

THE NILE RIVER AS A POTENTIAL PROGENITOR OF WAR OR COOPERATION: THE CASE OF GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM (GERD)

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ABSTRACT

More than half of the world population lives in internationally shared river basins. Shared waters could be either a source of conflict or a source of cooperation and prosperity. Today, the growing need for water resources for development has brought intense political and economic tensions among the countries that share rivers that flow across two or more countries. The disagreements among the riparian States of the Nile River on sharing the resources of the basin represent the challenge of governance over shared resources. This challenge has intensified with Ethiopia's construction of dam that is believed to impact the status quo in terms of benefits from the river. This article highlights the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt surrounding the construction of the dam and forwards possible policy solutions on enhancing shared utilization of the Nile River including the benefits from the hydroelectric power to be generated from the dam.

KEYWORDS

Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Nile River, Ethiopia, Egypt, International rivers

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nile River is the second largest trans-boundary river basin shared among 10 riparian States. Such trans-boundary nature of the River has become a challenge since it has created varying expectations and aspirations among the riparian States. While countries like Sudan and Egypt have significantly benefited for the Nile Water Resources, other riparian States have utilized so little if not null of the Nile River for domestic development. An increasing dissatisfaction with the way the water resources are shared and competing water demands among the riparian States have reignited the potential stability of the Nile basin region.

The Nile river basin encompasses both the Blue Nile and the White Nile. The White Nile originates at Lake Victoria and borders Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda whereas the Blue Nile begins in Lake Tana in Ethiopia. Both Niles flow toward the North and meet in Khartoum where they form the Nile River that actually flows into Egypt (Azarva, 2011). Ethiopia's Blue Nile constitutes approximately 68% of Ethiopia's available water resources. But only 1% of the river is used by Ethiopia while the river constitutes over 85% of the Nile River that flows to Egypt (Ibrahim, 2011). The Blue Nile is the principal contributor of the Nile water and directly impacts the people in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. This makes the contribution of Ethiopia to the Nile River more than 70%.

The Nile River directly impacts the population in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. Owing to the expected population growth in the countries and environmental factors like climate change, drought and water scarcity, the Nile would remain subject to rivalries over who can use the resources and how. States can only exercise effective control over temporarily or partially over international waters as they flow through or along their territories and as a result, one co-basin's utilization or development of a shared water resource necessarily affects the quantity and quality of water available to lower or neighboring basin States (Rangeley, 1994).

This paper discusses in detail the ongoing dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt concerning the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and its implications on the regional peace and stability. In this regard, the paper explores the evolving domestic political situations in Ethiopia and Egypt and the implications of these changes with respect to the dispute. The paper concludes that despite the ongoing differences between the two countries concerning the potential impact of GERD on Egypt, the differences are not irreconcilable rather a product of long rooted lack of trust between the two governments. To this effect, the paper argues that dialogue and de-securitization of the situation could legitimately address the problem.

2. THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM (GERD) AND THE DISPUTE BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND EGYPT

BACKGROUND TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DAM

Notwithstanding the pride Ethiopians take in being Africa's oldest nation, the history of contemporary Ethiopia is one of recurrent conflict, disaster and economic turmoil. Ethiopia has always been unhappy about the lack of use of a river that it has overwhelmingly contributed to. The United States Bureau of Reclamation developed comprehensive plans for the construction of dams on the Blue Nile in 1964 and Ethiopia have been refining such plan since then. Even though there have been attempts to construct dams on the Blue Nile during the regimes of Haile Sillasié (1930-1975) and Mengistu Hailemariam (1977-1987), none of those projects materialized due to threats from Egypt (Dale Whittington, 2014). Since coming to power in 1991 after two decades of guerrilla warfare, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the coalition dominated by the Tigray People Liberation Front, has made socioeconomic transformation and the restoration of Ethiopian greatness its overarching objectives (Verhoeven, 2013). The EPRDF government has since the 1990s pursued a strategy of encouraging industrial activity to diversify the country out of its dependence on agriculture and of trying to broaden livelihood options in rural areas. Both the Agricultural Development Led Industrialization and its 2010 successor, the Growth and Transformation Plan, rejected neoliberal growth models in favor of statist interventionism, spending on infrastructure and a selective engagement with the world economy. This plan also emphasizes the fact that the energy deficit in Ethiopia must be addressed in order to ensure the country's path towards industrial nation. Ethiopia has only developed approximately 10 percent of its hydropower capacity (Bank, 2017).

