

DeNial is Not a River

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For some, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile (Abay) continues to be a source of controversy and insecurity. For Ethiopia, however, the construction of the GERD is a simple choice: a choice between light and darkness; poverty and prosperity; dependence on the charity of others and dignity; renaissance of a great nation and its people and that of a nation which would be left behind with the rest of the “rest.” The choice is obvious; the missing ingredients were leadership, stability and peace - which Ethiopia has now managed to secure for itself.

Ethiopia is also working hard for peace in its immediate neighborhood and throughout the continent in cooperation with the African Union, the United Nations, neighboring governments and other peace partners.

Abay

For centuries Ethiopians, like many tourists and adventurers, were awe struck by the beauty and majesty of Abay. They were seemingly indifferent about Abay - the resource - or possibly unable to see beyond the river's drop zones, the smoking falls and the gorgeous gorges that Abay mockingly dances through and disappears beyond the horizon into exile. Abay the “rebel” like many of the diaspora fringe politicians - despite its potential and ability to play a meaningful role in the prosperity of its native land - had remained a source of pain and discomfort because it too had chosen to completely drain itself out and deny the people a much needed respite so the nation can emerge from under development and overcome the scourge of poverty and its gate keepers.

Many misty eyed romantics and nationalists wrote prose and sang about the rebellious nature of Abay and the river's sheer disregard for their feelings and needs. Many a sonnet was written about the unrequited love between Abay and the residents of its immediate watershed who looked at destiny with disdain until they realized the power of their unity and their ability to shape destiny through the visionary leadership of a precious son, the late prime minister, Meles Zenawi.

Some indigenous observers believe, the genie is out; the mystery of Abay has been solved. Many Ethiopians are convinced that no mortal or sovereign is mighty enough to bend the trajectory of “the arch of justice” that Ethiopia and the upstream countries have embarked on. It is clear, as far as the majority of the riparian countries are concerned, the only way to manage their shared resource, the Nile is: responsibly, equitably and in a sustainable manner.

It is evident that the Ethiopian people have now seen the sun rising from the deep gorges of Abay. They have started to dry their misty eyes in a resolute determination to harvest the full potential of Abay, utilize its energy to develop their country and transform their lot for the better. Ethiopians are also aware and fully cognizant of the geopolitical sensitivities of downstream nations and their own rights and responsibilities with respect to Abay - as the source nation of more than 85% of the total flow of the Nile.

Poverty Mitigation

The ruling party and the government of Ethiopia have identified poverty as the primary enemy of the people. They have designed a growth and transformation strategy to combat the ills of underdevelopment and are working hard to mitigate poverty by using all of their available resources without denying the right of others to reasonably and responsibly benefit from any and all common and/or shared resources. The people of Ethiopia have made it clear that their resolve to extricate themselves from abject poverty does not negate the needs and aspirations of the brotherly peoples of the region and that it shall not be accomplished at the expense of the environment.

Ethiopia has now set its priorities right. It has launched itself on an ambitious development and transformation orbit that is designed to maximize and efficiently utilize the full potential of the people and their resources. In this regard, Ethiopia is focusing on its energy sector and building sufficient capacity to benefit from its immense hydro-geological potential.

One of the major hydro projects underway is the GERD. The GERD is expected to be a source of a renewable energy to meet the ever expanding domestic need and to contribute to the energy security of the region. Some of the energy will be exported to neighboring countries, including many of the riparians of the Nile, at pre-negotiated reasonable prices which will enable Ethiopia to generate a stream of revenue in hard currency.

It seems to me, trash talkers aside, the GERD is more than a great infrastructure project or a “white elephant” as some have alluded to it. The GERD is a great symbol of the collective awakening of the consciousness and potential of the Ethiopian people in their resolve to see poverty in their rear view mirrors for once and for all. The GERD has effectively become a touch stone that has galvanized a nation and its people in their endeavor to restore dignity and their rightful place among the great nations and peoples of the world.

The GERD is also a public enterprise that is constituted with the full consent and support of the people of Ethiopia. Ethiopians for the first time have now set out to fully fund a mega infrastructure project on their own and are prepared to bear the cost of the GERD so it can be completed without delay. To this end, citizen sourcing has enabled Ethiopia to effectively bypass geo-political pressure and related funding constraints. Ethiopians, as in the people themselves, are now the sovereign share holders of their resources.

The government of Ethiopia, on many occasions, has also expressed its readiness and determination to pursue the people's legitimate interests and safeguard the peoples rights and gains. Ethiopia, as a responsible nation, however has chosen to engage all stake holders and its development partners. The policy directions are clear. The Ethiopian people continue to believe and strongly advocate for strengthening multilateral and bilateral mechanisms and setting up a system and a process in place to oversee basin wide initiatives and help resolve any contentious issues between and among riparian nations amicably.

Nile Crocodile Tears

The Nile derives its headwaters from the highlands of the greater East Africa region, gathers input from many tributaries and traverses through several sovereign states before spouting its contents into the Mediterranean Sea.

