

Full Length Research

New Development in the Ethio-Egypt Relations over the Hydro-Politics of Nile: Questioning its True Prospects

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The central objective of this study is to examine the true prospects of the recently established amicable relations between Ethiopia and Egypt. To this end, the researcher employed qualitative methodology. Accordingly, data were gathered from secondary sources mainly from books, journal articles, unpublished materials and websites. Based on the data analyzed, the study came up with findings which show a great suspicion on the sustainability of the newly established cordial relations following the coming into power of president El-Sisi in Egypt. The study outlined the following basic reasons: the still persisting mistrust among Egyptians, the existence of anti-Ethiopia forces, absolute dependence of Egypt on Nile, the possibility of using visits for spying purpose, the possibility of buying a time and the inherent worry on the development of Ethiopia. Thus, the paper concludes that the new friendly approach of El-Sisi may be a new tactic to pursue the old objective. Following this conclusion, the study suggests that there is a need, on the part of Ethiopia, to be skeptical and keep a watchful eye on the development while keeping ahead the friendly relations.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Egypt, Nile, amicable relations, downstream countries, upstream countries, El-Sisi

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ETHIO-EGYPT HISTORICAL RELATIONS

The politics of Nile has greatly influenced the Ethio-Egyptian relations since very long time ago. The Nile River has served as the source of tension and mistrust in the two countries' relations. It is rightly outlined that "deep distrust, suspicion, misunderstanding and even political and military confrontations have characterized their relations throughout history" (Ibrahim, 2012). As history reveals, Egypt under the leadership of Khedive Ismail Pasha had encroached into northern Ethiopia so as to control the source of Blue Nile (Abay) as a colony in 1875

and 1876. However, Emperor Yohannes IV, the then emperor of Ethiopia, had successfully taken victories on such invasions at Gundet and Gura respectively. Habtamu (2011) noted that, from that historical juncture on, the form of the two countries' hostilities converted from direct military attack to serious diplomatic and proxy interventions. The whole effect is it created "shadow of mutual suspicions, hostile perceptions, conspiracy theories, and deeply entrenched emotions" between the peoples of Egypt and Ethiopia (ibid). The point at the

heart of such hostilities is Egypt has been all in all dependent on Nile which emanates, mainly, from Ethiopia. As a result of this fact, the foreign policies of Egypt have centered on the objective of securing the continuous consumption of Nile waters. This reality has made the issue of sharing of Nile waters intolerable phenomenon and compelled Egypt to secure its hegemony over Nile.

The colonial agreements have been the main legal basis for Egypt in an attempt to perpetuate its hegemony over the Nile waters. The 1929 agreement was made between Egypt and Great Britain (which had colonized most of upper riparian countries) and it prohibited any kind of activities on the Nile River and its branches that may affect the interest of Egypt (Oestigaard, 2012). This agreement offered Egypt the upper hand on the Nile waters. The 1959 agreement was also concluded between Egypt and Sudan for the full utilization of the Nile waters (ibid). Accordingly, the agreement allocated 55.5 and 18.5 billion cubic meters to Egypt and Sudan respectively (Tedros, 2014). This agreement neither involved upstream countries during the negotiation nor allowed them to use water in any amount. Generally, these segregating colonial agreements put upstream countries out of the game of Nile waters' utilization, without giving concern to where the waters originate.

Upstream countries benefited very minimal from Nile waters. Most importantly, Ethiopia which is the contributor of 86% of Nile waters has used very little, if not nothing, thereon. Conversely, Egypt successfully utilized the Nile waters for long using such discriminatory colonial agreements as a legal ground. Put differently, it advanced the 'historical' and 'natural' rights that colonial powers gave her over the Nile waters (Yacob, 2012). Egypt has contributed nothing to the total volume of Nile, but it has taken the lion's share from Nile's benefit and firmly convinced of monopolizing it (ibid). To this end, it has developed a strict commitment to the 1929 and 1959 colonial agreements and its historical status quo. However, in the recent time, it has encountered great challenges on the part of upstream countries. Climate change, population growth, and poor water management, among others, are the factors that compelled upstream countries to come together to discuss on how to use Nile for sustainable development of the area (Tedros, 2014).