As a result, the Ethiopian government has been extensively engaged in the development of hydro-infrastructure in order to boost domestic electricity production and consumption thereby promoting industrialization. In addition, the investment in hydro-infrastructure is meant to reduce Ethiopia's vulnerability to climate and hydrology, weakening its dependence on erratic rain-fed cultivation and enabling irrigated production for both internal consumption and international exports. Since early 1990s, the Ethiopian government has constructed a large number of small

dams, and many additional dams are also planned, to enhance the country's irrigation and hydropower capacity (see table below). Ethiopia's current water development plans require a small portion of the Nile's water compared to the potential demand in the near future. It intends to develop its hydropower potential in order to meet the increasing energy demands. However, the real threat to downstream water supply does not come from hydropower production, which does not divert water from the river system, the way irrigation does (Swain, 2007).

Table 1: List of hydro-power dams in Ethiopia since 1991

No	Hydropower Dam	River	Capacity (in Megawatts)	Operational since
1	Tis Abay II	Abay River	75	2001
2	Gilgil Gibe I	Omo River	184	2004
3	Tekeze High Dam	Tekeze River	310	2009
4	Gilgel Gibe II	Omo River	420	2009
5	TanaBeles	Belesa River	435	2010
6	Gilgel Gibe III	Omo River	1870	2013

Source: Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation

Even if most of the hydropower projects sanctioned in Ethiopia were not centered on the Nile River, the ambition to change this trend was often clearly communicated by the Ethiopian government. To this effect, Ethiopia spearheaded the Nile Basin Initiative's Comprehensive Framework Agreement, which was rejected by Sudan and Egypt due to the disagreement on explicitly acknowledging the 'historic rights' under the 1959 Agreement. Ethiopia has clearly indicated that both the 1929 and 1959 agreements are not binding as it has never been a party to these agreements. Ethiopia's grievance also stems from the fact that despite being the overwhelming contributor of the Nile River, the Aswan High Dam and both the 1929 and 1959 agreements on the Nile River did not consult Ethiopia's consent.

The ongoing dispute over Nile in the region in general and between Ethiopia and Egypt in particular cannot be understood without the historical relations between the two countries. While Nile is considered as a national identity that Egyptian civilization is built upon, Ethiopia takes pride in being the 'water tower of Africa' (Arsano, 2007). The first encounter between the two States was in the last quarter of the 29th century when Egypt was expanding its territory over the Red Sea to have ultimate control over the Nile River. Since this encounter Egypt has never stopped fearing Ethiopia's potential activities to divert the Nile water flow to Egypt while Ethiopia, on the other hand, looks every political ambition of Egypt in the region as a strive to sustain its dominance and unilateral exploitation of the resources of the Nile. While Nile has been used domestically by Egypt to unite any potential threat from a riparian State, Ethiopia tends to politicize any claim it has under the guise of reclaiming the past glory. Egypt has always used a negative foreign policy towards its Southern neighbors in order to prevent an emergence of a regional power that might rival Egypt's long standing hegemony in the Nile basin (Waterbury, 1929).

Egypt mainly relies on the refusal to compromise as a national policy driven by self-help measures in any negotiations for equitable share of the resources of the Nile River. Egypt rejects any compromise on the use of the Nile by the riparian States. Egypt's former President Anwar

As-Sadat once said that the only reason for Egypt to go to war in the future would be over the resources of the Nile and anything that threatens the life of more than 60 million Egyptians (Swain, 2007).

