

Why is Egypt Raising the Stakes of War on the Abbay River Now?

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November 29, 2017

Ethiopia is prepared to share Abbay (the Blue Nile) with its neighbors in a fair and equitable manner. Ethiopia's primary responsibility is to use it for the service of its growing population and economy."

Emperor Haile Selassie, 1964

The continued assertion by Egypt that it has "a historical and natural right" to exercise hegemony over the waters of the Nile is arrogant, unwise, unfair and very dangerous for Africa. Egypt fails to appreciate the notion that the era of colonialism is long gone. Ethiopia and the rest of Sub-Saharan African nations have the right to use their water resources in order to modernize their respective economies and to achieve food security for their growing populations. Their positions are supported by international conventions.



Ethiopia's historical and natural rights to use its water resources in support of its growing economy and to ensure the food security of its 105 million people is indisputable. This right is supported by the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1994. The Nile Basin Initiative to which Ethiopia is a party supports its legitimate rights.

More specifically, this Convention states clearly that "Watercourse States shall in their respective territories utilize an international watercourse in an equitable and reasonable manner." Egypt built the Aswan Dam to support its economy and ensure its food security needs. It harnessed the waters of the Nile to feed its growing population and supported its industries, including its cotton production and textile factories etc.

On the other hand and for decades, the primary sources of Nile waters, especially Ethiopia, asserted their legal rights to use the waters within their own or respective territories. However, they lacked the political will and the capacity to build major hydroelectric or irrigation dams. Against this background, Egypt enjoyed absolute monopoly over Nile waters and claimed incontestable "historical and natural rights" on natural resources over which it had no legitimacy. The colonial system was on its

side. Sub – Saharan African countries with legitimacy over their waters began to claim their rightful place only in the last two decades. The emerging Sub – Saharan Africa that Egypt fails to recognize and accept is a reality with which Egyptian authorities have to deal. Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan and Uganda are among riparian countries with strategic stakes in the Nile River.

I acknowledge the Egyptian contention that access to Nile waters is a matter of “ life and death. ” Equally, future modernization and food security for Ethiopia is a matter of “ life and death ” and a must for its national security. Looking ahead, population sizes and economic potential and output of Ethiopia and other Sub – Saharan African countries that have vital stakes in Nile waters far exceed that of Egypt. The lives and wellbeing of the people of these countries matter as much as the lives of the Egyptian people. Parity is therefore vital for all concerned. Continued hegemony by Egypt is not the same as equitable use and parity. No Sub – Saharan African government worthy of its name will accept the gross disparity imposed by Egypt and its colonial masters.

Egypt needs to recognize that its economy has grown at a faster pace than Ethiopia and other Sub – Saharan African countries in part due to its agricultural productivity. Nile waters offered it a gift of waters and fertile soils to produce wheat, rice, cotton, corn, beans, fruits and vegetables, sheep, goats and cattle. A bulk of these waters and soils come from the Ethiopian highlands. Therefore, the contemplation of war against Ethiopia or any other Sub – Saharan riparian state would, in the long term, be self – defeating. It undermines Egypt’s national interests. Riparian states have the potential to divert waters from rivers and streams for irrigated farming over which Egypt would have no control. It can’t possibly occupy Ethiopia militarily.

I pointed out in a series of five commentaries on the subject that, Ethiopia has an unquestionable right to use its water resources for the betterment of its population. Ethiopia’s future food security and the prosperity of its population will depend on its ability to harness its water resources for irrigated farming as well as for generating electricity primarily for domestic use. The conception of building hydroelectric and irrigation dams is nothing new. Studies were conducted and options for building dams were conceived under Emperor Haile Selassie. The conception for the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) began during this period. The Derg tried its best to realize this objective. The regime was conflict – ridden. It also lacked the political will as well as the requisite capital to undertake a major hydroelectric or irrigation dam on the Abbay River.

Emperor Haile Selassie’s assertion in 1964 is therefore the fundamental foreign policy principle that guides Ethiopia’s claims to use the Abbay River. Regardless of regime change in Ethiopia, this fundamental principle remains sacrosanct and incontestable. Article 5 (2) of the UN Convention provides the legal framework for equitable use.” This provision contradicts Egypt’s recurrent and unreasonable claim of “historical and natural” rights under which Egypt consumes enormous quantities of water at the expense of Ethiopia and other Sub – Saharan African countries.

Egypt and the Sudan assumed the bulk of Nile waters at the exclusion of Ethiopia and the rest of Sub – Saharan Africa. On November 19, 2017, Mohammed Nabil Helmi quoted President Abdul Fattah al Sisi (see Asharq Al – Awsat) that Egypt’s share of Nile water was “a matter of life or death. ” He meant that no one will affect Egypt’s long – standing national position of preeminence over Nile water. At the heart of his assertion is Ethiopia’s Grand Renaissance Dam that is more than 60 percent complete.

The “ life and death ” assertion was made at a development event on the Nile, where Egypt inaugurated the largest fish farm in the Middle East. “The water of Egypt is not a subject for discussion, and I assure you, no one can touch Egypt’s water” said President Sisi. This utterance is exactly the same as the one voiced by the former President of Egypt, Morsi. He too feared that the construction of the GERD will affect the flow of waters to Egypt.

The completion of the GERD is inevitable; and the fear that water levels to Egypt will decrease

substantially not backed by technical analysis. The dam generates electric power. It would have a devastating effect on Egypt if used for massive irrigation in Ethiopia. In any event, and in the long-term, Ethiopia cannot afford to commit itself to a national policy of no dams for irrigation. Such a position will be suicidal; and the Ethiopian people won't declare "war on their survival" just because Egypt is used to a massive share of 55.5 billion cubic meters of waters to sustain its agricultural sector including fish farming. So, the issue goes beyond the completion of the GERD.

Egypt must tame its voracious appetite for waters that it does not own or produce on its own spaces. It must scale back its use and must negotiate terms and conditions that are fair and equitable. The option of war is not the solution. Nor is Egyptian interference in the internal affairs of Ethiopia or any other Sub-Saharan African country. The realistic and sustainable option is to negotiate fair and equitable deals with upstream riparian countries.

To my knowledge, Egypt did not stipulate during talks in March 2015, that Ethiopia is obliged to cease the construction of the GERD. Egypt's persistence and insistence to adhere to old colonial rules under the frightful utterance of "life and death" while using a disproportionate amount of waters is unreasonable and unjust.

I find it quite ironic that President Sisi intends to support Ethiopia's development efforts while strangulating its economic life line. He may as well declare that "Ethiopia's sustainable and equitable development" that relies heavily on agricultural modernization and industrialization is a "matter of life and death" too. The 1959 one-sided agreement that granted 55.5 billion cubic meters of waters to Egypt is no longer acceptable. Neither Ethiopia nor other Sub-Saharan African riparian nations are bound by this outdated policy. These Sub-Saharan African countries must stand together in defense of their national interests.

In summary and as I commented in a March 2015 commentary on the subject, Ethiopia must not accept any foreign interference in its national projects. Regardless of how I and other Ethiopians feel about the current repressive and oppressive government in power in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's rights to its water resources is a matter of "life and death" for 105 million Ethiopians.

The government of the United States to which Egypt protested must be careful and cautious that it does not lose sight of the fundamental principle that Ethiopians have as much right to defend their sovereign rights as much as Egypt; and that the only reasonable way out of the impasse is diplomacy and not the drum of war.