In view of that, the upper riparian countries appear to be highly concerned with the fair and equitable utilization of Nile waters challenging the firm position of Egypt to unilaterally enjoy as well as administer the river. Here comes the clear contention between the need to maintain the status quo by Egypt and the need for cooperation on the river by upstream countries. In 1999, Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was established by 10 riparian countries (including Eritrea as an observer) with the aim to bring sustainable development of riparian countries using Nile equitably by signing an agreement which includes

upstream countries (Yacob, 2012; Michel *et al.*, 2012). Accordingly, riparian countries came up with the Comprehensive Framework Agreement (CFA) in 2009 and majority of upstream countries signed it, namely Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and Burundi while Egypt and Sudan strongly oppose (Yacob, 2012; Michel *et al.*, 2012; Nicoll, 2014). Following the disagreement of downstream countries and the failure of other upstream countries to sign it, Yacob (2012) noted that "countries continue to resort to unilateral measures within their jurisdiction". Most notable example in this respect is the inauguration of Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This new development by upstream countries goes against Egyptians' interest of unilateral utilization of the Nile waters. Egyptian hegemony over the Nile waters put at risk as the upstream countries began to take measures on Nile waters on their territories.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF "GERD" AND THE HASTENING OF HOSTILITIES

Ethiopian government showed great commitment to meet the overriding energy demand of the country as well as neighboring countries by commencing to aggressively harness its hydropower potential. GERD was commenced in 2011 and planned to be completed in 2017. After the completion, the dam is expected to generate 6000MW hydroelectric power. This aggressive plan of the country has created great worry on the part of Egypt which is 97 percent dependent on the Nile waters. Egyptians consider the dam as a serious threat to their national interest as they believe that it will reduce the amount of water flow. As a result, Egyptians continuously released propagandas as to the measures they may take unless Ethiopia stops its project on Nile. In this regard, Pohl *et al.* (2014) unequivocally noted that "Egypt's government responded with belligerent rhetoric, raising the possibility of violent conflict and serious doubts about future cooperation in the basin". Most importantly, former president Mohammad Morsi went to express the possibility of even bombing the dam (The Reporter, 2015). This shows the truth that the announcement of the beginning of the dam added fuel on the existing hostile relations of the two countries.

In response, Ethiopia reiterated that the dam has a lot to contribute to the downstream countries such as providing regular flow of water, resolving problem of siltation, significantly reducing evaporation and providing cheaper electricity export (Tedros, 2014). Above all, it is attested that there exists neither irrigation plan nor irrigable land on the area thereby imposing no significant harm on the downstream countries. Despite such argument, Egyptians have not been convinced instead continue to put pressure to deter the undergoing project.

By the mid-2011, Egypt sent a 48 person delegation named “Egyptian People’s Diplomatic Delegation” comprised of different important figures of the society being headed by Moustafa El Gendy (Getnet, 2014; Simon, N.D). By welcoming the delegation, Ethiopia’s late prime minister reiterated that the dam is helpful for downstream countries. And, to assure them Ethiopia accepted the establishment of an International Panel of Experts (IPE) led by Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt with the support of consultants from international bodies and individual experts (Yacob, 2012; Kidane, 2012; Simon, N.D). This group was established to study the possible impact of GERD on the downstream countries. After their investigation, experts came up with the conclusion that the dam will pose no significant harm on the downstream countries instead it benefits all the three countries (Getnet, 2014; Simon, N.D). The result of experts was unwelcomed event for Egyptians and heightened the prevailing friction (Simon, N.D). Misunderstandings, hostilities and psychological warfare continued to be the order of the days.

THE COMING INTO POWER OF EL-SISI AND THE CHANGE IN ETHIO-EGYPT RELATIONS

After the overthrow of the Islamist government of Mohammad Morsi, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi came to hold the post of the presidency. Subsequently, the new president of Egypt pronounced that “Egypt’s relations with Ethiopia must be informed by cooperation and love, not hatred and belligerence” (The Reporter, 2015). Following this premise, Egypt has changed its foreign policy orientation to have friendly relations with Ethiopia (Ghelawdewos, 2015). The new president recognized negotiation and cooperation as a means for resolving the issue of Nile.