2.2 THE LAUNCH OF THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM (GERD)

The GERD, which is the largest hydropower dam in Africa, is officially launched on 2 April 2011. The dam will flood 1,680 square kilometers of forest in Northwestern Ethiopia, near the Sudan border. The grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam (GERD) is an ambitious hydropower project that is being constructed on the Blue Nile, close to the border between Ethiopia and Sudan. It will have a reservoir capacity of 74 billion cubic meters (BCM); and when fully operational, it will have a power capacity of 6,000 MW.

The project's launch came in the midst of the Egyptian revolution, which some observers believe was intended to take advantage of the more powerful nation's confused political state at a time when the issue of who controls the Nile is heating up. Specifically Ethiopia officially launched the construction of the dam just two days since the overthrow of the then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Ethiopia has not secured external financing to construct the GERD. While some argue this is in response to the project's potential for increasing water conflict in the region, others point to Ethiopia's desire to prove its growing economy and sense of national pride. Thus, Ethiopia has raised funds by selling government bonds to citizens and private companies and by tapping into government reserves (International Rivers, 2019). This self-financing may be a unique situation unlike other large dam projects in Africa, in which countries are indebted to foreign lenders for decades after the completion of the project.

Upon the launch of the construction of the dam, Ethiopia has reiterated its sovereign right to use its natural resources within its territory including the Nile River as long as the use does not cause 'significant' damage on other riparian States including Egypt. Ethiopia rejects the 1959 Agreement and other prior agreements as it has never been consulted during the negotiation and signature of those treaties (Alan Nicol & Elisa, 2011). Moreover, Ethiopia claims that Egypt is exaggerating the potential effect of GERD with respect to the flow of water into Egypt and even contends that due to GERD, the volume of water flow to Egypt would increase since the rockier highlands of Ethiopia has significantly lower level of evaporation. During the launch of the construction of the Dam, the then Prime Minister of Ethiopia MelesZenawi noted;

"...[t]he Dam will increase the amount of water resources available, reducing the wastages of evaporation which has been a serious problem in these countries (i.e Egypt and Sudan). It will in fact ensure a steady year round flow of the Nile. This in turn, should have the potential to amicably resolve the differences which currently exist among riparian States over the issue of equitable utilization of the resources of the Nile water (Horn Affairs, 2011)."

Egypt's primary concern regarding the construction of the GERD is ensuring access to water resources from the Nile, its primary resource, to serve its livelihoods and rapidly growing population; national water demand is anticipated to increase in the future.

On June 17, 2013 former President Mohammed Morsi gave a public speech in which he made it clear that 'all the options are on the table'. In his June 17 address, Morsi noted "*as President of the republic, I confirm to you that all the options are open... if Egypt is the Nile's gift, then the Nile is the gift of Egypt. If it diminishes by one drop, then our blood is the alternative (The New York Times, 2013)*" Following Morsi's threat, former Ethiopian Prime Minister (PM) made astounding speech to the Ethiopian parliament on the potential threat of Egypt on GERD. The PM explained the use of Egypt's Strategy to the Ethiopian Parliaments by categorizing Egypt's approach into three. Firstly, Egypt has persistently tried to ensure that Ethiopia will not receive development loans to finance the project from IFIs or Western donors. The Prime Minister emphasized that Egypt is utilizing its geo-political importance as a political threat against the western States claiming that financing the GERD is a direct attack on Egyptian National Interest. Secondly, noted the Prime Minister, Egypt has a strategy of destabilizing Ethiopia by financing domestic dissident groups and exploiting the ethnic diversity of the country to fuel internal instability. The Prime Minister noted the historical role of Egypt during Gamal Abdul Nasser's reign to push Ethiopia's neighboring States, particularly Eritrea and Somalia, to join the Arab League. The third strategy is using Egypt's biggest military power as a fear factor for any country daring to jeopardize Egyptian national interest on the use of Nile River (Ethiopian Forward, 2013).

