

South Africa: Why Mining and Violence are Inextricably Linked

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The South African government is currently embarking on streamlining a decision-making processes in mining. To many this sounds like more top-down decision-making at the expense of those communities that will have to host mines and paves the way for more violent conflict, warns Jasper Finkeldey.

Last year South Africa's bountiful Wild Coast saw the assassination of Sikhosphi Rhadebe, activist against proposed dune mining on his homeland. The commemoration of Rhadebe who went by the name Bozooka coincided with this year's Human Rights day. At least 500 people came to stand together in solidarity to call for an end to violence under the glaring sun of the Wild Coast far off the tarred national roads.

Saluting the deceased Rhadebe, leader of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, gun shots were fired in the air giving a vivid demonstration of the sound of death that was heard on the Wild Coast a year ago. Mark Caruso, CEO of the company that applied for a permit for titanium mining on the Wild Coast had (according to local media) previously bragged in an internal email:

"I am enlivened by [the] opportunity to grind all resistance to my presence."

Violence and mining do not meet spontaneously - they are uncanny bedfellows.

Acclaimed mining scholar Anthony Bebbington calls the choice communities are facing when mining companies approach "Faustian in the extreme". Companies offer compensation (mostly money) for multiple forms of dispossessions; namely dispossession of "land, territory, landscape and natural resources". According to Bebbington, no matter if mining is to go ahead or not it will irrevocably divide communities over the question. Defying the notion of win-win situations invoked by mining companies' global examples show that mine-affected communities typically lose while a class of investors, CEOs and some local managers wine and dine on the generous revenues.

Blockadia in the making?

But as the Wild Coast people testify quite a number of activists are not shying away to take on mining Goliaths. Environmental justice activists are putting themselves in the frontlines of a global battle that Naomi Klein calls "Blockadia" - a new conflict zone "cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill, whether for open-pit mines, or gas fracking, or tar sands oil pipelines." The struggle of

Standing Rock is a case in point where indigenous activists faced the heavily armoured police.

But media attention to extractive struggles is rarely that persistent. And even in cases in which the media reports diligently from these conflict zones, time seems to be on the side of mining companies and oil firms. If extractive operations face resistance the nature of mineral resources allows companies to change strategies and come back when resistance is at its weakest.

Death toll of mining

The imbalance of resource also plays to the hands of companies as they have the means to bring delinquents on their side. In an academic paper entitled *Conflict and Astrourfing in Niyamgiri*, which is very instructive beyond the confines of academia, Romy Kraemer and others tell the story of a young tribal activist who received global attention for his fight against bauxide mining in India. In the cause of the struggle however the company manages to buy the activist out and provide him with a scholarship away from his native land. This is a rather peaceful case if one considers how many violent conflicts are reported around extraction worldwide. Ken Saro-Wiwa who died in the struggle against Shell as well as environmental justice activist Berta Cáceres from Honduras paid with their lives for their vocal oppositions. Their names, just as much as Sakhosiphi Rhadebe's, echo in the struggles against exploitative extractivism of today.

The number of casualties in operating mines should not be forgotten either. In a single accident in the Turkish coal mine in Soma in 2014, at least 301 miners died in an underground fire. Even in the absence of major accidents miners are pressured to take ever higher risks in anticipation of the ever greater emphasis on production.

Increasingly struggles over mining are fought under environmental banners. The Environmental Atlas mapping of the social and environmental impacts of mining and other invasive developmental projects counts 158 conflicts over coal as well as 105 reported escalations over natural gas - the list is far too long to complete it. To get an overview it is certainly worthwhile to have a look at the globe full of colourful dots marking conflicts in virtually every region of the planet.

Consent or choice?

Is this just another case of the resource curse thesis suggesting that countries with large amounts of mineral endowment are worse off than their resource-poor counterparts? The answer is not that straightforward. In an ideal world communities could decide freely on whether or not they opt for mining in their community. In cases in which they opt in favour of mining communities should benefit from operation at every stage which would require the involvement of local entrepreneurs and schemes to upskill locals (I am still talking about an ideal world). Initiatives such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples demand free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC). This might not go far enough as critics argue that "consent" should be replaced by "choice". This seems easier said than done in the face of cosy relationships between mining capital and elite politicians.

South Africa's impasse

Let me go back to South Africa where I currently do research on popular mobilization around

the extractive industries. According to Corruption Watch, South Africa's mining industry is at high risk of corrupt practices. Evidence certainly suggests that companies and governing African National Congress (ANC) politicians are working together quite closely.

President Jacob Zuma's son is heavily and controversially involved in mining ventures. Vice-president Cyril Ramaphosa held large shares of the mining company which saw 34 of its miners shot down in 2012. It is because of these conflicting interests that political economy professor Patrick Bond does not trust South Africa's decision-makers to oversee mining relations. He likens them to a drunk nephew who

“finds the key to the cupboard containing the family jewels, and he takes them all away, then finds a sleazy foreign buyer on the street corner who pays him a small portion of the value of the jewels, at which point the nephew goes to the bottle store and gets the most vile booze available, swigs it down and comes home to the same house, and vomits it all up, passing out and leaving the Auntie to clean up the mess.”

So the challenge will be to become sober about how to manage mining relations in a country in which close to 10 percent GDP comes from mining operations and where countless other sectors are connected to mining. Under the current fast-tracking methodology Phakisa, the South African government is currently embarking on streamlining decision-making processes in mining. To many this sounds like more top-down decision-making at the expense of communities that will have to host mines.

The T-shirts on Human Rights day on the Wild Coast read: “No mining on our land”.

We will see more of those where people's freedom of choice becomes violated.

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