

Reflection on the Contemporary Debate on Grand Renaissance Dam

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Introduction

In the last week of February, Saudi Arabia's deputy defence minister, Prince Khalid Bin Sultan, has condemned Ethiopia for "posing a threat to the Nile water rights of Egypt and Sudan¹" at the meetings of the Arab Water Council in Cairo. Though Ethiopia has a long standing historical, religious and trade relationship with Arab countries, the Saudi prince went further to claim Ethiopia as "the enemy of Arab nations". Regardless the fact that Saudi is neither an African nor member of Nile Basin countries, the prince's comment has aggravated the debate on Grand Renaissance Dam and its implications on domestic and international politics.

Since Nile is not only a thing that has only economic benefits, but also it is associated with Ethiopian and Egyptian emotional and mental constitutions, political nationalism and national security, which is defined in terms of national interest. Thus, any dam which is build on the Nile river has its own peculiar political-economy features. Grand Renaissance Dam is not an exception. As a result, it became on one hand the most defining point in the relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt and on the other between the ruling party and oppositions.

¹ **Sudan Tribune:** " In unusual rebuke, Saudi Arabia accuses Ethiopia of posing threats to Sudan & Egypt". February 27, 2013. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article45666>

Grand Renaissance Dam and Its Domestic Implications

It has been said that many opposition leaders have seen the Grand Renaissance Dam in its political connotations. However, even the opposition leaders and elite have polarized views on the dam. For instance, Professor Alemayehu argues that the impracticability of the dam emanates from weak institutional capacity to build the dam in due date, limited financial resources and corruption. Further more, Alemayehu sees the efforts to build big projects as “kleptocratic African “Big Man” syndrome²”. One of his classical example is Kwame Nkrumah’s project of Akosombo Dam on the Volta River. However, still now this dam is the most important power source in Ghana.

Alemayehu and like minded people are repeating the same criticism as Nkrumah’s opponents did. It is clear that criticisms towards “big projects” are emanated from overseen the developmental impacts of these projects in the long run and fear of domination in the domestic political sphere. The hardest line of Alemayehu’s commentary is that it does not demarked the national interest with personal or group interest. Building the dam on Nile river could not be seen as individual or group interest. It is merely a national interest regardless of the person or political group in power. These variants of arguments have also maintained by Diaspora politicians and elites. ESAT’s news are the case in point here. Accordingly, Alemayehu’s commentary can be seen as an academia coverage for the extremist political elite in the Diaspora.

² **Alemayehu:** Ethiopia: Rumors of Water War on the Nile? March 11, 2013.
http://open.salon.com/blog/almariam/2013/03/10/ethiopia_rumors_of_water_war_on_the_nile

On the other hand, Abiye Teklemariam, in his Face book wall, argues that “We are in a very sophisticated and possibly dangerous strategic game with a country [Egypt] that has, at least for two generations, had a muscular foreign policy of protecting its full interest on the Nile as per the exclusionary treaties.” Abiye’s argument is one of the variants of Thucydides’s peace resolutions³. According to Thucydides, the existence of weak and strong nations depend on their own capability to defend themselves or the weaker should capitulate and accept the will of the stronger. And it is clear that Ethiopia is seen as a weak state and as a result, we shall limit the possibilities of direct confrontation with Egypt even at the expense of our national interests. This idiom is not only reflected by Abiye but also by many domestic opposition leaders and elites like Dr. Merera Gudina and Dr. Negasso Gidada.

However, a critical look at these criticisms on the dam reflects the weaknesses of the opposition political elites. First, the fundamental assumption behind these criticisms is that if Ethiopia tries to build a dam on the Nile river, it will open power politics confrontation with Egypt. So far, Ethiopia has achieved a significant triumph over Egypt and the old agreements through diplomacy and mobilizing six countries out of ten Nile Basin countries. Second, limited capacity, in its different forms, does not necessary put the priority of the national interest in to question. We didn’t give up for Italian invasions given the fact that they were equipped modern armaments more than our forehead fathers. Most importantly, in our mind set-up we are still looking at ex-

³ Jackson, Robert H./Sørensen, Georg 2010: Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ternal factors while neglecting internal demands. If our elites are ready to fight poverty, it is a must to build a dam to increase electricity power, which is need for industrialization and irrigation of land to produce more agricultural products. Lets put aside the economic advantages of the dam, we, Ethiopians, need a landmark which reflects the end of the indirect strategy of Egypt to sabotage our internal peace like the battle of Gura 1876 was ended up Egypt's ambitions to control Ethiopia directly.