So how did the Nile become an Arabian river?

Over the years a combination of soft and hard power – including acts of violence and threats - have been used to directly or indirectly stifle any development efforts on the Abay. Concerns and cross cutting and/or competing meta narratives still continue to be utilized without any signs of abatement. This time however, many of the arguments have lost their shine.

Recently, however, some seem to be using old arguments to make a point or as a means to an end in order to satiate a thirst for power and influence or as a part of a subversive geopolitical design; a catastrophic miscalculation.

One such uncalled for provocation against the people and government of Ethiopia came from the deputy Defense Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Prince Khalid, at a recent water summit in Egypt. The Prince was clearly out of line when he inserted himself and by extension his country and other Arab states as direct stake holders in matters of the Nile. He railed for no apparent reason and pointed fingers at “evil” Ethiopia:

“...There are fingers messing with water resources of Sudan and Egypt which are rooted in the mind and body of Ethiopia. They do not forsake an opportunity to harm Arabs without taking advantage of it...”

The media and some in the commentariat picked up the story and gave it significant play time and their own spin. The Ambassador of Saudi Arabia in Addis and the Kingdom's Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly distanced themselves from the opinions of Prince Khalid. Ministers, Emissaries and Trade representatives of the Kingdom and their counter parts in Ethiopia have also underlined the importance of the deep rooted and historic relationships between the people of the two nations and the strengthening economic ties as proof that Saudi Arabia means business and has no ill will towards Ethiopia. However, perceptions of mistrust remain.

The Egyptian ambassador in Addis, also attempted to deescalate the rhetoric in an interview with the Ethiopian Reporter. He delivered the right sound bites with the right tone but sans the requisite forthrightness and sincerity anticipated by his target audience, the people of the riparian countries and particularly Ethiopians. Nevertheless, the Ambassador seems to know his craft and has delivered his points with more finesse; much better than some of the political elite in Egypt and his immediate predecessors.

It seems Ethiopians have also become more sensitive about Nile issues. Many have eloquently expressed their displeasure with Prince Khalid's unwarranted attack against them and their nation. Some however, have tried to amplify the volume beyond proportion and speculated on the Prince's, his country's and Egypt's sinister motives.

Why are some misguided critics speculating on motives, repeating the same stale arguments and attempting to stalk conflict and controversy?

Some in the commentariat tried to make the most of the unfortunate comment, without due care and regard for unintended consequences. They couldn't resist; some clearly hyper extended their arguments and ended up damaging their credibility. Others also ended up misdiagnosing the existing reality and context and seemed to goad the parties into an imminent conflict. It is unfortunate that many who choose to thread on the fault lines of social, economic and political crevices and perceived and/or manufactured crises are attempting to play with matches in the hope of benefiting from the ensuing chaos.

Opposition politicians in the diaspora, despite all the advantages of exposure and western education seem to be unwilling or unable to advance a significant number of Ethiopia's contemporary challenges and important conversations forward because they fail to consider the intent and the impact of the methods of communication employed and the importance of their contribution towards the issues at hand. It is time to get out of the social construction that many of the fringe diaspora opposition pundits reside in, attempt to change the set of arguments and assumptions many seem to be stuck with and create a new way of understanding in order to engage the wider public in a meaningful conversation.

A former opposition activist is convinced that though a number of diaspora opposition leaders (in their previous incarnations) may have received some support from the diaspora, mainly because people thought they were speaking truth to power, at this juncture he believes very few of the existing leaders can win a plebiscite on character, credibility, competence and compassion for the poor people of Ethiopia.

So do these seemingly literate people truly believe that the GERD is being built to glorify the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi? Do they really wish the GERD never happened?

Scratch and 'win' games are for gamblers. Reaching back to scratch old wounds to benefit from a possible crisis is a very highly irresponsible act and a dangerous game. It seems to me the deep imprint of Meles' vision and the economic results born out of his pro-poor development policies have left a deep psychological wound among his detractors, many of the feeble minded opponents and neigh sayers, that they are willing to go to great lengths to muddy his legacy and disrupt the trajectory of the development path charted by him regardless of the cost and damage inflicted upon the Ethiopian people and the nation of their origin.

No person, of average intelligence, can miss the contribution and significance of the GERD in the development of Ethiopia and its role in strengthening the historical ties and economic integration of the region. Honesty and real patriotism where are thou?

Polemics aside, a review of pertinent expert studies and technical documents of the GERD is being undertaken by a joint commission which will present its findings in May 2013. Egypt and Sudan have also resumed engagement with the signatories of the CFA after withdrawing for a couple of years. The CFA is crafted based on the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization of Nile waters without causing significant harm to any of the signatories and other riparian nations including Sudan and Egypt. Therefore, at this point despite all the noise, pragmatic and reasonable approaches seem to be winning the day.

A Matter of Leadership not Denial

The new leaders of Egypt need to draw the right lessons from their previous approach towards handling their relationship or lack thereof with many of the upstream, Nile basin, countries. Already, many in the new government of Egypt are entertaining wild rumors and unwarranted security concerns in relation to the construction of the GERD.