The Meeting of the Two Leaders

Following the coming into power of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in Egypt, the two countries’ relations seem turning into a better direction. Discussions on issues of common concern between governments of the two countries have come to be more regular and more frequent compared to what had been in the previous times (MoFA, 2015). By the month of June 2014, both countries’ leaders could met together at the African Union summit in Malabo and discussed bilateral, regional and continental issues thereby showing an important shift in the two countries’ relations on the Nile issue (Getnet, 2014). This meeting is considered to be a springboard for a new step in the two countries’ friendly relations and mutual understanding (Daily News, 2014). In their discussion, prime minister Hailemariam assured El-Sisi the fact that the dam is crucial for his country too. El-Sisi, on his part, being

optimistic of the value of the project, denounced the anti-Ethiopia activities used by his predecessors and promised that his country will oppose any act of destabilizing Ethiopia (ibid). It is crystal clear that the stance of the new president of Egypt shows a dramatic shift from the past leaders of Egypt as regards the hydro-politics of Nile. This is because the past leaders of Egypt had no room for compromise on the issues of Nile with other riparian countries.

Ethiopian Public Diplomacy Delegation

As part of the efforts to build confidence of Egyptians on Ethiopia’s intension, the Ethiopian public diplomacy delegation, the first of its kind, had a tour in Egypt (ibid). The tour was aimed at consolidating the newly established amicable relations following the meeting of the two countries’ leaders (Getnet, 2014; MoFA, 2014). The team was anticipated to express the intention of Ethiopian government for mutual progress thereby narrowing the gap created due to the inaugural of GERD (ibid). The delegation was comprised of prominent academicians, former Ambassadors, religious leaders, artists and other prominent personalities drawn from various sectors with the headship of Speaker of the House of Peoples’ Representative, Aba Dulla Gemedo (Getnet, 2014). In their meeting with Egyptians, the team time and again reaffirmed the fact that the sole objective of the dam is eradicating poverty and nothing else. It is true that the discussions made in Egypt by these important personalities have a paramount importance in well articulating the beliefs of their country to the host country thereby promoting trust and confidence between the two countries. At the top of all, different activities undertaken by the delegates, most importantly by artists are instrumental in fostering people to people relations.

The response of Egyptians for this public diplomacy delegation was a promising to future amicable relations of the two countries. Interestingly, Egyptian Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahleab expressed, on behalf of Egyptian government, to the Ethiopian public diplomacy team the need for cooperation of the two countries in all areas including education, trade, tourism and investment surpassing the commonly raised and overwhelming issues of Nile (MoFA, 2014). President El-Sisi further confirmed that Egypt under the new government will not repudiate the construction of GERD and the development of Ethiopia at large (ibid). From this standpoint it is possible to safely conclude that the current government of Egypt has showed a major departure from the preceding leaders as to the issue of Nile which had for long been the bone of contentions between Ethiopia and Egypt. It is a common knowledge that there was a propagation that Egypt will go to war if any act is to be done which meddles with the waters of Nile (Daniel,

1999). But, this is reversed by the current government.

The Visit of the Patriarch

The other significant manifestation of the Ethio-Egypt renewed relations is underscored by the visit of His Holiness Abune Mathias, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in Cairo. Abune Mathias visited Egypt for six-days. In his visit, he got His Holiness Tawadros II, Patriarch of Egypt's Coptic Church and visited several churches and monasteries thereby negotiating the need to consolidate the two churches' relation which was interrupted during the Derg regime (MoFA, 2015).