Thirdly, with this sense, patriotism is needed to defend the national interest. It is safe to say that oppositions argue that the ruling party lacks nationalistic feeling to defend the national interest and security. What is the saga is that oppositions have also lacked this nationalistic feeling. What is needed now is to fight fiercely against the old status quo in terms of academic works, diplomacy and peaceful means. Ethiopia has legitimate natural, historical and legal rights to use Nile for socio-economic development. It is irrational to accept the old agreements for two reasons at least. On one hand Ethiopia has never been a colonial country. All agreements were declined by the-then Ethiopian governments. On the other hand, old agreements did not recognize Ethiopia's rights given the fact that Ethiopia produces 85% of the water volume of the Nile. Because of geo-political, war on terror and colonial reasons, international institutions and most western countries support Egypt. So, the only option we have to defend the national interest is to strength our unity while keeping our differences. This requires a new political culture that our elites don't have.

Fourth, domestically, oppositions have the tradition to oppose what the central government does, regardless of why, where and how. As a result, oppositions leaders lost a political card to mobilize the people around them and to trigger the national feeling ahead of political, ethnic and religion differences. Strategically, the opposition could support Grand Renaissance Dam, and yet criticize how and why aspects of the project. In this sense, they could have crafted more political space for themselves. However, let alone to develop this kind of strategy, they are in their comfort zone and skeptically try to control each other. This is the old dogma and *modus operandi* of Ethiopian opposition political elites.

Grand Renaissance Dam and Its International Implications

Herodotus observed “Egypt was the gift of Nile”. This observation is valid even today since not only the ancient Egyptian civilization but also its very existence depend on Nile water. Thus, Nile is the first prioritized Egypt’s national interest. Historically, Egypt was tried to control directly the source of Nile. The 1876 battle of Gura was marked the end of Egyptian ambition to conquer Ethiopia directly. However, subsequently they developed indirect approach to sabotage and destabilize Ethiopia through pressuring the international institutions not to allow loan and developmental aid to Ethiopia and mobilizing rebels against Ethiopian central governments.

Egypt and Sudan still want to defend the status quo which is granted by the 1929 and 1959 agreements. Great Britain, the then colonial master of Egypt and Sudan, considered Egypt’s and Sudan’s interests as its own because of two reasons. First, Britain

was in die need of raw materials for its textile industry, which had been losing its dominance in the world market and faced strong competition with French and other countries' textile industries. Secondly, it was used as a source of legitimizing the Britain colonial administration since Britain intended to stay in those countries⁴. Given all this historical accounts, since Grand Renaissance Dam is build on the Nile river, it has a strong international implications.

International institutions like World Bank and International Monetary Fund have been (are) cynical to support any of Ethiopian hydroelectric projects. They often see these kinds of project as politically motivated projects. These stands of international institutions clearly reflect the US and most western countries position towards the issue of Nile. Given the fact that Ethiopia is still an ally of war on terror, Egypt is the one who receives more developmental and military support from the US and EU countries. And even Egypt sent its higher official delegation to Beijing in January 2013 to pressure China to scrutiny its financial support to Ethiopia. Nonetheless to say, Egypt will never allow Ethiopia to start to use its right over the Nile river until Ethiopia moves ahead of Egypt's conspiracy attitude.

A Calculus of war on Water

Last week I had a conversation with a friend of mine. We started discussing about the prince's comments on Grand Renaissance Dam. On the middle of our discussion, we started doing a calculus of war for what will happen if Egypt attacks Ethiopia?

