

**Subverting Democracy:  
Private Military Companies**

Carlen MacFarlane

78:280 International Politics

Dr. Richard Baker

May 3, 2022

Concerns about democracy are being raised as global warfare methods are evolving and the world transitions to a new epoch of outsourcing military capabilities to private companies. American academic Robert J. Bunker writes about the transition to a new epoch born from the emergence of an increasingly influential private military industry whose work is largely done in secrecy without public oversight and regulations. He posits that shifting sensitive state military activity to for-profit companies should be understood as a transition to a new era of international relations and an erosion of democratic principles. Outlined here is an exploration of actions taken, consequences, and the implications of the increasing use of private military and security companies (PMSCs) on international relations and state legitimacy in a democratic context. PMSCs are private companies that contract soldiers to perform missions contracted by external sources. Private military companies (PMCs) are often used by states to supplement their own military numbers and bring more specialized skills to the playing field at a far faster rate than regular military deployment.

Democracy, as defined by the Canadian parliament on its website, is where “all eligible citizens have the right to participate, either directly or indirectly, in making the decisions that affect them” (Parliament of Canada n.d.) This means that a true democratic government would be completely transparent about its decisions and if the process is indirect, the citizens would have the ability to hold their elected representatives accountable through democratic processes like elections, referenda, and free expressions of public opinion. A large concern about democratic governments using private military companies is that by contracting large portions of their state’s military powers to non-state actors, the democratic process becomes cloaked in secrecy. By being free from governmental control and oversight, PMCs avoid lots of regulation and public scrutiny; because private military and security companies are also a newer actor in the

international economy, there are few regulations established around PMSCs within most countries and on a global scale as well. How can democracy be upheld when a state is able to bypass the democratic process with contracted private militaries?

Private military contracts are not limited to state usage; larger companies and even wealthy individuals are known to hire private military and security companies. PMSCs can be used for far more than just fighting wars. Companies like the World Wildlife Fund and the Olympics have been known to use PSCs to train guards and provide security (Avant 2006; CBC 2009). Private security companies can be legitimately hired to train or protect a company's employees or protect property. For example, in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, more than half of American soldiers were actually contracted PMC fighters (McFate 2019). In 2018, the Nigerian government contracted private militaries to drive out and get rid of the Islamist terrorist group, Boko Haram (McFate 2019). While these represent legitimate uses of PMSCs, they are not the only ways they can be and are used. PMSCs are often exploited and used in less appropriate ways.

Private security companies are commonly used by industries across Africa to protect desirable resources. Oil and mining companies, for example, are known to use PSCs to protect their harvesting sites and terrorize villages located around targeted lucrative areas. This can be seen with the expulsion of Congolese miners in Angola by private security companies hired by larger diamond mining enterprises (Gordon 2004, 8-9). A large concern about private military and security companies is the power that they hold and the ability for anyone with money to have access to that power as well. How does a state maintain power and control when a private company has the ability to wield comparable military power however they want?

Before making claims about privatized military companies' potential to cause harm to democracy, it is helpful to establish a definition of democracy to understand throughout this paper. The word democracy comes from the Greek words *demos* (“the common people”) and *kratos* (“power; form of rule or government”); democracy roughly translates to “rule by the people” (Annan n.d.). In a liberal democracy, the idea of accountability for the government takes shape in the form of regular elections, opposition parties, and independent officials. The key part of democratic processes working and being true is transparency; a liberal democracy has to have transparency to its constituents in order to continue being a democracy. Some good examples of this are the access to information laws in Canada (Government of Canada n.d.) and the United Kingdom (Information Commissioner’s Office n.d.) that provide all citizens with the “right to access records under the control of government institutions” (Government of Canada n.d.). This ensures that all decisions that affect citizens are publicly accessible and that citizens are able to make fair and informed judgements based on that information when participating in democratic processes.

Along with private military companies, there are also private security companies. PSCs are similar to PMCs in as much as they can both be contracted by anyone – state or non-state actors – and can perform similar tasks. PSCs generally focus more on security and training, while PMCs do a wider range of jobs including those of PSCs. PMCs are most notably contracted for their military uses and niche specialties. These specialties include experts with certain weapons, vehicles, or mission types. In 2015, a group of American ex-military, that were contracting for the private military company Spear Operations Group, was hired by a monarch from the United Arab Emirates to assassinate leaders of an opposition political party in Yemen (Roston 2018). This is a clear breach of democratic values and integrity with very little to no

consequence of note. Private security and military companies are also often contracted to do non-military tasks such as training, hacking, and intelligence gathering. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has, historically, resorted to hiring the help of PSCs to train and protect animals and park guards when endangered species like rhinoceros are being targeted by poachers in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo (Avant 2006).

