

## **Ethiopia: My Takes on the Ethiopian Dam and the Addis Ababa Master Plan**

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**By Messay Kebede**

**The issue of the so-called “Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam” has proven very tricky for all those Ethiopians who oppose the present regime. On the one hand, no Ethiopian wants to see Ethiopia’s right to use the waters of Nile for its own development contested so that any interference from external countries appears as an unacceptable assault on its sovereignty. On the other hand, many Ethiopians are understandably apprehensive of the detrimental ecological and social impacts of such a huge project and are skeptical about its economic benefits, a skepticism based on the failures of the experience of huge dams in other African and non-African countries.**

**Recently, three eminent Ethiopian scholars, namely, Minga Negash, Mammo Muchie, and my dear friend Seid Hassan wrote an article in which they argue that Ethiopians must engage in a cost-benefit**

analysis instead of opposing the project based solely on its alleged negative consequences. They find that the dam will provide “valuable economic benefits,” but they also admit that it will have several negative “side-effects.” This admission led them to say that “Ethiopians may legitimately ask questions and raise concerns about the manner in which the Government of Ethiopia is handling the project.” Accordingly, while concerns are legitimate, a simple one-sided opposition is not.

Since the article was obviously written to help Ethiopians resolve the dilemma in which they find themselves, I must confess that I remain as perplex as before. After reading the article, I still wonder whether the opposition to the dam project is really misplaced. Precisely, the cost-benefit analysis that they advocate seems to show an imbalance in favor of cost because even if we concede that the dam will be economically beneficial, the question remains as to who will benefit from the project and at what costs. The three scholars are right when, dismissing the validity of colonial treaties, they defend the sovereign right of Ethiopia to use the waters of the Nile. Unfortunately, the question is not only about sovereignty, it is also about the misuse of the right by a ruling clique whose records in the defense of Ethiopian interests have been so far nil.

It is fair to say that people should not expect anything good coming from a ruling elite that so wholehearted landlocked Ethiopia. Moreover, the fragmented nature of Ethiopian society thanks to the ethnic divisions implemented by the TPLF puts us in no position to

antagonize further our enemies. There is no doubt that Egypt will engage in destabilizing policy, short of a military attack, to either stop the construction or makes it very costly for Ethiopia. True, as concerns ecological consequences and social adversities, such as displacements of people, palliatives can be found to mitigate the damages.

Nonetheless, can one seriously expect that the ruling elite, assuming that it is capable of such concerns, will take the necessary measures to alleviate the harmful downsides of the dam?

It is also true, as noted by another dear friend, Tecola Hagos, in a recent article, that the existing government was successful in removing the traditional opposition of Sudan. The question is, at what cost? Is the seceding of Ethiopian territories, which happen to be in the Amhara region, the price for the Sudanese support? Who has any idea of the secret deals between the Sudanese and the Ethiopian governments? Clearly, to change the dam into a project in which benefits would outweigh costs, the condition is to have in place a nationalist and democratic, that is, accountable, government.

Last but not least, is the project really economically viable? I am no expert in this matter, but plenty documented studies on the real benefits of grand dams exist that invite caution, if not outright skepticism. Caution is all the more advised since the project originated from the former prime minister whose dictatorial ethos and aspiration to personal grandeur have left Ethiopia in a state of shamble. As pointed out by Alemayehu G. Mariam's article, dictators are consumed by vanity and the need to justify their rule. As a result, they launch grandiose projects whose purpose is both to flatter their

aspiration to grandeur and hide the misery and pettiness of their rule. It is important that we resist the temptation of separating the dam from Meles's megalomania if only because it gives the reason why alternative proposals that would be less costly and more in tune with the environment and the interests of surrounding people were discarded in favor of the Grand Renaissance Dam. I am not convinced by the argument that economic benefits are dependent on the size of the dam, and not on a smart, efficient, more manageable use of the water.

To the argument of economic benefits, Tecola adds that projects like the grand dam can work as antidotes to the ethnic division of Ethiopia. Projects with a national dimension counter the fragmentation of the country and serve as achievements around which people can rally and repair their torn unity and national identity. As a harsh critic of Meles and his regime, Tecola knows that national projects are not enough to patch up Ethiopian unity. Centuries of common existence did not deter the Tigrean TPLF from advocating and implementing an ethnonationalist agenda. To counter the trend, we need a government that expressly dismantles the institutions created to divide Ethiopia and promotes a national culture that permeates ethnic identities.