At the top of all, Abune Mathias met El-Sisi and made discussion on the issue of GERD besides the talk to strengthen the two countries' historical, cultural and religious relations (ibid). In the discussion they made, His Holiness reiterated the fact that GERD is so helpful for downstream countries and will not cause significant harm to them, adducing the outcomes of the experts and other studies (ibid). Also, His Holiness insisted that GERD should serve as a source of cooperation and negotiation than conflict and mistrust (ibid) as also been expressed by Ethiopian Public Diplomacy Delegation (MoFA, 2014). President El-Sisi was in affirmative as he affirmed that Egypt will not be a bottleneck for Ethiopian development and thereby promised the two countries' future better relations. This is a major breakthrough compared to the past Egyptian leaders who were highly worried with the development and growing hegemony of Ethiopia as well as other Nile basin countries in the area (Daniel, 1999). Generally, the coming into power of president El-Sisi has showed unpredicted change in the Egypt's position in the hydro-politics of Nile which tends to more cooperation and negotiation than confrontation and animosity.

STILL WORRYING ISSUES

Still Persisting Mistrust

Even though El-Sisi reengineered Egyptians' approach towards Ethiopia in a right direction, the hostility has not been removed completely. In this connection, it is rightly noted that "such an encouraging development, however, does not mean that animosity and mistrust have been rooted out. Some politicians and elites still spew out hatred and threats against Ethiopia. And, a sizeable portion of the people of Egypt continues to distrust Ethiopia" (The Reporter, 2015). It is beyond doubt that even though there are Egyptians who have positive outlook towards Ethiopia, there are still individuals with misconceptions and manifest extreme nationalism (ibid), which could have the potential of dragging the current developments to the opposite direction. The public

diplomacy delegation was sent to overcome such still persisting doubts and mistrusts. However, the researcher believes that even though it is significant, the possibility of utterly converting the deeply rooted pessimistic outlook of Egyptians towards Ethiopia is less likely. To root out the deeply rooted mistrust, hatred and animosity and create full trust and confidence among all Egyptians is not something to be achieved easily.

The Existence of Anti-Ethiopia Forces

It has been a common practice in the Horn of Africa countries to use the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Following this premise, countries supported the available enemies of their enemy to secure their national interest. Most commonly, the tactic is using the enemy's neighboring rivals and internal dissident groups. In this respect, Egypt has for long used all the available means to put pressure on Ethiopia and thereby to maintain its hegemonic position on the Nile waters. The Reporter (2015) affirmed that Egypt has used until recently both directly and indirectly all the possibilities to destabilize Ethiopia internally which is considered to be instrumental for their continued full enjoyment of the Nile waters.

Egypt was the mastermind behind the preparation, consolidation, and perpetration of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) (Daniel, 1999; Ibrahim, 2012). It gave office in Cairo for ELF and facilitated the insurrection eventually leading to political instability, economic decline, and social turmoil in Ethiopia (Daniel, 1999). The whole purpose was to weaken Ethiopia internally and divert its attention and scarce resources to fight insurgents so that Egypt can secure uninterrupted flow of Nile waters. Indeed, as hinted above, Egypt had successfully devastated Ethiopia by backing Eritrean insurgents militarily, ideologically, politically, and diplomatically and secured its hegemonic position on Nile (ibid).

Besides, Ibrahim (2012) clearly noted that "...the war with Somalia, the Ethio-Eritrean conflict and the current threat by the Islamist Al-Shebab movement have all been fanned by Egyptian support". It was supporting Somalia and Eritrea while they were in war with Ethiopia. And it has also backed insurgents in Somalia to prevent the establishment of pro-Ethiopia government. These show that Egypt has never passed any opportunity to undermine Ethiopia. In fact, in response to such conspiracy there was a less comparable reaction by Ethiopian foreign policy too.