⁴ Kendie, Daniel 1999: "*Egypt and the Hydro-Politics of the Blue Nile River*". Northeast African Studies Vol. 6, No. 1-2: 141-169

Internally, Egypt has been facing a political turmoil. According to him, there are two possibilities for Egyptian political elites. First, given the fact that Nile has an emotional and nationalistic features in Egyptian mind set-up, Egypt can attack Ethiopia if the current Egyptian government tries to shift the people's mind from domestic political issues to Nile. It is merely a political tactic that has been used in many African countries. However, this tactic calls for at least harmonized relationship between political and military elites. Slightly speaking, this precondition is difficult now to find in Egypt since Egypt is now under "uncertain state of the nation".

Second, the economic price of waging a direct war is much ahead of the current Egyptian government status. Thus, the best strategy to attack Ethiopia could be using Ethiopia's neighbors possibly Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea. Thought it is not equitable, Sudan is the second most benefited country from the old agreements next to Egypt. Historically, Sudan stands with Egypt on the issues of Nile. However, given its internal political schism, it could be impractical for Sudan to go to war against Ethiopia. The same rationale can apply for Somalia and Eritrea. One thing is possible that Egypt can support Ethiopian rebels groups who have some cell in Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea.

Third, given the recent news about Sudan's conspiracy to give a military base for Egyptian air force and commando for a sudden attack if things do not go as planned. According to this contingency plan, Egypt might use "hit and run" military tactic to sabotage or destruct the construction of the dam. It seems plausible tactic for Egyptian. However, what will happen if Egypt attacks

Ethiopia? This question needs a careful look at the dynamism of world power structure particularly that of UN, EU, Arab League and AU. Without doubt, it will be a just war for Ethiopia to defend its national interest and sovereignty, international communities will have different views depending on their interests.

It is given a fact that Arab League will back Egypt without questioning the just or unjust nature of Egyptian attack. This can be rationalized in terms of considering Egypt's status quo over Nile as a collective interest of Arab League member countries; regarding Ethiopia as enemy of Arab nations; given the fact the Egypt is a most influential country in Arab League's decision making process; and its place on Arab politics and Political Islam. Given Egypt's geo-political position, its importance for war on terror and middle east conflict, UN and EU will take the role of negotiator. Potentially, they might put an embargo on both countries; however, it is systematically support Egypt's position.

What will be the role of AU? It is important to look at the dynamism of AU's decision making process in terms of regional interest. The eastern African countries are part of the struggle to challenge the old status quo on the Nile river. Hence, it is their national and regional interest to support Ethiopia. Even though Ethiopia has a strong influence on AU's decision making process, northern African countries are pro-Egypt and they will continue to materialize the Arab League's decisions. Ethiopia has a very good relationship with the southern African countries. Given Ethiopia's anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid supports for southern African countries, strong people-to-people bondage and unjust nature of Egypt's attack, they will back Ethiopia.

Some of Western African countries will support Ethiopia and others will develop silent mode. Nigeria will not support officially Ethiopia in fear of Boko Haram might politicalized the decision. Even though, much of Ghanaian elites are in favor of pan-Africanism movement, it would be difficult for Ghanaian politicians to support Ethiopia officially. Here it is important to note the legacies of colonial masters of western African countries. Historically, Britain has been favored anti-Ethiopian movement and French has been favored to support Ethiopian governments. Thus, much of western Africa Anglophone countries will not support officially Ethiopia, but Francophone countries will back Ethiopia. These kinds of dynamism can be seen in many of recent AU's decisions including Libya, Congo and Sudan cases. However, the dynamism of decision making process nowadays is not an arithmetic and simple one.

Conclusion

A war on water is merely a propaganda of Egypt to put Ethiopian politicians in fear of losing their power. And it is an old strategy that Egyptians have implemented for the last two centuries. The construction of Grand Renaissance Dam is important basically for economical and attitudinal reasons. Thus, lets put aside our differences and fight together for our nation. Our internal strength is the only solution to put an end for vicious circle economical and political poverty.