That is why Tecola supplements his support to the dam with the argument that "the current Government of Hailemariam Desalegn seems to be engaged in a subtle fight to reverse such disastrous course of national disintegration." In thus making his support

conditional, Tecola joins all those Ethiopians who have serious concerns about the good use of the dam, the only but important difference being that concerned Ethiopians, in which I include myself, are not as optimistic as Tecola in the belief that the actual prime minister has the necessary power to reform the regime. In light of this uncertainty about the reformist agenda of the prime minister, I maintain that it is still reasonable to oppose the construction of the dam.

The upshot of all this is that the mentioned articles, despite their good intention and estimable arguments, do not do the job of appeasing my original concerns. To support the construction of the dam, I require an open debate about the pros and cons and the release of all relevant official and secret documents. By debate I do not mean the defense of the project by the officials of the government, but the presentation of alternative projects. The goal must not be to obtain endorsement, but to allow people to exercise their free and enlightened judgments with no attachment of political significance that would be construed as supporting or opposing the regime. Of course, some such condition amounts to nothing else but a change of government, given that the present regime will never subscribe to an open debate. Anyway, the construction of the dam is on its way so that the time for open debate has already passed. Even so, I reserve the right to oppose a *fait accompli* if only to show that the dictatorial regime did not fool me a bit.

The second issue I want to deal with is the riots caused by the expansion plan of Addis Ababa into Oromo territory. University students from various towns located in Oromia have expressed their opposition to the expansion plan by engaging in peaceful demonstrations. Undoubtedly, a number of legitimate questions can be raised against the plan, the most important being the utility of such an expansion. Why expand Addis Abba further when already its disparity with other towns is only too wide? Why not use the available resources to expand other towns that badly need to grow? This focus on Addis Ababa seems to be a continuation of the policy of make-believe, so dear to dictatorial regimes. It is more about impressing tourists, foreign visitors, and supporters than implementing a policy of development that really benefits the country as a whole. More importantly, the plan does no more than expand what Addis Ababa has effectively become, namely, the secluded island of exclusive enrichment for the cronies of the regime.

Another legitimate concern has to do with the fate of the Oromo peasants who surround the town. Unsurprisingly, the government insists that the plan promotes the integrated development of Addis Ababa and its surroundings. But seeing the government's previous records of forced displacement of peasants with no or inadequate compensation in other regions of Ethiopia, there is no reason to suppose that a different fate awaits Oromo peasants. One more time, what matters is not the declared good intention, but the reality of an implementation devoid of established process of accountability. Any more than in the case of the dam, Oromo students have little reason to take at face value what the government is saying or promising.

**The irony of the whole case is that the regime is reaping what it has sown. The creation of ethnic regions and their definition as sovereign nations could only backfire at the plan to expand Addis Ababa into a territory considered as the exclusive property of the Oromo. In principle, the invention of nations within the Ethiopian state considerably limits the authority of the central government so that Oromo students are within their rights accorded by the ethnonationalist constitution of the TPLF. The crackdown on the students is just another proof that the TPLF has done nothing but trample its own constitution since it came to power. Accordingly, what is absolutely unacceptable is the violent repression of the students who did nothing but use their recognized right to express their demands in a peaceful way. This savage repression, which caused many deaths, should be emphatically denounced by all Ethiopians.**

**That said, it must be at the same time clear that the condemnation of repression does not mean the endorsement of ethnic politics and borders. Indeed, from what I have read so far, Oromo students oppose the expansion because it violates the sovereignty of Oromia. For unionists, this is not the right reason and they should say so openly. They must condemn the violation of Oromo students' right to protest peacefully, but they also must make quite clear that the condemnation is not an approval of killil politics.**

**I take this opportunity to ask unionists to become more aggressively engaged in favor of Ethiopian unity. It is high time that unionists drop their timid approach to unity in the hope that their timidity will decrease the secessionist tendency of Oromo nationalists. Especially, the Amhara elite must shake off their sense of guilt over the marginalization and mistreatment of Oromo under the previous Amhara dominated regimes. The fall of these regimes, which would not have been possible without the active and multifarious participation of Amhara elites and people, exonerates, so to speak, the Amhara and celebrates their decisive input in the rise of a new Ethiopia in which ethnic groups with their language and characteristics will flourish in conjunction with their Ethiopianness. EPRDF and other ethnonationalist groups present the new Ethiopia as a political reality born against the will of the Amhara when we all know that nothing would have been possible without the primary rise of Amhara students and elites against the imperial regime. Indeed, the time has come to raise the mere defense of Ethiopian unity to the offensive level and this change begins with the work of unifying the unionist base and laying out a clear vision of what the new Ethiopia will be. Our rallying motto should be: unity in diversity versus diversity in disintegration!**

**Wake Up Unionists!**

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