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Channeling Indigenous Contestation of Uranium Mining in Australia: Legislation, Negotiation, Co-optation

While the question of uranium mining has long been widely debated among different political actors within the Australian democracy, and more particularly governments, business corporations, and social movements, the most recent developments in this area have led to an intensification of this debate. After approving the expansion of the Olympic Dam mine in South Australia so that it could deliver more copper and uranium and incidentally become the world’s largest open-pit mine, the Australian government has just announced that it would lift its ban on selling uranium to India despite the country’s refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In a context of economic uncertainty, this might be understood as an attempt to ensure prosperity in the short run. But more and more Australians are starting to wonder about the issues of security and long-term sustainability raised by such decisions, and more generally about the apparent hijacking of democratic processes by big corporations.

Among those who oppose uranium mining in Australia, Indigenous peoples have been particularly persistent in their contestation. However, the response to this contestation may help explain why Australian democracy is still devoid of any meaning to them. Although it was meant to respect such principles of democracy as the ability for people to have a say in decisions which may affect their lives, attempts at inclusion and participation in decision-making related to uranium mining fell short of Indigenous expectations. Instead, we can state that different actors — governments, mining companies and environmental groups — have channelled Indigenous contestation through seemingly democratic processes while stopping short of giving Indigenous peoples access to the real, meaningful participation and decision-making powers that would stem from self-government.

Drawing from specific examples, this paper will first show how Australian land rights legislation, which was designed to help Indigenous peoples in the face of repeated encroachment by mining development projects, failed to provide them with effective veto powers over uranium mining. It will then focus more closely on negotiations between these peoples and mining companies in order to reveal how this seemingly democratic process may be flawed. Finally, it will look at the co-optation of Indigenous contestation by environmental groups in order to show how, despite the advantages of bringing non-Indigenous and Indigenous interests together, this failed to give more power to Indigenous peoples regarding this issue.

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