The researcher highly convinced that there may be the possibility for the continuance of such practice of proxy wars. One reason for this conviction is that Ethiopia is still in hostile relations with Eritrea. Though the two countries ended the war, they are standing on uncompromising positions and the condition remains to be no peace no

war. Though no direct military confrontation, it is noted that Eritrea still poses a security threat on Ethiopia (Habtamu, 2015). Thus, using such condition Egypt may perpetuate its act of creating threat and turmoil in Ethiopia. The fact that Eritrea supports the “historical rights” of Egypt on Nile (Memar, 2013) may encourage Egypt to further consolidate its relations with Eritrea and operate on the land of the latter to destabilize Ethiopia. Therefore, Egypt may use this opportunity as an instrument to coerce Ethiopia to come to its term. Another reason is the fact that the threat from Somalia is not utterly resolved. Al-Shabab of Somalia is still a security threat to Ethiopia (Habtamu, 2015). Thus, as usual, Egypt may continue to back anti-Ethiopia insurgent groups operating in Somalia. Above all, Ethiopia is not still free from the danger posed by internal dissident groups. Here again, the opportunity is open for Egypt to destabilize the internal situation of Ethiopia and once again to turn her face with all its scarce resources to react insurrections putting aside of the whole development processes.

The researcher strongly believes that Egypt may not miss such chances. This is because Egypt well knows what it has benefited from its previous proxy wars on Ethiopia. The bottom line is Egypt may take supporting Ethiopian enemies as a better option to the already started renewed amicable relations. It may not hesitate to support all the available anti-Ethiopia forces. In this regard, Memar (2013) rightly argued that “I don’t think that Egypt will keep its hand away from Ethiopia as long as there are political forces that are willing to attack Ethiopia”. In a nutshell, there exist ample opportunities to facilitate Egyptian longstanding motive of undermining Ethiopia.

Egypt’s Absolute Dependence on Nile

Egypt has for long extremely been dependent on the waters of Nile. Herodotus attested this fact stating that “Egypt is the gift of the Nile”. Nile means everything for Egyptians. Nile is not only the source of ancient Egyptian civilization but also the very existence of today’s Egypt. Egyptians are 97 percent dependent on the Nile waters. They used Nile waters for millennia for agriculture, drinking, washing, transportation, energy, and other purposes. Egypt’s absolute dependence on Nile emanated mainly from its geographical location and climatic conditions.

Egypt is located in the northeastern Africa. The country forms part of the Saharan desert. It is characterized by the climatic conditions of hot dry summers and mild winters and it received very low, irregular and unpredictable rainfall (Khalil *et al.*, 2011). Egyptians’ maximum average rainfall is only 120mm per year which is the least in the riparian countries (Hassan and Al Rasheedy, 2007). Also, 96 percent of the country is

unpopulated desert thus the whole population of the country is gathered in the 15,000 sq km along the narrow green belt of the river (known as the Nile Valley), and in the exceptionally fertile delta altogether constituting 4 percent of the country’s total area (Yohannes, 2008). This fact forced Egyptians to be absolutely dependent on Nile and to develop a deep sense of entitlement to the river (*ibid*). Without Nile one cannot think of the existence of Egypt. It is for this reason, successive Egyptian leaders strongly committed to safeguard the continuous flow of Nile waters to their land.

The aforementioned fact compelled the researcher to doubt the possibility of the current renewed relationship of the two countries to come to a good end. The fact that Egyptians are still without possible alternative to the waters of Nile blurs the prospects of the two countries’ viable future relationship. To meet the overriding needs of its population, Egypt has entirely dependent on overexploitation of Nile waters instead of finding alternative solutions (*ibid*). President Mohamed Morsi rhetorically pronounced that “... If it diminishes by one drop, then our blood is the alternative” (Verhoeven, 2013). It is also expressed by El-Sisi that Nile is “the source of life” for Egyptians not merely for Egyptian development (Ahrum Online, 2015). These expressions show their absolute dependence on Nile and the non-existence of another viable alternative. To complicate the matter, studies revealed that the water demand of the country will continue to increase steadily in all economic sectors (Hassan and Al Rasheedy, 2007) which puts doubt on the continuation of newly established amicable relations which allow Ethiopia to harness its river.