Democracy's integrity is being stretched further and further from democracy's core principles, and as the line gets tauter, the risk of breaking away from democratic governance increases. A government presses the boundaries of transparent democratic governance when it resorts to outsourcing state-controlled powers to non-state actors like PMCs. Un beholden to the regulations set by a democratically chosen government, private military companies have the freedom to execute their orders however they see fit within whatever guidelines are set in their contract. This allows a government to bypass existing laws and policies, avoid scrutiny, and in turn, have more expedient results, ignoring the ethical and regulatory considerations when hiring PMCs. Private military companies have extremely fast deployment times and are generally advertised by states to be cheaper to hire than using state military resources, making the use of PMCs sound like an ideal option; these statements only serve as facades to cover the reality of the propaganda promoting the privatization of warfighting capabilities and the concerning implications of private military reliance by states.

The growth of private military use in inter-state warfighting has many implications for the future of wars and conflicts. Members of a state military swear an oath to their nation and to upholding its interests. Private military contracted soldiers, on the other hand, swear an oath to have extreme allegiance to their profit-driven organization. While historically, in times of war, countries have relied on nationalism augmented through propaganda to recruit soldiers, states in

the modern-day do not need to bolster nationalism for a keen military. Instead, the state only needs to provide money upfront rather than pay the long-term costs maintaining and providing benefits to regular military soldiers. A private contractor does not give the same employment benefits, or any benefits at all, meaning that the upfront cash is the only investment the hiring entity would pay (Blakely 2006, 26-27). Hiring a private company to fight is an effective way for a state to artificially lower the death rates attributed to its country, manipulating the public perception of conflicts and betraying the transparent foundations of a democratic government. States are able to propagandize statistics by manipulating them with external influences, like contracted lives not counting toward a nation's death rates. As a result, it is able to trick the general public into believing that a certain conflict or war is not as catastrophic as they think.

The use of private security companies is very common among big oil companies and diamond mining companies in Africa. There are very few details actually available about private companies hiring PMSCs because of the covert nature of their operations, trade secrets, and the lack of regulations to compel the disclosure of this kind of information. In 2015, three Angolan anti-corruption activists were sentenced to prison for speaking out against corruption, human rights violations, and peaceful protesting against oil and diamond companies (HRW 2015). One of the activists, journalist Rafael Marques de Morais, writes about corruption, human rights violations, democracy, and private security company abuses in Angola. He reports on incidents that are largely ignored by general media or that likely would not make it out of local headlines. Morais wrote about an incident in April of 2016 where guards wielding machetes from the security company Bicular are seen abusing and torturing a small group of *garimpeiros* ("informal miners"). The security company was hired by *Sociedade Mineira do Cuango*, an established diamond mining company, to crack down on independent mining and protect their sites so that

they could maintain a monopoly on diamond mining in the territory that they occupy (Morais 2016).

When the right to use violence is no longer retained solely by the democratically elected state and is instead controlled by the companies that can afford to challenge power and impose their own desires on citizens through violent means, democracy becomes diluted. Corporations hiring violence and authorizing extreme uses of force circumvents the governmental authority and democratically chosen distribution of power. The more capital and power a company wields, the easier it becomes to bribe or threaten governmental figures to bend to the company's will. This creates corruption that is very difficult to put a cap on once it gets loose. In the extreme, what could result is a modern regression to feudalism - losing democracy and breaking up formerly democratic states into fiefs ruled by the wealthy and their private armies.

While private military and security companies have been used by a large variety of people and entities for a wide range of legitimate uses, there is reason to be concerned with the uses to which they are put, the slow erosion of democratic principles nationally, and harm that will change the global understanding of democracy. It is concerning to think about the potential uses for private militaries outside of the democratic process. When anyone with money is capable of hiring or building their own army with the same capacity as a national military, there is so much potential for misuse, abuse, and corruption. There is no way to predict with certainty whether this new epoch of privatized warfare will result in the end of democracy reducing society to a feudalistic dystopia or will be reigned in and dissipate with heavier regulations worldwide, but there is lots of potential for each of those scenarios to occur. Going forward, it will be important for more international regulations to be put in place for private military and security companies to prevent a more chaotic and violent future and maintain democracy.

