

The Historic Ethiopian-Egyptian Renewed Diplomacy and Cooperation

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I am gratified to witness the renewed Ethiopian-Egyptian diplomacy and cooperation after much turbulence, mistrust, and bellicose political climate that have gripped the two African nations for decades. To be sure, it was Egypt that had promoted *animus belligerendi* (a near war attitude) against Ethiopia since the days of Emperor Haile Selassie. Now, thanks to the wise leadership of President Field Marshall Abdel Fatah el-Sisi and the pragmatic vision of the Egyptian people, Egypt has completely reversed its old policy and enhanced a friendly foreign policy toward Ethiopia. Ethiopia, on the other hand, had advanced a more conciliatory and *compromise d'arbitrage* (resolving disputes peacefully) policy toward Egypt, but finally, so it looks, the Ethiopian patience paid off.

Back in 2001, I personally was hopeful that Egypt and Ethiopia were going to resolve their differences on the Nile issue amicably based on the initiative taken by the Eastern Nile Council of Ministers, and because sometimes reality takes on the quality of self-fulfilling prophecy, I had then ventured on analyzing the Ethiopian-Egyptian relation conundrum as follows:

The outcome of the Seventh Eastern Nile Council of Ministers which heralded the news that Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan agreed to develop the Nile is a very encouraging political measure that, in turn, signals hope to the people of north east Africa. As Mohammed Zeid, the Egyptian Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation aptly puts it "the level of achievement is extraordinarily satisfactory." This affirmation by itself is, by all measure, an indication of the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel". Beyond the metaphoric "light of hope", however, it is the raw material now laid down by Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan, which clearly exhibit a development consortium that would at once resolve the tensions between these countries and furthermore link them together in a peaceful human endeavor for a common agenda. ...The three countries had already invested in the precursor of the Eastern Nile Subsidiary Action Program (ENSAP) to cooperate on irrigation, drainage, and hydroelectric development. This kind of cooperation and agreement is, of course, not new to the Sudan and Egypt; only Ethiopia is a new partner, and because of its inclusion, the agenda of Nile development could become more meaningful and effective.¹

However, in the last three years, when constellation of problems infested the Egyptian-Ethiopian relations, in large measure due to Ethiopia's decision to construct a huge dam on the Nile, all the hope I garnered in 2001 was dashed and washed away. As a result of the viscerally disturbing Mohammed Morse' s policy against Ethiopia, I was compelled to incorporate a defensive posture to the extent of defending Ethiopia's interests without damaging Egypt's inalienable right to the use of the Nile waters. Thus, in 2013, I wrote an article entitled "Ethiopia Has No Choice but to Cooperate with Ethiopia on the Nile Issue" and this is how I put it then:

...The people of Egypt will continue to enjoy the waters of the Nile in spite of the dam construction project in Ethiopia...Contrary to opposing the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam of Ethiopia, Egypt is best advised to cooperate with Ethiopia and support the Nile initiative Ethiopians have taken to tame and harness the Nile on their own turf. Moreover, Egypt is advised to invest and benefit in return rather than venture on opposing the completion of the Grand Renaissance. By cooperating with the Government and people of Ethiopia, Egypt has nothing to lose but to gain. It is quite obvious that the ultimate resource of the Nile Water is Ethiopia, because the Blue Nile (Black Nile as it is known in Ethiopia) contributes 80 to 90% of the water and 96% of the alluvial soil to the Nile, and the country that benefits most from the 'gift of the Nile' is Egypt. ...Ethiopia, on the other hand, must reciprocate Egyptian [anticipated] cooperation by, first and foremost, guaranteeing the water needs of the Egyptian people.²

In the above mentioned article and in another article entitled "Ethiopia Must Complete the Construction of Gligel Gibe III"³, I have defended Ethiopia's right to construct dams on its own turf and underscored the hundreds of countries across the globe that built dams, not to mention the USA that boasts 75 to 80,000 dams across the nation.

