

ON THE BRAWL OVER THE NILE WATERS

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Note: This article can be considered as a rejoinder to the recently published commentaries made public by Messrs. Robele Ababya, Jawar Mohammed, Girma Kassa, and Asrat Abraham.

A. INTRODUCTION AND PERSONAL OBSERVATION

I lived in Egypt for about five and a half years (from late 1979 to the first few months of 1984) as a political refugee doing my undergraduate studies at the American University in Cairo. Just like any stateless Ethiopian who escaped the Derg's murder, my 5 ½ years of stay in Egypt were filled with many ups and some downs. Speaking about the downs, two of them stood out of all. One of the nauseating and vexing issues had to do with listening to the constant barrage of negative campaigns carried out against Ethiopia by the Egyptian government, in which we felt was a deliberate implantation of "natural enmity" between the peoples of the two countries into the minds of the Egyptian people. On the other side, Mengistu Haile Mariam, standing on Maskal Square, and while mounting the "Red Terror" campaign against his opponents, was smashing bottles filled with "blood" to demonstrate the fate that his opponents, Egypt included, was awaiting them. Mengistu's madness aside, I wondered why Egypt could have found it useful to instigate enmity and intensify the conflicts between the two nations instead of being thankful to the gift that both God and Ethiopia were giving her- the waters of the Blue Nile. Amazingly, the enmity barrage and the constant negative campaign did not stop within the sphere of international politics. In fact, it was very irritating to me and other true Ethiopians who observed the constant enmity barrage hurled against Ethiopia (and not Mengistu H. Mariam). The whole affair used to be broadcast live on TV as a staple recitation of Egyptian religious leaders during the Holy Friday Prayers. The constant rancor was being recited by the religious leaders irrespective of the fact that Ethiopia was the country chosen by Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) when his companions needed protection and freedom from oppression and persecution. Never mind that, in recognition of the kindness that the Ethiopian king who saved his followers, the Prophet had offered the first funeral prayer in absentia for a Christian. Never mind that the Prophet himself is known to have said: "They were generous to our companions, so I wish to be generous to them in person...." Never mind that the Prophet himself is even known to have personally served them meals when a Christian delegation from Ethiopian churches visited Medina.

The other was the two kinds of discriminatory treatments the Ethiopian political refugees received while in Egypt. On the one hand, those of us who claimed to be Ethiopian were not received well whenever we presented ourselves within the Arabic diplomatic circles, in general, and the Egyptian diplomatic community and officials, in particular. On the other hand, one could observe an unbelievable friendly reception being extended to those who claimed to be non-Ethiopian – nearly all of them being members of Liberation Fronts – the TPLF followers and "delegates" included. The recognition they received was comparable to the diplomatic immunity and extra-territorial status which is only extended to those who are friendly or allied militaries,

foreign heads of state, ambassadors and diplomatic agents. I cannot help but just cringe wondering how on earth we let such groups and individuals, who wandered around the capitals of the Middle East, claiming to be partly Arabs, that they don't belong to Ethiopia, and that they were fighting to secede from Ethiopia, smuggling and selling priceless Ethiopian religious relics along the way, be our rulers!?! This absurd reality aside, which speaks volumes about the current generation of Ethiopians, please allow me to make my first point here: that Mr. Zenawi's accusation of Egypt for backing anti-government rebels is quite accurate for he speaks from his own practical experience. Moreover, the historical enmity between the two nations, a substantial portion of the hostility originating from Egypt and Ethiopia's neighbors is real and despot leaders such Messrs. Mubarak and Zenawi have a built-in tendency to exploit it. For picking a fight against both traditional and concocted enemies is a tool used by dictatorial and illegitimate regimes who are seeking unity in a highly fractured society.

