against the rebels. It provided weapons and skills to the forces loyal to Kabbah who had been ousted by his own military in May 1997 (Harker 1998:2). Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C Williams, in their recent Country Report on Sierra Leone, note that:

While the recent conflict (1991–2002) provides the immediate context for the expansion of private security provision, the use of private security has a long history in Sierra Leone. As early as 1936 the Sierra Leone Selection Trust, a De Beers subsidiary, was allowed to field a private ‘security force’ of 35 armed men to patrol its diamond concession in the Kono area. Much later, in April 1995, the Strasser government hired the South African Executive Outcomes to fight the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), an arrangement that was continued by President Kabbah until January 1997. Both the extraction of Sierra Leone’s mineral wealth and the survival of its elite have thus historically been crucially dependent on the involvement of international private security actors, a relationship which continues, albeit in different ways, in the current post-conflict situation.

According to the Sierra Leonean Office of National Security (ONS), a government agency responsible for the private security sector, over 30 different PSCs have been operating in Sierra Leone. The companies include Mount Everest, which is the largest and employs approximately 1 600, followed by Pentagon with over a thousand employees, and Hughes Security with 800 employees (Abrahamsen & Williams Report nd).

The example of Sierra Leone indicates how rulers of weak states use apparent weakness as a political resource, standing on its head the Weberian notion that state viability is proportional to its claim on a monopoly on violence (Reno 1997a:184). Sierra Leonean leaders privatised violence and outsourced the accumulation of wealth and the disciplining of wayward politicians and social groups to reliable foreigners. As long as weak states and their weak leaders continue to accommodate foreign financiers and fighters as an alternative security measure, it will remain very hard for Africa to speak with one voice on the issue of regulation of the private security sector. The private security sector is vital to the security of leaders of weak states who
use more reliable foreign mining firms and foreign private mercenary armies to marginalise threatening local strong men.

William Reno (1997b, 1998 & 2000) has ably demonstrated how leaders of Angola and Sierra Leone have used private military forces to collect revenue, defend territory, and conduct diplomacy with other states. The use of private security forces by rulers of weak states forms what Reno (1998:9) terms ‘regime innovations for managing’ internal threats.

**Concluding remarks**

Recent years have seen growing concern over the proliferation and growth of the private security sector in Africa. Africa was familiar with isolated colonial mercenaries who were hired by colonial regimes to fight against liberation movements. Post-Cold War Africa has awakened to the reality of highly organised, corporate type companies that provide military and police services to any entity able to pay for the services. This reality dawned in tandem with the post-Cold War liberalisation and privatisation processes. African states that, like any other state, had enjoyed a degree of control over the means and resources of violence are now challenged directly by the proliferation and growth of the private security sector.

As a result of this development that has caught Africa napping and without a ready legal framework to deal with and regulate it, serious efforts are being made to determine the causes of this proliferation and growth as well as innovative ways to regulate it. The present study focused on how weak states and their rulers have deliberately invited the private security sector to be part of their innovative strategies for survival and compensation for weakness. Even such well known warlords as Liberia’s Charles Taylor, Angola’s Jonas Savimbi and Somalia’s Mohamed Aideed managed to survive through the privatised pursuit of power, mimicking sovereign states within states and entering into complex relations and networks with private providers of military services. They were joined in this business by the recognised heads of weak states who also competed for PMCs’ protection. The leaders of Angola, Sierra Leone, DRC and other weak states are well known for inviting private military forces to prop up their precarious position.

In the face of the reality that some African leaders rely heavily on these private military providers for their survival, the option to abolish the private security sector is ruled out. Sabelo Gumedze (2007:16) noted that for any effective regulation of the private security sector, must be preceded by research to
determine the extent of this sector, the impact of the privatisation of security on vulnerable groups, the advantages and disadvantages associated with the sector, possibilities of partnership between private and public security bodies, the impact of the private security sector on the African security architecture, and the extent of mercenary presence and operations in Africa. This article added the element of how weak states and their rulers invite mercenaries to Africa and how they factor in this sector in their survival tactics and strategies. This is very important because as long as rulers of weak states regard the private security sector as a prop rather than a danger to their power they will not cooperate with efforts to regulate the sector. As long as these customers of the private security sector exist, its proliferation and growth will continue unabated. African leaders need to consider seriously how the existence of weak states constitutes a security issue in Africa, much as Westerners view poverty and underdevelopment in Africa as constituting fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. Countries such as the US and Britain consider the weak or failing African state extremely dangerous to international peace and security. However, African leaders seem unconcerned about weak states as a direct enticement to the entry, proliferation and growth of the private security sector in Africa.

Notes

1 The Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949 provides an exhaustive definition of a mercenary. Its definition contains six criteria: a mercenary is any person who (a) is specifically recruited locally or abroad to fight in an armed conflict; (b) does, in fact, take direct part in the hostilities; (c) is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by desire for private gain and, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that party; (d) is neither a national of a party to conflict nor a resident of a territory controlled by a party to the conflict; (e) is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict; and (f) has not been sent by a state which is not a party to conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces.

2 As Sierra Leone has reconstituted itself and is on the road to recovery from conflict, it has since put in place legislation aimed at regulating the operations of the private security sector.
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