

Esaias Afeworki and the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Inferences vs. References

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Prelude

Eritrea's lifelong president, Esaias Afeworki, has recently issued a press statement through the country's state television on a range of issues, inside and outside with Ethiopia, as usual, being his primary target. He understandably made the GERD (the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam) his main agenda since 2014 where he made a lot of inferences on its meanings and implications to the existing state of affairs in the sub region and beyond. One welcomes reasonably Esaias's concern about Ethiopia, in general, and the GERD in particular, political conflicts and partisanship aside, for obvious reasons, as a state leader and even personally too.

First, his country is one of the ten riparian states in the Nile river system with a legally set of admissible rights in the management and water share of the resource no matter how much stake it has;

Second, the unavoidable geographic, cultural and historical ties between his country Eritrea and Ethiopia bring any development in one of them into an immediate focus in the other.

Third, the Horn of Africa is usually a breeding ground of intra and interstate misunderstandings and, at times, conflicts of violent nature, has undoubtedly a serious spillover effect on Eritrea calling the attentions of its leaders.

One, however, equally expects official statements of state leaders everywhere including Eritrea, of course, to be coherent, consistent, and sound mirrors of official policies as well as international norms and accepted practices. Though a habitual experience to see and

hear Esaias standing against these expectations, his recent inferences about the GERD deserves a due examination into its relevance and contribution to the politics and international relations of the Nile basin states and beyond. But it is worth briefly assessing and outlining the present background political, economic and social realities specifically in Eritrea, Ethiopia and the sub region before we see these inferences.

1. Eritrea and the sub region spotlighted

At the very present time when Eritrea's president speaks of the GERD, his country remains legally and diplomatically one of the most isolated states of the world for its illegal involvements in cross-border terrorist engagements and unwarranted behavior against Ethiopia and other neighboring states.¹ Midst this, a flood of Eritreans continues to cross national borders into neighboring states. Whether this exodus has economic explanations is without question. Esaias himself has repeatedly admitted in his officially televised press releases since 2013 that Eritrea's promise of national growth regrettably evaporates and suffers bitter stumbling blocks due to severe energy shortages.

Statistically explained, Eritrea has only 60MW ² megawatts of electric supply for its about 6 million people and, worse than this, made no any appreciable progress in this deadly sector, one way or another.³ Word by word, Esaias complains over energy shortages to have completely crippled growth ambitions and plans of the country where growth, at the present world, means nothing but a blessing of energy. He disparately tells the world that a huge industrialization scheme of the Assab Port remained a shelf décor. Compelled by this bleak state of affairs, Esaias has not hid his intentions of buying energy from outside sources.

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 1907 adopted on Dec. 23, 2009 and Resolution 2023 adopted on Dec. 5, 2011 are among the legal decisions on the Eritrean Regime.

² Eritrea has approximately 60 MW of diesel-fire generating capacity (www.mbendi.com), and the Eritrean Ministry of Information has also posted an article on Eritrea's Power Challenges on its website on August 2, 2014

³ We can compare it with Tigray's power consumption of 189MW (of which Mekelle city takes 48MW)

Eritrea is also still a prisoner of its own policy-born border conflict with Ethiopia strongly marked by a diplomatic deadlock for more than a decade. The stalemate obviously has in stock quite differing, even opposite, ramifications and meanings to the two states. Ethiopia has changed the deadlock into a stable and reliable opportunity where it has continued to register a double-digit growth. The growth raises more demand for energy and port service, which the country is said to find itself in a better position to effectively deal with the limitations. Ethiopia also earns the witness of such international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that it adequately frees itself from possible dependence on oil sources of energy and Eritrea's ports.

On the other pole of the scene, Eritrea, being convinced that it is without any possible access to energy sources, turns its face to economically least beneficiary fields to survive as a state in a hostile world surrounding it. The Esaias government heavily relies on remittances from its huge mass of diaspora compulsorily collected to compensate for the severe shortages of foreign currency. Admittedly, Eritrea has lost hopes in its potential for being an industrial hub of the sub region coupled by the weak agricultural base as the major national economic sector. These and other policy predicaments adversely affect possibilities of international investment into the country.

It is against this background that the Eritrean president, Esaias Afeworki, has come up with a new round of inferences about the GERD. Let's now raise the very central points of his arguments and conclusions by comparing his inferences against his references as follows in some greater details.

2. Inferences vs. References

President Esaias, disregarding contradictions between his position on the GERD at one time and the other at another time, his recent press statement greatly boils down to two important views.

