

Morocco: Building Power From Below

The Movement on Road '96 as a Horizontal, Local, and Autonomous Model

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The commune of Imider is located in a valley between the water-rich sedentary Atlas and the mineral-rich volcanic Jbel Saghro mountain ranges in Morocco. At the bottom of the valley, fertile fields cling to the sides of a riverbed where the villagers maintain a diverse mosaic of crops, trees, and bushes suited to the climate of this semi-arid region. Each plant is laid out symbiotically with other plants and in harmony with the passage of water, the movement of the sun, and occasional windstorms. A complex system of ancient *khettara* (a traditional system of water transport in desert areas) runs underground bringing spring water from faraway mountain sources, keeping this high-altitude oasis lush. Despite their aridity, the commons surrounding the oasis are not only a source of food for livestock but also home to a variety of natural herbs, plants, and animals which the community has taken care to use in moderation. Tribal customs, discussed and decided upon in regular *Agraws* (popular assemblies), have designated hectares of collective lands as *Agdals*, natural reserves forbidden for pastoral activities. *Agdals* are rotated every couple of years, allowing for plants to regenerate and making pastoral activities genuinely sustainable, and are even crucial for the stability of the commons. Meticulously developed by the Ait Atta tribe for centuries, these various organizational features come together in social and environmental harmony which speaks to human creativity, indigenous knowledge, and participatory tribal politics.

However, with the brutal penetration of French colonial forces into Ait Atta tribelands in 1933, much of this system would come under threat. Over the coming decades, an authoritarian state, regimented from Rabat, would come to replace local autonomy and participatory politics maintained by tribal confederations. The commons, along with the water and minerals underneath them, became property of the state. With the discovery of significant silver reserves in the commune, the situation became aggravated as a state-owned mining company started extracting the raw mineral and exporting it for purification and manufacture. Starting in the 1960s, this model would stand for the next couple of decades, until the 1980s when the state took out a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF in turn required the Moroccan state to privatize state-owned industries and services, including the silver mine in Imider. By 1984, the mine was well on its way towards privatization but was also changing the raw-export model by expanding its activities to include on-the-spot silver purification. While the proponents of this new economic model claimed it would provide more jobs, what it meant in reality was the introduction of an extremely water-intensive and toxic process in a semi-arid region. In the same year, the mining company Managem began planning to tap into Imider's fragile aquifer waters, resulting in the first of four peaceful uprisings led by the villagers over the next three decades: in 1986, 1996, 2004, and 2011. Quickly put down by the authorities, the 1986 uprising consisted of the villagers occupying the area where the mining company was planning to build the well. After that, the mining company would go on to dig more wells and a system of pipelines which led to increasing substantial water extraction. This became more evident after a 2004 report showed a 48 percent decrease in *khettara* water levels just one year after the mining company drilled another well in 2003. [\[1\]](#) Another 2015 report puts the

mine's daily consumption of water at 1555 cubic metres, which is 12 times the village's consumption for agricultural and domestic purposes combined. [2] As such, by 2004, the drastic depletion of water resources resulted in another uprising, this time led exclusively by peasant women worried for their crops and angered by the lack of water in their homes.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the successes of the last rebellion in 2011, which goes by the name "Movement on Road '96" (MOR96) in memory of the 1996 uprising, which led to the intervention of the military, as well as curfews, imprisonment of villagers, and the death of one activist, Lahcen Usbdan. Unlike the previous rebellions which lasted for no more than 40 days, the 2011 uprising lasted for eight years. It began on an August morning as students, previously promised summer jobs at the mine, were turned away at its gates. Angered by the situation, the students marched to and occupied the square in front of the commune administration. As news of their protest spread through Imider's seven villages, other segments of the population joined the youths. Most notable among these segments were peasant farmers, mainly women, who united their demands for water with the unemployed students' demands for jobs and better local infrastructure. The result was a comprehensive grassroots movement which included all demographic and social sectors in Imider, including schoolchildren who led their own strikes and school walk-outs.

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Throughout this paper, I will attempt to analyze how the community of Imider was able to galvanize this moment to construct one of the strongest and most unique rural protest movements in modern Moroccan history. I will offer an overview of MOR96's various gains and victories, including how it managed to shut down the majority of water extraction in the commune, forced the mine to insulate waste deposits from local aquifers, and secured essential local infrastructures like school buses and roads. This paper will particularly focus on the four primary factors which I believe enabled the movement to establish these gains and build counter-power: horizontal organization, direct action, cultural action and counter-propaganda. However, today, the movement has seen an almost fatal decline which was largely brought about by a relentless eight-year long campaign by the state and the mining company deploying violence. Peasant farmers, mainly women, united their demands for water with the unemployed students' demands for jobs and better local infrastructure. Building Power from Below 23 imprisonment, propaganda, social pressure, and co-optation. Since most of these detrimental forces have already been quite widely discussed in the press and by human rights organizations, here, I will rather focus on the role of political parties and workers' unions and their largely negative impact on the Movement on Road '96.

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Footnotes

[1] INOVAR (2005), Compte Rendu de la Mission du 29/08/2005, Temara.

[2] World Amazigh Congress (2015), International Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Geneva.