Security and party politics in Cape Town

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ABSTRACT

Despite a long academic debate on the patrimonial dimension of the state in Africa and a more recent interest in African political parties, the effect of patronage and party politics on governability in Africa's cities remains poorly addressed in the academic literature. This includes the case in South Africa when one looks at the security sector, which to a certain extent, looks like a depoliticised field of expertise. Popular claims for security seem to be a side issue in the literature on social movements, while vigilante specialists and policing experts do not place party politics at the core of security issue challenges, especially in poor townships. The provision of security in poor neighbourhoods is an important resource in the struggle for political support however. This is examined through two case studies in Cape Town Coloured townships, considering the role played by political leaders, NGO leaders and key officials in grassroots mobilisations for security. These mobilisations are not only about politicking however; 'ordinary members' of local security organisations also get involved for motivations, which have nothing to do with confrontational party politics. These different agendas between ordinary members and local leaders cannot be read as the manifestation of a fundamental opposition between the popular classes and a westernised elite as suggested by Charterjee. It reveals instead prevalent and ambivalent relationships between partisan politics and popular mobilisations for security in a context of high insecurity.

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1. Introduction

The development of multi-partyism in 1990s Africa has favored a new scientific interest in African political parties (Gazibo, 2006; Basedau et al., 2007). Simultaneously the popularity of notions such as "civil society" and "decentralization" (Otayek, 2000; Crook and Manor, 1998) have sparked off an interest in what Christian Lund has termed local politics (Lund, 2007). This new concern for local political landscapes in Africa may well come from a longer historical trend however. Post-1970s structural adjustment policies (SAPs) together with the reduction of state services have facilitated the return of local power centres, increased the number of non-state actors involved in delivering services, and multiplied the patron–client ties and personal networks upon which people must rely to survive (Péclard and Hagmann, 2010; Cooper, 2002). The extent to which patronage politics (under its various labels: neo-patrimonial state, gatekeeper state, the politics of belly, prebendal politics...) are a common feature shared by all African countries is the object of an important and controversial academic debate among 'Africanist' scholars (Bayart, 2007; Cooper, 2002; Joseph, 1988; Médard, 1991). Despite this, the effect of patronage and party politics on governability in Africa's cities remains poorly addressed (see however Albert, 2007; Fourchard, 2010, 2011a,b; Haenni, 2005; de Smedt, 2009; Bénit-Gbaffou et al., forthcoming

a). Scholars in political science have focused mainly on party systems and the functions of parties while organisational and empirical approaches of political parties are still lacking leading to over-generalisation and mistakes in establishing models and typologies (Darracq, 2008). Moreover electoral studies or democratic theories are mostly focused at the national level while urban regime framework considers electoral politics as irrelevant (Bénit-Gbaffou et al., forthcoming a).

This article wishes to analyse a poorly explored issue in urban governance or political studies, i.e. the centrality of partisan politics in providing service delivery, in this case security at the city level. Cape Town Coloured townships are used as a case study.[1] Since the end of apartheid, providing security to South African citizens has been one of the declared priorities of national governments and a recurrent concern in a country often held to be one of the most violent in the world.[2] Policing is a highly politicised field and its changing functions at the global level and in Africa in

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[1] Coloured population referred to one of the four racial legal groups recognised before and during apartheid time. The term remains common today for administrative use and for self identification. According to the 2001 census, there was 4 millions of Coloured in South Africa (or 8% of the population). Over two third of them lived in the Western Cape Province.

[2] Homicide statistics, which tend to be among the best recorded crime statistics in any country, indicate that South Africa's murder rate was 37 per 100,000 in 2009, one of the highest in the world. See Annual Report, South African Police Service, 2008–2009.

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particular have been increasingly explored, especially by experts of South Africa (Baker, 2010; Wood and Shearing, 2007; Brogden and Nijhar, 2005). Partisan politics are not however at the core of research on policing in South Africa (see for instance Shaw, 2002; Standing, 2005; Singh, 2008) even if a few early studies have mentioned the role of national and local party politics in shaping community-policing initiatives (Mistry, 1996, 1997; Steinberg, 2008). Policing and security in South Africa, often looks like a depoliticised field of experts in development (Ferguson, 1990). I argue in this article that policing a divided environment such as the coloured townships of Cape Town is an everyday battle between the African National Congress (ANC), the party in power since 1994 and the Democratic Alliance (DA), the party in charge of the city of Cape Town since 2008 and of the Western Cape Province since 2009. This conflict is especially visible when looking at the role playing by political leaders, NGO leaders and key officials in grassroots mobilisations for security. This article is based on three types of original sources: (1) interviews with police officers, community police chairmen, neighbourhood watch members and NGOs leaders in Cape Town in 2008 and 2009[3]; (2) my participant observation in seven night patrols in various townships and suburbs of Manenberg and Mitchell's Plain in 2009 and 2010[4]; (3) a systematic reading of the *Plainsman*, the principal weekly newspaper of Mitchell's Plain since its creation in 1980 looking more especially on the myriad of security initiatives taken by the residents.