3. THE POSITION OF THE TWO STATES

EGYPT'S POSITION

Nile is the life line of Egypt. The Nile River accounts for 96% of Egypt's renewable fresh water. The Nile Valley hosts 98% of Egypt's Population and 95% of the Egyptian population lives within 12 Miles from the Nile. The Nile also accounts for 86% of the freshwater for Egypt's agriculture, which is the main source of Egypt's economy (Jack, 2015). It is no surprise that Egypt considers the Nile as its lifeline and refuses to compromise concerning a project by any riparian States that could potentially affect the water volume that flows into Egypt.

Egypt's national Policy on the Nile has been characterized as 'No Negotiation Nile Policy' indicating the country's zero tolerance towards anyone that might impact the flow of the river into Egypt (Habtamu, 2011). Egypt refuses to recognise any subsequent treaty or principle except the 1959 Egyptian-Sudan Nile Waters Agreement, which Egypt believes have established its unquestionable right on utilizing the resources of the Nile river (Giorgio, 1987). Noting the approach of Egypt on the potential use of the Nile River by upstream countries, Ashok Swain noted;

"The reality is that Cairo has never hesitated to use the threat of war to prevent upstream countries from taking any actions that might adversely affect the lives of all Egyptians. Indeed the Nile has been at the heart of the regional foreign policy that has been pursued by Egypt, which pursues to claim its historic right to utilize the water that it needs from the river (Ashok, 1997)."

Egypt's response to the construction of GERD is no different. The government of Egypt held a National Security Council meeting concerning the GERD project on June 3, 2013. Chaired by the then President Mohammed Morsi during which members of the central government has proposed a strategy of internal conflict and destabilisation against Ethiopia despite the effort of the Egyptian Coptic church to prioritize negotiation. In particular, Egypt's strong reaction to the

commencement of the dam was intensified on the ground that Ethiopia failed to notify Egypt of the construction of the Dam despite the ‘long-standing policy’ of all the riparian States.¹ Egypt has historically used such policy against Uganda that led to Uganda’s cancellation of a water reservoir on Lake Victoria in 1990s.

ETHIOPIA’S POSITION

Ethiopia has always been unhappy about the lack of use of a river that it has overwhelmingly contributed to. The United States Bureau of Reclamation developed comprehensive plans for the construction of dams on the Blue Nile in 1964 and Ethiopia have been refining such plan since then (Whittington & Jeuland, 2014). Even though there have been attempts to construct dams on the Blue Nile during the regimes of Haile Sillasié (1930-1975) and Mengistu Hailemariam (1977-1987) (as Yacob; 100), none of those projects materialized due to threats from Egypt (businessinsider, 2014). Before the beginning of the construction of the dam, Ethiopia spearheaded the NBI’s CFA which was rejected by Sudan and Egypt due to the disagreement on explicitly acknowledging the ‘historic rights’ under the 1959 Agreement.² Ethiopia’s grievance also stems from the fact that despite being the overwhelming contributor of the Nile River, the Aswan High Dam and both the 1929 and 1959 agreements on the Nile River did not consult Ethiopia’s consent.

Ethiopia maintains its sovereign right to use its natural resources within its territory including the Nile River as long as the use does not cause ‘significant’ damage on other riparian States especially Egypt. Ethiopia rejects the 1959 Agreement and other prior agreements as it has never been consulted during the negotiation and signature of those treaties. Moreover, Ethiopia claims that Egypt is exaggerating the potential effect of GERD with respect to the flow of water into Egypt and even contends that due to GERD, the volume of water flow to Egypt would increase since the rockier highlands of Ethiopia has significantly lower level of evaporation. During the launch of the construction of the Dam, the then Prime Minister of Ethiopia noted;

“... [T]he Dam will increase the amount of water resources available, reducing the wastages of evaporation which has been a serious problem in these countries (i.e Egypt and Sudan). It will in fact ensure a steady year round flow of the Nile. This in turn, should have the potential to amicably resolve the differences which currently exist among riparian States over the issue of equitable utilization of the resources of the Nile water (Horn Affairs, 2011)(Daily News Eryp, 2013).”

