Private security has become a global concern due to the lack of regulations, accountability and its consequences on democracy. Based on a historical-institutional approach this book explores the origins and development of private security in Guatemala. The book traces state trajectories and identifies critical junctures and causal mechanisms that led to an expansion of private security. Rather than resulting from the postwar levels of crime and institutional inefficiency that most explanations address, this book concludes that private security in Guatemala is an outcome of historical, political, and institutional processes.

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Private Security in Guatemala: Pathway to Its Proliferation

Otto Argueta

Nomos
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1. Introduction

Private security has rapidly proliferated in almost the whole world in the last decades. The diversity of its services, organizations, coverage, and activities characterize the displacement of security functions centred in the state as the main provider of security to a new polycentric perspective of security in which various actors – including the state – interact to provide security. This perspective is characterized by its heterogeneity and the wide range of non-state armed actors operating from the legal and public sphere to a more informal and illegal sphere. From a broad perspective, private security includes both commercial activities such as private security companies (PSCs) and private military companies (PMCs) as well as non commercial forms such as citizens organizations to provide protection and self-defence, the so-called "security neighbourhood committees". The activities of private security can range from a national level of public security to international operations such as the protection of natural resources, war against terrorism and organized crime, among others. In this scenario, there is a noticeable absence of legal frameworks and effective state controls at both national and international levels.

All of the above place private security at the centre of different dilemmas and debates. On the one hand, under effective state controls private security can contribute to improve security against threats and respond to an increasing demand for citizen security both at a national and a global level. On the other, the proliferation of private security implies the substitution of security functions traditionally associated with the state, which are expected to be core aspects of the legitimacy of public institutions. The displacement of state security functions to the private sector also implies transgressions to nation-state sovereignty, inequitable access to public goods, authoritarian practices, vigilantism, patronage (clientelism), and human rights violations. In addition, it is clear that private security contributes to the displacement of crime due the implementation of preventive and dissuasive private tactics.

Whatever the practical issues and concerns identified above, there are academic concerns about the implications of private security and the mechanisms that produce its proliferation as well as its relation with the state and society. Private security is mainly explained as the result of, on the one hand, the increasing threats associated with insecurity and crime both at a national and a global dimension. On the other hand, private security is analysed as a product of the weakness of the state to confront these threats. The problem is that private secu-
rity has proliferated both in strong and weak states and mostly before an increase in crime became a global concern.

However, there is little knowledge about the influence of contexts and historical processes. It is not the same when proliferation of private security begins through international delivery companies providing security services to states and the consequent implementation of international armed operations as when proliferation begins through national state actors that implement private security operations before, during, and after internal conflicts or an increase in crime. The first among other factors supposes actions of international private actors against the existence or absence of national public institutions, the second suggest an active interaction between private and public actors. These interactions are rooted in the social and political system and interact with historical political processes of state formation and institutional change. Those differences suggest that contexts and processes matter when attempting an explanation. For this reason, the isolation of variables related to crime and institutional capabilities does not answer satisfactorily the central questions of this research: What explains the proliferation of private security in particular contexts? How do context and history interact with the proliferation of private security?

To deal with these questions this study approaches private security as a result of political processes with a strong temporal dimension. From this perspective, historical contexts feature the configuration of security and the social relations that emerge from this configuration. The focus of the research is on the proliferation of private security in a post-war context. The study is defined by both theoretical and empirical objectives. Historical institutionalism is the theoretical basis of this study and it seeks to contribute to the analysis of private security from a wide perspective which integrates security issues and their interaction with given contexts and political and social processes. In addition, the study identifies path dependent processes, critical junctures, institutional arrangements, and self-reinforcing sequences which have led to the proliferation of private security in the case study. Finally, the contextual political analysis makes it possible for the research to observe the relationship between private security and political processes as well as the feedback produced by these elements themselves.