2. Policing post apartheid South Africa: a depoliticised field?

Looking at the involvement of party politics in everyday security arrangements should be analyzed within the framework of what many scholars have termed the privatisation of security. This includes looking at the existence of various forms of localised security organisations most of the time considered as vigilante groups[5] and the understanding of cooperation developed between the police and the policed, often referred as community policing (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005). In these various subfields of this particular literature, the role and functions of partisan politics remain poorly explored especially when it concerns post apartheid South Africa.

What is considered to be the process of 'privatisation' of state security agencies and the loosening of the state's sovereign control over its territory has become a central issue with the rise of private security companies, private armies, warlords and powerful vigilante groups in many African countries over the last 20 years. This process is sometimes considered to be the manifestation of state decline or state failure, a peculiar reading of the African state which has been critiqued for its normative and analytical shortcomings (Péclard and Hagmann, 2010). Against this trend many authors have argued that the privatisation of security in Africa does not necessarily imply the decline of state power: 'Private security actors cannot be situated entirely outside or in simple opposition to the state as the state is also frequently the instigator of forms

of privatisation' (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2007, p. 132). Vigilantism in African and beyond not only reflects popular responses to vacuums left by state collapse and neoliberalism, but also reveals specific historical and cultural logics (Pratten and Sen, 2007, pp. 5–6). Historically, colonial and postcolonial African states have managed to exercise power while avoiding the costs of establishing and maintaining major administrative apparatus through the 'outsourcing', of state functions to different political, religious, associational or corporate entrepreneurs (Hibou, 2004; Bayart, 2007). In this regard, South Africa's historical trajectory might not be radically different from other postcolonial states in Africa. Private security companies were first encouraged by the apartheid state in the 1980s, before expanding tremendously since 1990s due to growing demands for increased security provision on both private and public spaces (Shearing and Berg, 2006). Even though SAPs measures have decreased the size of the bureaucracy in many African countries (which is far to be the case in South Africa where the planned programme of privatisation barely started, Seekings, 2009, p. 143), state officials and political leaders have focused particular attention to the ways their populations have been policed. This is even more obvious in countries such as South Africa which is faced for historical reasons by a high level of violence and in which insecurity is historically perceived as very high (Kynoch, 2008).

In poor urban areas of South Africa the demand for security has imperfectly been met by a set of actors including the South African Police Service (SAPS), NGOs, the business sector, churches, elders, chiefs, registered and non-registered local associations often referred as vigilante groups. Yet despite the increasing number of studies devoted to vigilantism, (see the special issue coordinated by Buur and Jensen (2004)), there are few empirical studies on the use of, or the fight against, those groups by political parties in post apartheid South Africa. Partisan politics may be mentioned but with a few exceptions they are rarely looked at empirically (see however Kynoch, 2005; Buur, 2008; Kirsch, 2010; Fourchard, 2011a). This contrasts with research conducted in other African countries which has explored how vigilante groups can be captured, recognised, absorbed or institutionalised by the state and/or by political parties (Abrahams, 1987; Anderson, 2002; Baker, 2010; Fourchard, 2008; Meagher, 2007).

Neither is the place of the political parties in community police relationships at the core of the debate on community policing in post-apartheid South Africa. One of the central debates is dominated by the importance of forms of community policing. According to Brogden and Nijhar (2005) this experience has resulted in failure and there now remains little support for community policing except in White areas while for Marks et al. (2009) a community policing narrative remains central to the South African Police Service (SAPS) as it is incorporated in their policy documents and forms an integral part of their basic training programmes. Police-community relationships are apparently changing at very uneven paces but the place of political parties between the community and the police and the specific role played by local leaders in promoting forms of community policing are hardly mentioned in this literature (see however Steinberg, 2008; Bénit-Gbaffou, 2006). Community police programmes are nevertheless constantly reshaped by national and local policing habits and specific political landscapes in which community security practices are promoted, discarded, mobilised, or reinvented: due to the specific nature of security as an eminent power over spatial and social dynamics, security models are effectively mobilised by different local agents and leaders in political struggles – either against the state (at its various scales) or against competing local leaders (Bénit-Gbaffou et al., forthcoming b).

Finally, literatures on urban governance and on social movements have not really dealt with this issue. Growing research on the neoliberal forms of urban governance have investigated the ways urban security provisions have been transformed by the

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[3] Interviews were conducted with a few ANC activists, party leaders and Community Police Forum's Chairmen in Manenberg and in Mitchell's Plain, with eight women involved in the safety sector of a NGO in Manenberg and with 50 neighbourhood watch members (men and women) in Mitchell's Plain. Most of the interviews were done between January and August 2009. In-depth interviews were recorded with Manenberg's coordinator safety sectors while informal interviews and discussions with neighbourhood watch members in Mitchell's Plain and Manenberg were not registered but only transcribed.

[4] Most of neighborhood watch patrols are night patrols which is a deeply entrenched tradition in the history of South African townships. I observed the work of the patrol but did not participate in the process of searching 'suspects'. Generally patrols were operating between 9 pm and 3 or 4 am.

[5] Vigilante groups are understood as the manifestation of a localized sovereignty that is active in the production of a moral community defined against certain groups (e.g. youth or foreigners) which are perceived to represent a threat against this moral community (Buur, 2006).