Spying the Realities in Ethiopia

The researcher also believes that the positive approach of Egypt may be to consolidate its relations with Ethiopia and pay a regular visit to the latter to investigate the prevailing conditions. They may gather the realities in Ethiopia to report back to home. The possibility of using such visits and subsequently acquired facts for another purpose is immense. It is clear that an attack based on knowledge is more likely for success. The act of spying has already been attempted and thus not a new thing. In view of this, it has been reported that very few days before El-Sisi’s presidential inauguration, Egypt sent three individuals to spy dam projects in Ethiopia and south Sudan (Middle East Online, 2014). Hence, though allowing them to visit the dam is instrumental in creating confidence and trust which have been the main sources of hostilities, there is still a need to take into account the possibility of delegates/visitors to serve as a formal spy group. Put differently, the idea is not to prohibit a visit to the site of the dam which in its turn creates another serious danger of mistrust on the issue, but to stress the

care be taken as they may have mysterious missions. Thinking the other way around is very vital while acting in good faith is still normal.

May be Buying a Time?

The El-Sisi approach appears to be surprising in a sense that it deviates from what had been experienced by his predecessors. He positively looked the development of Ethiopia and the under construction dam which were great concerns of Egypt previously. He completely reversed Egypt's zero-sum game calculation almost overnight. Why he preferred so? May be buying a time? There is a belief that "in political struggles peace is only a way to buy time and prepare for war" (Gorfu, N.D). In this connection, Habtamu (2015) best articulated that "... it can be rightly argued that if the right time comes, he will show his true self by inciting hyper-nationalist views at home in pressuring and if need be in forcing Ethiopia". It is noted that after averting the ISIL forces which committed a sudden attack in Egypt, Egypt may turn its face to Ethiopia using the sophisticated weapons which are obtained from external support. It is further argued that "Sisi is not foolish to confront the sophisticated Israel and Iran. Rather, his first target in this case will be Ethiopia" (ibid). Zerihun (2014) further noted that "...what we have seeing and listening is no more than a mere change of tactic to buy time and appear cooperative while continuing the divide and rule policy". The researcher supports these arguments because Egypt may be using a new tactic while pursuing the usual goal. It may be waiting the right time to resume the commonly known act of creating threat and turmoil in Ethiopia thereby to ensure the constant and undiminished flow of Nile waters into its land. The message is the new development should not give Ethiopia a relief instead it should make it skeptical of the change on the part of Egypt. It needs to keep a watchful eye on the development because when the circumstances allow Egypt may turn back to its real ultimate goal.

Egypt's Inherent Worry on the Development of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is said to be one of the fastest growing countries in Africa and the world at large while anticipated to continue in the same pace (Addis Ababa, 2011). It has showed a remarkable economic growth for the past decade. It is also a relatively politically stable country in Africa which contributes for the overall development of the country. In this regard, the realization of GERD is supposed to be one significant engine of the overall development of the country, which has been a headache for Egyptians since long time ago. Pragmatically looking,

having cognizant of this truth letting Ethiopia to further develop and consolidate seems less conceivable unless Egypt has calculated some other project having the goal of undermining Ethiopia. This is because if it allows the progress of Ethiopia, what would be its guarantee for the uninterrupted flow of Nile into its land in the future, unless it is going to opt military attack which is an outdated weapon in this modern time.

The above outlined points are reasons why suspicion is to be made on the unexpected development in the Ethio-Egypt relations. Accordingly, the whole idea of the above discussion is that there are a number of factors which pose question on the healthiness of the new development on the two countries' relations. After all, how one can easily (free of doubt) think of positive from the country which has constantly and without rest strived for the failure of Ethiopia. Hence, a critical look on the true intension of Egypt to convert its entrenched zero-sum mentality is very crucial.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ethio-Egypt relations have for long been characterized by hostilities and mistrust. However, the coming into power of president El-Sisi has showed unexpected departure from the past leaders through changing the two countries' relations into a positive direction. In this study, the researcher questioned the true prospects of the renewed amicable relations. The fact to be noted is that the analysis given in this study does not show the pessimistic outlook of the researcher on the two countries' future positive prospects. It does not also mean that normalizing the two countries' hostile relations and consolidating amicable relations have no importance. Instead, the very idea of this paper is to insight the fact that there is a need to critically scrutinize the true motive behind the new and friendly approach of the current government of Egypt. Thus, the study suggests that there is a need to be vigilant on the part of Ethiopia while keeping forward the current amicable relations.

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