THE DYNAMICS OF REGIME CHANGE IN ETHIOPIA AND EGYPT

Since the beginning of the construction of the dam in 2011, both Ethiopia and Egypt have gone through significant political changes. These changes have brought within them different government positions and policies in relation to the way the dispute shall be resolved.

¹ Egypt claims that the duty to notify Egypt of all construction projects that might affect the water flow of the Nile River is borne out of past agreements like Anglo-Italian Protocol of 1981 and the 1906 Tripartite Agreement among France, Italy and Britain.

² Ethiopia rejects the 1959 Agreement because of the lack of consultation while all other riparian States (except Sudan and Egypt) reject the Agreement because it was signed while they were under colonial occupation.

In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown from power following a fiery of popular protests. He was replaced by President Mohammed Morsi, who came to power on June 2012. Following his coming to power, Morsi tried to use the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt as a unifying power. In June 2013, President Morsi publicly stated that Egypt's water security cannot be violated at all and that 'all options are open' with respect to dealing with Ethiopian construction of GERD (BBC News, 2013). The speech was made after different media outlets reported that Egyptian politicians were proposing military actions to destabilize Ethiopia by providing military and material support to military groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia (BBC News, 2012). However, less than 30 days after his speech, protests in Egypt began against Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood party. He was deposed from power in July 2013 and replaced by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Unlike his predecessors, General al-Sisi is focused on diplomatic solutions to the dispute.

In Ethiopia, similar changes have taken place. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was deceased of natural cause and replaced by Hailemariam Desalegn in August 2012. Despite the regime change, however, Ethiopian government's position that the dam will move on has not changed. But Ethiopia has continued to seek for diplomatic resolution of the dispute despite the change in leadership. This seemed to have been achieved in December 2015 when the leaders of Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan signed a cooperation deal, called the Declaration of Principles over Nile Water, aimed at establishing joint approach to regional water supplies. The Declaration of Principles shows that Egypt understands the importance of negotiation concerning the Project. The Declaration incorporates 10 principles as fundamental principles governing the relationship between the three countries in relation to the utilization and sharing of Nile resources (Ahram Online, 2015). In a historic de-escalation of conflict, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi agreed to conditionally support the GERD in Ethiopia. He stated publicly that the agreement represents a new chapter in the history of Egyptian- Ethiopian and Nile relations, he raised the ring of friendship (arms interlocked and elevated overhead) with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, and he was quoted as saying, *"Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt are inaugurating a new era of trust which will secure life, future and prosperity of the peoples of the three nations."*

Among the principles are the principles of cooperation and not causing significant harm. To this effect, the three countries agreed that cooperation be based on mutual understanding, good intentions and other principles of international law (Principle 1). In addition, the Declaration reiterates the principle that the three countries will take all the necessary procedures to avoid causing significant damage while using the Blue Nile (Principle 3). The Declaration also specifically emphasizes the importance of peaceful settlement of disputes in cases of disagreements (Principle 10).

The major step forward by the Declaration is the agreement to form a Tripartite National Technical Committee, with four members from each of the three countries to study the potential impact of the dam on other riparian States specifically Sudan and Egypt (Principle 8). The Committee has faced different challenges particularly concerning the consultancy firms to employ for dam impact studies.³ However, the Tripartite Committee has been unable to reach agreement on devising mechanisms to ensure the implementation of the Declaration of Principles.

³Two consulting firms (French BRL (70%) & DUTCH Deltares (30%)) were selected by the Committee. The use of a second firm was a disagreement between Ethiopia and Egypt as Ethiopia insists on using a

Despite positive steps towards diplomatic resolution, Hailemariam's tenure was however characterized by mass protests across the country. Low unemployment, demand for better protection of human rights and opposition to the domination of the Tigrean ethnic group resulted in widespread protests in central and Southern parts of Ethiopia. As a result, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced his resignation on 15 February 2018.

