

Book Review

National Security Surveillance in Southern Africa: An Anti-Capitalist Perspective

Jane Duncan

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National Security Surveillance in Southern Africa: An Anti-Capitalist Perspective by Jane Duncan focuses on the abuse of state intelligence agencies in Southern Africa based on the need for ‘national security’ as an excuse to infiltrate and thwart social movements.⁸²⁸ Duncan argues that such abuse maintains unjust social orders, which is aggravated by the increasing use of digital surveillance. Countries included in the research on which this book reports, are South Africa, Namibia, Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as Mauritius. This book could be viewed as an expansion on *The Rise of the Securocrats: The Case of South Africa* (2014),⁸²⁹ in which Duncan investigates the role of state security institutions in undermining democratic processes to keep certain politicians in power, while using secrecy to protect their institutional interests; and *Stopping the Spies: Constructing and Resisting the Surveillance State in South Africa* (2018),⁸³⁰ which assesses whether South Africa has become a surveillance state, from an international human rights perspective.

Although Duncan studied fine art and art history, she served as professor in the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Johannesburg, and more recently as professor of Digital Society at the University of Glasgow. Besides researching the impact of national security practices, she has been actively involved in civil society organisations and research projects dealing with policy issues on media affairs, communication, and freedom of expression. To obtain in-depth data for *National Security Surveillance in Southern Africa*, Duncan relied on the expert knowledge and insights of journalists, lawyers, activists, communication researchers, ‘spies of conscience’, and academics by means of semi-structured interviews.⁸³¹ She also utilised documents that leaked in the public domain, such as The Snowden Archive, and documents leaked to her personally to understand surveillance practices better.

The seven chapters in *National Security Surveillance in Southern Africa* contain findings of both empirical and normative research. Chapter 1 covers the theoretical foundation of perspectives and key concepts, such as “national security” and “surveillance”. In this chapter, Duncan argues that surveillance is often used by major powers to accumulate

economic and political gain; moreover, that in capitalist systems, intelligence agencies serve a capitalist agenda rather than the interests and needs of society. Chapter 2 pays attention to the post-colonial national security surveillance practices in Namibia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. In Chapter 3, Duncan discusses communication surveillance in Southern Africa for the purpose of national security. Duncan starts Chapter 4 with a critical consideration of the mass surveillance practices of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New-Zeeland (also known as “the Five Eyes”), and then presents her evaluation of mass surveillance in Southern Africa. An assessment of the global trade in spyware and surveillance technologies follows in Chapter 5. In this chapter, the author also discusses how the proliferation of such technology and spyware could be curbed through activism, disarmament, and anti-war movements. The penultimate chapter reports on intelligence-led policing in Southern Africa, with a focus on how the South African Police Service responded to the #FeesMustFall student protests at tertiary institutions in 2015 and 2016. In the last chapter, Duncan points out the international trend of securitising domestic or home affairs functions, such as national identity and immigration management, with a focus on South Africa and Mauritius as case studies.

Duncan is critical of governments in Southern Africa, especially former liberation movements, for misusing intelligence agencies in a similar fashion as colonial police and ‘policing Special Branches’⁸³² to maintain regime security, instead of implementing democratic reforms, ‘[t]hey have not done enough to transform intelligence agencies and practices from the colonial and apartheid periods, because it has served them not do so’.⁸³³ She observed that since the Global War on Terror (GWOT) (September 2001) and increasing international competition for natural resources in Southern Africa, outside powers from the West and East are promoting their national security doctrines and the practice of mass surveillance in the region, instead of encouraging respect for individual rights, transparency, and accountability. The general disregard for the latter, Duncan argues, blurs the lines between law enforcement and national security. Moreover, she argues that widespread intrusive legislation and intelligence practices have not been reversed to restore civil liberties and democratic freedoms.

Duncan furthermore argues that the popular notion of human security, often promoted by multilateral institutions, is inappropriate to guide the mandates and roles of security institutions in Southern Africa. The concept of human security, combined with a too broad definition of national security, is not considered conducive for establishing accountable intelligence agencies, since the latter may misuse the notion of human security to securitise more sectors, obtain larger budgets, as well as having more invasive powers. Duncan concludes that, in Southern Africa, internal security is increasingly viewed as national security, and police are becoming increasingly militarised in this role, while many intelligence agencies fulfil internal policing roles.