Incidentally, one of the myriad countries that built dams and hydroelectric power is Egypt. The first attempt by Egypt of constructing a dam goes back to 1902, when the country was still under British rule. The Aswan High Dam, constructed under the auspices of the Soviet Union during Gamal Abdel Nasser, "was expected to have an impact on agriculture in two ways. The old lands were to be more intensely cultivated especially in Upper Egypt, allowing the peasants to earn more by growing more...The second effect of the dam was to expand Egypt's cultivated surface by 16 to 20%, to transfer substantial numbers of near-landless to the reclaimed areas, and thereby to increase agricultural production further."⁴

The Aswan High Dam, locally known as Al Sadd al 'Ali, was completed in 1970 and began its operations in the same year. It is 111 meters high, 3,830 meters-long, and 980 meters wide. On top of the obvious agricultural and power purposes of the Dam, as John Waterbury aptly put it, "it symbolized rationality in resource management, national sovereignty and strength, and the leading role of the state in finding technocratic solutions to Egypt's socio-economic problems. All are closely linked together."⁵

There is a striking resemblance between the rationale behind the construction of the Aswan High Dam and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The latter's main purpose is to generate hydropower, sell electricity to neighboring countries and allocate the money to alleviating poverty as well as realizing development projects. Admittedly, however, Ethiopians in general and the Government in particular have tacitly (and in some instances explicitly) attributed Ethiopian pride and self-reliance to the GERD. It has now become a common parlance among Ethiopians that the GERD should be built by Ethiopians, both in terms of labor and finance.

Some Diaspora Ethiopian commentators have wrongly assumed that Ethiopia has already incurred a huge debt in financing the construction of the Renaissance Dam. The fact of the matter is that no country or international financial institution has extended financial help (grant or loan) to Ethiopia, except for China. The total allotted budget for the construction of the Dam is \$4.8 billion and while Chinese banks have offered \$1.8 billion, the remainder \$3 billion will be financed by Ethiopians (via bonds and private funds), which by the way is only 10-15% of the total \$42 billion current Ethiopian GDP.

When the general plan of the GERD was laid in March 2011, it was decided to construct it on the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State of Western Ethiopia, a State which is contiguous with Sudan. It was also decided that the general structural features of the Dam, when completed, to be 170 meters tall, 1,800 meters long, and will have two power houses, each with 8X350 MW Francis Turbine generators. Moreover, a 50 meter high saddle dam that would reinforce the dam and a three mile long reservoir.

At a time when I write this essay, 40% of the Dam's construction is complete and by July 2017 it is expected that the Ethiopian engineers will announce to the world that they have successfully completed their job. When Ethiopia heralds the completion of the GERD in 2017, it is not only Ethiopians and other African people of the Nile Riparian states that will celebrate, but also the people of Egypt (the Misir brothers and sisters) that will take center stage in the festivity, and it is for reasons discussed below.

The recent Ethiopian public diplomacy group sojourn to Egypt and the joyous welcoming and hospitality it enjoyed from the Egyptians, tells it all. According to some of the seventy-strong Ethiopian public diplomats and their hosting counterparts, a mutual understanding and reassurance has been achieved, and both sides seem to agree that Ethiopia and Egypt have ironed out their differences on the GERD's impact on Egypt and the Egyptians are comfortable and at ease now.

Instead of concluding with my own interpretation of the Ethiopian-Egyptian renewed diplomacy and cooperation, however, I found it more palatable and meaningful to simply narrate as is the discourses of the Egyptians and Ethiopians in their own words.

In their three-day sojourn, the Ethiopians met President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahleb, His Holiness Patriarch Tewodros III of the Egyptian Coptic Church, and many professionals and intellectuals, as well as writers. In no uncertain terms, Prime Minister Mahleb told the Ethiopians that the peoples of Ethiopia and Egypt are interconnected by history. The Ethiopian parliament spokesman Aba Dula Gemedo, on his part, stated that the Egyptians expressed their support for Ethiopia's development projects and that they very well understood

Ethiopia's concern of Egyptian water needs.