## Bibliography

- Abrahamsen, Rita, and Michael C. Williams. 2007. "Securing the City: Private Security Companies and Non-State Authority in Global Governance." *International Relations* 21 (2): 237–53.
- Annan, Kofi. n.d. "Democracy." Council of Europe.  
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy>.
- Avant, Deborah D. 2006. "Private Military Companies and the Future of War." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. 2006.  
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2006/04/private-military-companies-and-the-future-of-war/>.
- Blakely, Gregg. 2006. "Marketized Soldiering: How Private Military Companies Challenge Global Governance, Erode Accountability and Exacerbate Conflict." *Simon Fraser University*, 1–122.
- Bunker, Robert J. 1994. "The Transition to Fourth Epoch War." *Marine Corps Gazette* 78 (9): 20–32.
- Bunker, Robert J., and Pamela Ligouri Bunker. 2016. "The Modern State in Epochal Transition: The Significance of Irregular Warfare, State Deconstruction, and the Rise of New Warfighting Entities beyond Neo-Medievalism." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27 (2): 325–44.
- CBC. 2009. "2010 Olympics Worth \$100M to Private Security Firms." 2009.  
<https://www.cbc.ca/sports/2010-olympics-worth-100m-to-private-security-firms-1.817149>.
- Gordon, Christine. 2004. "Diamond Industry Annual Review: Republic of Angola." Ottawa.  
<https://impacttransform.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Angola-2004-1.pdf>.
- Government of Canada. n.d. "The Access to Information Act."  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/access-information-privacy/access-information-act.html>.
- Grove, Nicole Sunday. 2019. "Weapons of Mass Participation: Social Media, Violence Entrepreneurs, and the Politics of Crowdfunding for War." *European Journal of International Relations* 25 (1): 86–107.
- Gwatiwa, Tshepo T. 2016. "Private Military and Security Companies Policy in Africa: Regional Policy Stasis as Agency in International Politics." *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies* 44 (2): 68–86.
- Human Rights Watch. 2015. "Angola: Rights Activists Face Outrageous Trials." 2015.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/18/angola-rights-activists-face-outrageous-trials#>.
- Information Commissioner's Office. n.d. "What Is the Freedom of Information Act?"  
<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-freedom-of-information/what-is-the-foi-act/#:~:text=The%20Freedom%20of%20Information%20Act%202000%20provides%20public%20access%20to,request%20information%20from%20public%20authorities>.

- Lacher, Hannes. 2003. "Putting the State in Its Place: The Critique of State-Centrism and Its Limits." *Review of International Studies* 29 (4): 521-541.
- Maas, Titia van der. 2009. "Marketing a Defence Doctrine Dominated by Private Military Companies."
- McFate, Sean. 2019. "Mercenaries and War: Understanding Private Armies Today." National Defense University Press. 2019.  
<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2031922/mercenaries-and-war-understanding-private-armies-today/>.
- Morais, Rafael Marques de. 2016. "Machete Torture: More Human Rights Abuses in Diamond-Rich Region." Maka Angola. 2016.  
<https://www.makaangola.org/2016/06/machete-torture-more-human-rights-abuses-in-diamond-rich-region/>.
- Nichols, Tom. 2017. "How America Lost Faith in Expertise: And Why That's a Giant Problem." *Foreign Affairs* 96 (2): 60-73.
- Parliament of Canada. n.d. "Democracy Defined."  
[https://lop.parl.ca/About/Parliament/Education/OurCountryOurParliament/html\\_booklet/democracy-defined-e.html](https://lop.parl.ca/About/Parliament/Education/OurCountryOurParliament/html_booklet/democracy-defined-e.html).
- Petersohn, Ulrich. 2017. "Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), Military Effectiveness, and Conflict Severity in Weak States, 1990-2007." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61 (5): 1046-72.
- Roston, Aram. 2018. "A Middle East Monarchy Hired American Ex-Soldiers To Kill Its Political Enemies. This Could Be The Future Of War." *BuzzFeed News*. 2018.  
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/aramroston/mercenaries-assassination-us-yemen-uae-spear-golan-dahlan>.
- Stinchfield, Bryan T. 2020. "Small Groups of Investors and Their Private Armies: The Ascendance of Private Equity Firms and Their Control over Private Military Companies as Further Evidence of Epochal Change Theory." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 31 (1): 106-30.
- Woodring, Dalton Shane. 2018. "Private Military Companies in Africa: A Study on the Effects of Conflict Duration," 1-53.