B. ETHIOPIANS SHOULD BE UNITED WHEN IT COMES TO THE NILE BUT AVOID PLACATION

Given the deeply held unholy Egyptian bitter resentment against Ethiopia, what would democrats, who happen to disagree with the current regime, do if Egypt launches punitive actions against Ethiopia's newly built projects? Would the democratic forces ally themselves with Mr. Zenawi, even though they know that he is a despicable despot and has committed several treasonous crimes against the interests of their beloved country, if Egypt happens to trigger havoc against Ethiopia? My answer: "All things considered, and when push comes to shove: *You Betcha!*" They do so irrespective of the fact that the deeply rooted and historical enmity is being orchestrated by Meles himself, or, as Jawar aptly stated it, they know that "Meles is ratcheting up the rhetorical confrontation mantle in order to gain popular support" - <http://ethiomediamedia.com/augur/4233.html> .. They do so not because they are convinced treasonous and allegedly genocidal Meles has overnight turned to be a patriot when he tells them, via Reuters, that "I am not worried that the Egyptians will suddenly invade Ethiopia... Nobody who has tried that has lived to tell the story... I don't think the Egyptians will be any different and I think they know that¹." Instead, they are angered by the carefully orchestrated deception and placation. They will defend Ethiopia and its interests because they are fed up with the unjust animosity that Egypt harbors against Ethiopia for too long. They do so because they are tired of witnessing Ethiopia's sovereignty and rights being infringed by its traditional enemies. They do so because, the position taken by Ethiopia and the other upper Nile riparian countries is just- an equitable distribution of water sources. They do so because they don't want to set a precedent- since allying with Egypt and stopping the construction of the projects would be tantamount to Ethiopia's fate being decided by foreigner elements rather than its citizens. For some of us who strongly believe that Ethiopia is better off by building smaller dams and/or who detest the non-transparent manner by which projects are implemented, we do so because we just don't want to "throw the baby out with the bath water." We do so because..., well, we are placated (duped) by Meles' merciless Machiavellian tactics. Help! Unless Ethiopians come together and find ways to disentangle the web of traps that Ethiopia and its people have been logged into, their fates will be at the mercy of despots of Mr. Zenawi's type.

C. WHY WAR (CONFLICT) BETWEEN EGYPT AND ETHIOPIA IS POSSIBLE

There are several factors which indicate to me that hostility between Egypt and Ethiopia is likely to continue and I will mention just a few of them to save space. First, a significant portion of the Egyptian populace erroneously believes (or is made to believe) that the Nile waters belong only to them. As a result, they believe that dam constructions in Ethiopia are tantamount to crossing the “red line.” Second, the growing political uprisings of the Nile delta provinces of Kafr al-Sheikh, Gharbiya, Alexandria, Giza and Marsa Matruh due to water shortages indicate that, as argued by Lutfi Radwan and others that Egypt was facing severe water shortages (about 20 billion cubic meters per year) even before power dams were built in Ethiopiaⁱⁱ. The causes of the water shortages are known to be many- some of them being population pressure, life-style changes, the effects of global warming, the gradual changes of crop patterns such as the increased production of water devouring crops of rice and sugar cane. This suggests that, as correctly articulated by Alya Kebiri, water, which is becoming increasingly scarce, is not “priced and managed properly. Proper pricing could have been more efficient and sustainable. Moreover, the Egyptian government monopolistically controls the distribution and management of water, with a lot of subsidization, bureaucratization and inefficiencies involved.ⁱⁱⁱ” A government which is not willing to communicate with its people about the current realities will have a tendency to find scapegoats. Experts who have advised the government of Egypt to give up its production of some crops (or change some of the crop patterns) have indicated that the government is not willing to do so. Such irrational usage of water may have corrupted that nation and its farmers and such spoiled attitudes involve negative repercussions. Add to this the war mongering rhetoric of Mr. Sadat, the late president of Egypt and Butrous Butrous Ghali, the former Secretary General of the United Nations who played a role, in collaboration with the treasonous regime of Meles Zenawi, for the break-up of Ethiopia- both Egyptian leaders known to have said that “The next war in our region will be over the waters of the Nile, ... “ Wasn’t it Egyptian Mr. Ismail Serageldin, who was vice-president of the World Bank, who told the world that future wars would be mostly about water? As John Vidal informs us,^{iv} nations already are sparing over rivers and dams such as India and Pakistan over river Indus; China, Nepal, India and Bangladesh over the rivers originating from in the Himalayas; Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the Amu Daria and Syr Daria rivers; Argentina and Uruguay over the river Plate; Iraq and Syria over the Tigris; Israel, Palestine, and Jordan over the Jordan River watersheds and other water sources; Iraq and Iran over the Shatt al-Arab waterways; Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe, over Zambezi and its tributaries, etc.