The recent outburst of the Deputy Defense minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia against a friendly nation, Ethiopia, also harkens back to the old approach of reinforcing a perpetual Egyptian hegemony on the Nile by way of selective emphasis on supranational identities such as Pan-Arabic and Islamic ties throughout the region or failing that threatening the security of sovereign nations and the Nile basin through covert and/or overt means. This approach may have worked in the past but it is unlikely that it will work this time. The Egyptian people need no reminders to see that times have definitely changed; but it is not clear whether the people are able to be vocal and strident and hold their government to account especially towards issues of the Nile and its policy towards the brotherly peoples of the Nile basin. It is clear that previous regimes have used the security of the Nile as an excuse to subjugate their people and to create misunderstandings among good neighbors and brotherly peoples.

The Nile basin is not inhabited by wild-eyed anti Egypt zealots as some would have the people of Egypt believe. So approaching the Nile issues from a narrow Arab nationalistic and zero sum perspective is myopic and misguided.

The Nile Basin Initiative and the Cooperative Framework Agreement of the Nile (CFA), which Egypt has been working on along with other member states, present a framework and an opportunity for cooperative and strategic partnerships for a collective basin wide sustainable water security and a shared prosperous future for all the inhabitants of the basin.

The fundamental security interest of any riparian country is not served by denying the God given right of others to a fair and equitable use of trans boundary rivers such as the Nile. Since the start of the Egyptian revolution, the government of Ethiopia has become more forthcoming and transparent about the design, technical and environmental aspects of the GERD. It has allowed intervenors and indigenous and international experts to review the impacts and benefits associated with the GERD. The construction of the GERD like any mega infrastructure project involves trade offs. Understanding the trade offs and the cost of the trade offs based on data that is supported by competent analysis will help allay any environmental concerns and mitigate any related adverse environmental impacts. Further joint technical and environmental reviews are underway as part of a cooperative frame work and an independent peer review process.

So it is now time for Egyptian leaders to act with audacity and honesty. They should work diligently to bring Egypt to a post colonial mindset and engage the Egyptian people in an honest conversation.

Many dispassionate observers believe it is in Egypt's best interest to sign the CFA and start a new era of a win-win relationship with the other signatory nations. Analysts are also convinced that it is inevitable for the CFA to be fully ratified and come in to effect, with or without Egypt. It is

worthy to note that the Republic of South Sudan is making preparations to join the CFA . Congo is also believed to be bidding its time and will eventually sign the CFA and ratify it.

Trust but Verify

As Egypt charts a new democratic future, its leaders need to rethink their place and the role they want to play in Africa. It has often been said that though “Egypt's body is in Africa its head is in the Middle East.” With such a disjointed placement it is difficult for Egypt to approach the Nile water issues for what they are: issues of fairness, equity, sustainability and region wide collective water security.

The way forward is not by courting controversies or negating any and all major initiatives on the Nile. It is imperative that Nile issues not be used to advance short term political objectives or as a part of a domestic political soccer.

The emergence of Ethiopia is changing the political and economic map of the region but that shouldn't be seen as a threat to Egypt. Antagonizing Ethiopia and getting hysterical about a perceived threat from Ethiopia is not helpful. Ethiopia has already made it abundantly clear to all that its number one enemy is poverty.

Egypt needs to get on the proverbial bike and start pedaling forward in tandem with all stakeholders on the Nile to solve their common problems for a shared future. It is evident that there is no substitute for mature engagement and diplomacy; the way forward requires leadership not denial; negotiation not negation.

What can a visionary and ambitious leadership accomplish?

As we speak, a group of Canadian scientists are working on a twenty billion dollar plan for a Trans Africa Pipeline Project (TAPP). TAPP envisions to pump drinking water across eleven African countries, spanning from Djibouti to Mauritania, by setting up desalination plants in Djibouti and Mauritania and installing intermediate storage sites and pumping stations in order to maintain adequate pressure throughout the 8,800 kilometers of pipeline. The proponents of the project indicate that TAPP is intended to provide a longterm solution to conflicts in the region. Professor Tennyson, Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto, is convinced about the viability of the project and its contribution to peace and stability in the region. In a recent article in the Toronto Star, the Professor underlined, “what is on offer is a solution to a longterm problem. So much instability can be resolved if there is better water supply.”

So if solution oriented Canadians can come up with innovative solutions to mitigate conflict and water problems in Africa, why can't Africans do the same to solve any outstanding Nile basin issues? It is definitely possible; “yes they can!”

So in the interest of their common future, all riparians of the Nile need to build bridges and develop trust and confidence between them. Many believe lack of trust stemming from historic misunderstandings remains to be the main stumbling block. In that case the solution is, as a famous American leader succinctly put it: trust but verify. Set in place a common system and a mechanism to monitor and mitigate problems as they arise so that the people of the region can

benefit from the dividends of peace and build a prosperous sustainable future together.