

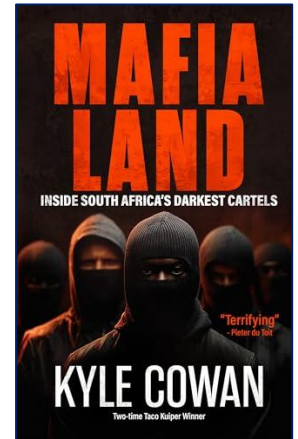


Title Mafia Land "Inside South Africa's Darkest Cartels"
Author Kyle Cowan
Published 2025 by Penguin
Review By Christelle Faul Marais (Founder and Director, Lucidum)
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Lessons For
 Directors, Prescribed Officers, Executives
 Governance Officers, Company Secretaries
 Ethics Officers, Risk Managers, Compliance Managers
 Audit Professionals
 Strategy and Sustainability Professionals
 Line Managers

Relevance	Overall Rating
9	8.5
8	
10	
8	
7	
9	



Synopsis

This account of how organised crime has fused with the South African state is told through twelve criminal 'mafias' operating inside public institutions. Cowan maps networks in construction, taxis, water tankers, tobacco, hospitals, cash-in-transit, nightlife protection, and kidnapping, showing how each survives on patronage from street level into municipalities, state-owned enterprises, political parties, the police, and the National Prosecuting Authority. In the construction mafia, syndicates forcibly extort a cut of a project's value from contractors under threat of violence, and by 2022 this had delayed or halted an estimated R63 billion of infrastructure work in South Africa alone. Cowan opens with Lieutenant General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi's July 2025 public allegation that the Police Minister colluded with organised crime, framing the book's central and uncomfortable question: where does organised crime end and the state begin? He traces this collusion back through episodes such as Jackie Selebi's 2010 bribery conviction and the 2008 disbanding of the Scorpions, arguing that each retreat by law enforcement created space that criminal networks were quick to occupy. Those who resist, whether contractors, whistleblowers, or officials, are shown facing intimidation, violence, or worse. Cowan resists total pessimism, pointing to investigative journalism, civil society, and businesses that keep reporting extortion as a counterweight to institutional decay. For risk managers specifically, the key takeaway is that organised crime is not only an external threat to be screened out through ordinary due diligence; it is often already inside the supply chain, the municipality, or the law enforcement structures an organisation depends on for protection, so risk appetite and response plans need to assume compromised, not neutral, oversight.

Key Concept:

State Capture occurs when private interests systematically shape a state's policies, laws, actors, and decisions to serve themselves and not the public. Embedded capture also operates from the ground up *via* everyday activities that render controls ineffective.

Quotes:

'Behind the façade of South Africa lies a brutal shadow-world ruled by mafias, cartels, and crime syndicates locked in a ruthless war over South Africa's riches.' 'This is not a criminal underworld lurking in the shadows. It is part of the system itself.' 'Where does organised crime end and the state begin?' 'From construction sites to mine shafts, from minibus-taxi routes to municipal offices, mafia-style enterprises are tightening their grip on the nation.' 'Construction firms, big and small, find themselves squeezed between paying off mafiosos or hiring their own muscle for protection.' 'Some firms have even struck Faustian bargains by contracting taxi bosses and their private security companies as enforcers, effectively hiring one feared gang to fend off others.' The choice is either to accommodate mafias or to hire someone heavier than them.'

Practical Tips

- Consider how exposed your organisation's supply chain and site operations are to extortion and protection rackets.
- Build vendor and site risk assessments that identify extortion demand safely for individuals (employees or contractors).
- Keep written record of every demand, threats, and refusal to pay to as independent evidence that doesn't endanger individuals.
- Consider how your organisation's reporting channels hold up when the threat is violent rather than purely reputational or financial.
- Where individuals face physical intimidation for resisting corrupt schemes, a compliance hotline alone is not enough; protocols should escalate directly to law enforcement and/or private security, to protect anyone who reports coercion from retaliation.

Think About

- Avoid treating construction, security, or logistics contracts as purely commercial decisions.
- Where a market is documented to be infiltrated by organised crime, price and delivery time are not the only factors that should determine vendor selection.
- Exposure exists through contractors and subcontractors, not only direct suppliers; extortion and bid-rigging may enter through a project's lower tiers, where oversight and contractual leverage are weakest.
- The quality of relationships with law enforcement and the willingness to report criminal demands in the face of police complicity is a documented risk. Escalation to national structures, oversight bodies, or the media may be necessary, and protecting anyone who takes that step must be non-negotiable.

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