Following widespread protests across the country that led to the resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn, a new Prime Minister was sworn in on 2 April 2018 in Ethiopia. A young reformer Abiy Ahmed started his tenure with call for peace and regional integration across Africa. He explicitly acknowledged that his tenure will prioritize regional cooperation and peaceful settlement of disputes including diplomatic solution to the dispute with Egypt concerning GERD. He backed his pledge towards peace and reconciliation by reestablishing diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, two neighboring nations embattled in conflicts since the Ethio-Eritrean War of 1998-2000.

With respect to the dispute with Egypt concerning GERD, Abiy continued to seek for diplomatic solution. To this effect, Prime Minister Abiy paid a state visit to Egypt in June 2018 where he met President al-Sisi to discuss matters pertaining to GERD and further regional cooperation. During the visit, both leaders pledged to work together towards shared benefit from the Nile River. Abiy also assured that GERD will not cause significant harm to Egypt's water needs and that in case a review of the impact is necessary, the countries will work together. He noted;

*"We will take care of the Nile and we will **preserve your share** and we will work to increase this quota and President Sisi and I will work on this. . . . (Reuters , 2018)*
(Emphasis Added)

Abiy's explicit statement on preserving Egyptian share seemed to address, at least theoretically, the concern over the construction of GERD. Furthermore, upon Abiy's initiation, the leaders of Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan held a tripartite meeting in Addis Ababa on 10 February 2019. Following the meeting, the leaders emphasized the need to rebuild confidence and ensure transparency on all projects being developed along the Nile Basin (Egypt Today , 2019).

4. DE-SECURITIZATION OF NILE AND THE WAY FORWARD

Securitization is a process through which an issue is brought to the realm of security and it is meant to be treated beyond normal politics or above normal politics; 'to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat (Bezen, 2011). Securitization is also about perception; a threat does not have to exist at present but it can be perceived; i.e. it is believed that it will happen in the future. As a result, the securitization of the Nile River treats the flow of the Nile as a security matter and its obstruction a threat to the people of Egypt (Salam, 2018). In this regard, de-securitization of the use of Nile resources is a prerequisite for successful cooperation and equitable use of resources among the riparian States. In particular, the following measures need to be adopted in order to establish mutual trust and conducive environment for cooperation.

single firm while Egypt prefers to use two firms. This disagreement has delayed the function of the Committee.

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES AS A FRAMEWORK FOR COOPERATION

Despite the traditional No Negotiation policy, Egypt has shown a softening concerning GERD. The Declaration of Principles shows that Egypt understands the importance of negotiation concerning the Project. Among the Ten Principles agreed upon are the principles on fair and appropriate use without causing significant damage (Ahrum Online, 2015); principle 3 & 4). Even though the Declaration is a political document as opposed to a legal document, it signifies that Egypt's stance is not totally aggressive. The Declaration specifically emphasizes the importance of peaceful settlement of disputes in cases of disagreements.

The major step forward by the Declaration is the agreement to form a Tripartite National Technical Committee, with four members from each of the three countries to study the potential impact of the dam on other riparian States specifically Sudan and Egypt (Principle 8). The Committee have faced different challenges particularly concerning the consultancy firms to employ for dam impact studies.⁴ The Committee is currently conducting an impact study on the dam even though there are occasional disputes between Egyptian and Ethiopia members of the Committee on how the consulting firms should proceed.

The Committee is a positive development in terms of understanding that Egypt is open to talks as long as the significant damage is avoided. Ethiopia's claim that the dam won't impact rather benefit the downstream countries is in line with Egyptian interest. The major obstacle seems to be not a conflict of interest rather the absence of trust between the two countries.

TRANSPARENCY

Among the factors that escalated the ongoing dispute is the extreme secrecy during the planning and commencement of GERD. Especially for Egypt who feels that the 1929 Agreement puts the duty of notification on all riparian States, the secrecy is unacceptable. But Ethiopia rejects the 1929 agreement and feels that there is a sovereign right to use the natural resources within its territory.