But I seriously doubt that Egypt will invade Ethiopia for Egypt can create enough havoc by doing what it knows best – supporting disaffected insurgent groups and perhaps even using individual terrorists. If Mr. Zenawi knows that Egypt uses disaffected Ethiopian insurgent groups to attack Ethiopia, wouldn’t be wise and less costly for his government to deny Egypt and other Ethiopia’s enemies by finding solutions to the causes of (reasons) that such groups are forced to be used by Ethiopia’s traditional enemies? Unfortunately, this is not possible for it is not in the nature of undemocratic rulers like Mr. Zenawi and the TPLF/EPRDF to look inside themselves. They would rather opt for the ultimate placation of patriotic citizens. Let’s face it:

the fact that I and other patriots, such as Messrs. Jawar Mohammed, Robele Ababya, Girma Kassa and others are calling for unity among Ethiopians when it comes to the Nile may indicate that the placation and Mr. Zenawi's shrewd Machiavellian plans are already underway. Some of us had seen this ultimate placation coming for quite some time, and a precedent was already set during the Ethio-Eritrean war. The costs associated with the impending hostilities and placation, particularly in terms of treasure, would be incalculable. It is for this reason that I call upon politicians, intellectuals, political scientists and all patriot Ethiopians, to design mechanisms (responses) so that we are neither placated nor the hostilities get intensified, while at the same time standing together to protect Ethiopia's rights to use its own waters.

Note: As soon as I begun disseminating the first draft of the above write-up, Professor Minga Negash, professor of accountancy at the Metropolitan State College of Denver and the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa who has been following the issue for many years sent me a couple of important email messages. Below, I present to you one of the messages and I thank him for allowing me to share it with you.

"It is a well known fact that Egyptian policy towards Ethiopia is primarily driven by the politics of the Nile water. This policy goes back to the antiquities. TPLF's ill trained diplomats are incapable of understanding the historical complexities. As we have seen in the case of the Algiers Agreement they have also a poor understanding of international law. Egyptian support for the separation of Eritrea and now its alleged support for other separatists show the consistency of Egyptian foreign policy towards Ethiopia, and it can be explained in part by the politics of water. In other words, Mr. Zenawi is facing the same problem that his predecessors were facing.

"What makes TPLF's policy scandalous is Zenawi's letter to the ex foreign minister of Egypt, Boutros Boutros Galli to legitimize Eritrea's separation through the UN system. In addition to diminishing Ethiopia's profile in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia's loss of its coastal territories gave Egypt the role of being the dominant naval power in the Red Sea. Egyptian support for Eritrea's policy towards Somalia is yet another evidence of reducing Ethiopia's influence on the Horn of Africa. TPLF's official scandals with regard to the Nile officially started in 1991. Ethiopia's useless foreign minister, Seyoum Mesfin bowed to the Egyptian demand for the removal of the CEO of the Valley Development Authority. In the confusion, confidential rain fall data was lost and some suspect that the data was stolen by Egypt through a student who was studying for his Masters degree in Belgium. TPLF then signed the infamous treaty with Egypt, which the Egyptians feel is a useful diplomatic weapon. Zenawi's poor understanding of water policy was rectified by the creation of a new regional organization that advocates for the equitable and fair sharing of the waters of Nile river system. The success of this organization has yet to be seen. This progress, however, is frustrated by another incoherent policy of the TPLF. According to some reports, Egypt is a beneficiary of TPLF's wholesale of farm lands to foreigners. The report suggests that the National Bank of Egypt has leased a large tract of agricultural land in the Afar region. Another report suggests that an Egyptian company has established a factory in Bahir Dar, the source of the Blue Nile. Zenawi's recent press statement is coming in the middle of these complex relationships between Egypt and Ethiopia."

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