In the case study on South Africa, Duncan argues that the Department of Home Affairs follows ‘an increasingly hostile approach towards foreigners’,⁸³⁴ and is using biometrics, risk technologies, as well as harsh regulations to implement exclusionary practices towards migrants and even citizens.⁸³⁵ Instead of enabling the proper management of migrants, Home Affairs regulations and systems are impractical and inconsistent, especially regarding asylum seekers and children of foreigners.⁸³⁶ Concern is also expressed about the possible

misuse of civic identity data by security agencies in order to expand their mandates.

From a security sector reform perspective, Duncan makes some important and useful recommendations regarding intelligence agencies in Southern Africa.⁸³⁷ Firstly, intelligence agencies must be professionalised and compelled to justify their existence and funding, based on what they do in practice to protect the public against clearly defined threats. Secondly, excessive and unjustifiable secrecy should be phased out. As a third recommendation, the author suggests that legislative oversight should be established over intelligence agencies, including their operational matters, and parliamentary oversight committees over intelligence should be able to hold public hearings, and be supported by an independent inspector general for intelligence. Lastly, due process should be followed to ensure judicial authorisation for targeted surveillance of legitimate criminal suspects, and the enforcement powers of intelligence agencies should be relinquished.

On international level and from an anti-capitalist and socialist perspective, Duncan makes several arguments and recommendations related to eradicating state institutions, national boundaries, and capitalism as “sources” of insecurity. This standpoint hinders the inherent strength of the book, which is a critical analysis of intelligence agencies and surveillance in Southern Africa, from a democratic perspective. These recommendations are naïve within the context of competitive and often adversarial international relations, where realpolitik, the harnessing of freer global trade, strategy, and espionage remain part of statecraft. Domestically, Duncan’s recommendations centre on bottom-up and community-based activities to supplant state institutions in providing public goods, including central planning and intelligence functions. Ironically, some of Duncan’s bottom-up recommendations for communities to provide basic services and security are quite relevant, especially where governments have failed at various levels to provide public goods.

Within the context of debates regarding the South African General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill,⁸³⁸ its passing by the National Assembly on 26 March 2024,⁸³⁹ its “expansive” definition of national security and disregard for essential security sector reforms,⁸⁴⁰ this book provides valuable principles for the governance of intelligence functions in a democracy. From the perspective of how an effective and efficient intelligence capability should look and operate against non-traditional threats in Southern Africa, the book however provides insufficient recommendations. As Duncan acknowledges, the leftist agenda lacks a roadmap for organising security powers;⁸⁴¹ nevertheless, the utility of the anti-capitalist perspective, is its ability to ‘unmask the system-maintaining nature of national security powers’.⁸⁴² *National Security Surveillance in Southern Africa: An Anti-Capitalist Perspective* is highly recommended for students of security studies, intelligence studies and related fields, since it illustrates how broad national security definitions, mandates and powers, mass surveillance, the unnecessary securitisation of non-military issues, and misuse of intelligence agencies could erode democracy, justice, and civil rights.

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Endnotes

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- 830 J Duncan, *Stopping the Spies: Constructing and Resisting the Surveillance State in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018).
- 831 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, ix.
- 832 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 58.
- 833 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 188.
- 834 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 157.
- 835 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 157–158.
- 836 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 157–158, 162–163, 165.
- 837 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 189–191.
- 838 J Duncan, ‘South Africa’s New Intelligence Bill is Meant to Stem Abuses: What’s Good and Bad about It’, *defenceWeb*, 19 January 2024. <<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/security/national-security/south-africas-new-intelligence-bill-is-meant-to-stem-abuses-whats-good-and-bad-about-it/>> [Accessed on 25 April 2024]; H Swart & A Harber, ‘Despite Important Gains, the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill Fails to Safeguard against a Second State Capture’, *Intelwatch*, 8 April 2024. <<https://intelwatch.org.za/2024/04/08/despite-important-gains-the-new-general-intelligence-laws-amendment-bill-fails-to-safeguard-against-a-second-state-capture/>> [Accessed on 9 May 2024].
- 839 Parliamentary Monitoring Group, ‘General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (B40-2023) Section 75: Ordinary Bills not Affecting the Provinces’, n.d. <<https://pmg.org.za/bill/1197/>> [Accessed on 9 May 2024].
- 840 Parliamentary Monitoring Group, ‘General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (GILAB): Oral Submissions’, 23 April 2024. <<https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/38807/>> [Accessed on 9 May 2024].
- 841 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 3.
- 842 Duncan, *National Security Surveillance*, 18.