This lack of transparency have especially intensified the distrust concerning the potential impact (or benefit) of the dam on downstream States. For a region with deep distrust, such lack of transparency exacerbates the problem on future cooperation among the riparian States. Ethiopia should provide more information on the unknowns of the dam and has the burden of substantiating the claim that the dam does not significantly impact Egypt. The transparency does not only serve to ease the ongoing dispute with Egypt but also establishes credibility and leadership for future collaborations.

NATIONALISM

As highlighted before the Nile is more than a river for both Ethiopia and Egypt. While Egypt prides itself of being the gift of Nile, for Ethiopia Nile has been a manifestation of weakness and subjugation. Blue Nile (*Abay* in Amharic) has a central theme in Ethiopia's local songs, poems

⁴Two consulting firms (French BRL (70%) & DUTCH Deltares (30%)) were selected by the Committee. The use of a second firm was a disagreement between Ethiopia and Egypt as Ethiopia insists on using a single firm while Egypt prefers to use two firms. This disagreement has delayed the function of the Committee.

and traditions, often as a metaphor of a kid stealing from his mom and giving it to an adversary.⁵ This has shaped the public perception of the relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia for the last decade as foes than friends. This is fuelled by the fact that GERD is not only another development project in Ethiopia but a symbol of ‘renaissance’ that represents ‘taking back what we gave away’ (Abdelhady, 2015). The Ethiopian government has effectively used the project to mobilize domestic political support and unify the people behind the dam. The fact that the dam is virtually financed through taxes and voluntary contributions from domestic sources gives a national pride for a people usually divided on ethnic lines. The politicization of the project has created a sense of extreme patriotism among the locals that any compromise should be off the table. It would be the responsibility of the Ethiopian government to build a local environment that stops denigrating Egypt and portraying it as perpetual rival. In this case, as the operator of the national media outlets, the government can use the media to put diplomacy and cooperation as the best political option for Ethiopian people.

5. CONCLUSION

The tension over the use of Nile resources is not just limited to the ongoing dispute on GERD between Ethiopia and Egypt. It is rather a manifestation of deep rooted lack of trust and sustainable regulatory regime on sharing the resources. GERD is a hydropower generation dam and by their nature hydropower dams are not harmful to downstream States as they are non-consumptive. But neither Ethiopia is being transparent enough to assure that nor is Egypt willing to accept the risk. Egypt’s firm stance has more to do with the precedent that allowing a riparian State to construct dams would set for future development projects over Nile. For a country that has been the most dominant political and economic forces in the Nile basin, it is hard for Egypt to accept a new challenger. But the reality is that more than 60% of the dam is already completed (Sudan Tribune, 2016). Ethiopia has lots of leverage in dealing with the dispute. Firstly, more than 70% of the Nile originates from Ethiopia and Egypt realizes the risk of that. Secondly, Ethiopia has assumed active diplomatic role in the region by stirring the negotiation of CFA and winning over the historically dissatisfied riparian States. Thirdly, GERD has become the hope of electricity source even for the countries in the region that are queuing to negotiate power agreements. And finally, Ethiopia realizes that war is not something that Egypt affords given its political and economic turmoil. To this effect, war over the Nile due to GERD is not realistic. Ethiopia should build on the diplomatic initiatives and strive for building trust among the countries in the basin. The gradual shift of Sudan’s position on the dam, the power transmission agreements with the countries in the basin and the negotiation processes of the CFA indicate that GERD can be utilized as an opportunity to consolidate cooperation and understanding in the future. Ethiopia should also supplement the negotiations with public diplomacy and exchange activities to tackle the growing nationalism surrounding the construction of the dam and the negative perception of the public towards Egypt.

⁵ For instance, the legendary Ethiopian artist Gigi Shibabaw eulogizes the Blue Nile (Abay) as a paradox in her song ‘Abay’.

Abbay, the bounteous;

Have I known that you replenish the desert;

Have I known that you are their flesh and blood?

That they drink from you and eat water;

Abbay, the generous to those of the desert;

Abbay of great bounty, and of great tension... as translated by Yacob, cited at note 5, at p 76

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