I was elated to learn that the Egyptians indeed said, "Egypt has no choice but to support Ethiopia's development programs" and those were the exact words I entertained in my 2013 article mentioned above. Whether the Egyptians have now realized the necessity of fostering a more meaningful relationship with Ethiopia or are driven by their national interest and wanted to pursue cooperation with Ethiopia is not of our concern now. At this juncture, both countries have forged a more amicable relationship and when this endeavor is further enhanced, Egypt and Ethiopia will be the beneficiaries from hitherto unforeseen productive palate.

His Holiness Patriarch Tewodros III said, "The Nile should connect us and not divide us." The Ethiopian Muslim cleric and chair of the Ethiopian Muslim Affairs Council Sheik Kiyar Mohammed Aman pointedly stated, "We have brought with us love and cooperation and we will not reduce a drop of water to Egypt." Mohammed Derar, the Ethiopian Ambassador to Egypt, reiterated the Egyptian positive remarks and distinctly underscored the meeting of the Ethiopians with top Egyptian political, religious, and civic leaders.

A member of the Ethiopian delegation, Weizero Mulu Solomon, categorically addressed the Egyptian audience by saying, "We should not be prisoners of old ideas; we can change not only Egypt and Ethiopia, but the entire continent of Africa." Ato Amare Aregawi of the Ethiopian Reporter unambiguously presented the weakness of the media in promoting an African agenda for African development. Professor Bahru Zewde also reassured the Egyptians that construction of the Renaissance Dam would not negatively affect Egypt, and some of the Ethiopian delegation including Dr. Aregaw Yirdaw perceived the joint meeting of the Ethiopians and Egyptians as one based on "deeply rooted relationship of the Ethiopian and Egyptian peoples."

While Prince Be'ede-Mariam Mekonnen asserted that Egypt can actually benefit from the Renaissance Dam, Ato Girma Seife entertained the legitimate concern and/or fear of the Egyptians as a result of GERD major project, although he added, "their fear is not based on truth." But of all members of the Ethiopian delegation, it was Ato Tesfaye Daba who pointedly and positively said, "Ethiopia has the right to develop herself, and the mission that we have brought from Addis Ababa has been realized."

Most of the Egyptian delegation, including Foreign Minister Semih Shukri has unequivocally supported the Ethiopian development agenda and the construction of the GERD. One of the Egyptian delegation in fact, said, "When we go to Ethiopia, we feel that we are going to our second country." Members of the Egyptian Writers Association, also present in the meeting, were by far candid and frank in their presentations. One lady distinctly and honestly asserted, "We [Egyptians] drink water that comes from Ethiopia, but we don't know much about Ethiopia; I myself have not read a single book on Ethiopia." And Mohammed Idris addressed the Ethiopians with gesture and sincere tone: "You Ethiopians have a national pride; we need your support."

One tangible and promising achievement attained in the renewed relationship and cooperation of the two nations is the formation of the Ethiopian-Egyptian Business Council, which I believe is going to serve as a solid cornerstone for future Egyptian-Ethiopian relations and synergy of development programs of the two nations. In the final analysis, Ethiopia and Egypt that are the pride of civilization of antiquity of Africa should indeed be the potential leaders of the continent, and as I have argued elsewhere in my previous works, Egypt in the North, Ethiopia in the East, South Africa in the South, and Nigeria in the West should play a major pan-African development agenda that could in actual fact unite Africa.

Notes

¹Ghelawdewos Araia, "Development Consortium of the Nile is the Way to Go", *East African Forum*, February 13, 2001. Also view "Egyptian Blooper: Politicians, unaware they are in air, threaten Ethiopia" video clip on www.africanidea.org

²Ghelawdewos Araia, "Egypt Has No Choice but to Cooperate with Ethiopia on the Nile Issue", www.africandiea.org/Egypt_has_no_choice.html June 13, 2013

³See "Ethiopia Must Complete the Construction of Gilgel Gebe III" www.africanidea.org/Gilgel_Gibe_111.html

⁴John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes*, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 87

⁵John Waterbury, *Ibid*, p. 64