His first inference is that he strongly believes that the GERD is more of a politically conceived project than an economic one. Esaias flatly rejects the GERD as a project gravely

demanded and called for by development motives. He underscores that the project is not only politically driven, but also an emotionally launched move without a well and carefully studied and prepared plan in advance. Reference wise, Esaias mentions two sources out of what he calls "the past history of Ethiopian governments and their attitudes toward the Nile river."

He cites Mengistu Hailmariam as a showcase of the Ethiopian mentality to use the river as a political weapon. Esaias coated Mengistu as saying "while the Arabs have oil, Ethiopia has water." From this, he progresses to argue that the present GERD is simply an extension of Mengistu's rhetoric, and no more.

The second inference of Esaias is that the GERD is technically wastage without any relevance to the benefits of the Ethiopian people. He justifies his argument by his suspicion that Ethiopian government leaders have no an adequate knowledge of what to do and how to do with such an ambitiously huge electric project. He raises a question for that effect:

"What is the benefit of 6000 megawatts of electric power after the completion of the Dam? For electric light? Agriculture? Industry? Precisely for what? There is no such a thorough study that could meet this question. I am sure the GERD has never intended to benefit the Ethiopian people. Though our conflict with Woyane, we never have a position that the Ethiopian people should not get benefits from the Nile River. However, I know very well that this has never been the goal behind the GERD."

Esaias has traveled again too far to further justify this position of him as true and correct by another set references. He dramatically reminds us of his experience as far back as 1993 with the then, Meles Zenawi who was then then the Head of State in Caier, Egypt at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Summit. According to Esaias:

"Meles shared me his intentions to talk to high level Egyptian officials over Nile River. At the time, there were rumors that Egypt had plans to canalize the Nile water in a bid to provide Israel. I, however, warned him that it was not the right

time to raise such an issue and parted. The same day, I found Meles at the dinner table being very nervous. And, he told me that the Egyptian official, second to President Hosni Mubarak, declined his appeal for Nile talks saying 'who are you to ask us for such a discussion?' As I reminded him that I advised him that his request was untimely, Meles said rather he would retaliate and make them kneel down."

Esaias continues from this to strengthen and justify his anti-GERD position that it was the result of this grudge of Meles to satisfy political revenge against Egyptians. Thus, he comes to the policy conclusion that the Dam is a premature project amidst a lot of pressing and worrisome priorities of the Ethiopian people. Back to his technical inference, Esaias warns that GERD generates a lot of questions, which are left unanswered. He mentions such examples like the huge cost of distribution and transmission lines, the uncertain demands of future client states of the electricity produced, and many others.

All in all, the GERD, for the Eritrean president, is a political project than a development agenda, with a lot of technicality limitations, but orchestrated only to entice the Ethiopian people to, in his own words, the "Woyane's political outlook." Briefly assessing his key positions, inferences as well as references, we now resort to testing them to the other side of the counter, which he, probably consciously, leaves untouched.

3. Where Esaias goes wrong

As one could see from the most positive standpoint, the advent of the GERD has introduced a new era of enquiries, thoughts and actions, and has posed real challenges to long established beliefs and rules of the game. One could also identify, at least, three major parties facing these challenges in differing scales, of course: Ethiopia herself, Egypt and other states of the Nile Basin. Ethiopia's number one challenge is the difficult and huge financial and technical burden of realizing the GERD as planned and intended.

Egypt's challenge, on the other side of the debate, is to discharge the most cumbersome duty of adapting itself to the changed reality by the coming of the GERD. We can also see

that Eritrea and its government are under challenge as to how to interpret the GERD in light of their national demands of growth and development. I argue that a serious and independent examination of Esaias Afeworki vis-à-vis the GERD soon and without difficulty reveals that the man suffers, at least, the following major blunders, which outright speaks that he staggers and lacks the energy in effectively meeting the challenges.

- A. Esaias has visibly proven consistent in his inconsistency of inferences and positions about the GERD where he vacillates between courageous admission of the truth and his temptations to satisfy his extreme hatred for Ethiopia and the grudge bears. In his similar press statement in 2014, for instance, suddenly, unexpectedly and boldly declared that the GERD was a response by Ethiopia to the undeniable fact that the country is home of most of the rivers in the sub region. He even strongly emphasized that Ethiopia's development is always attendant on the vast utilization of its water resources. He did not, however, last long with this right consciousness the coming year. He swerved away to have retaken his hostile position where his 2015 press statement picked the GERD as a "project intended to confuse and mislead the Ethiopian people." Now, in 2016, Esaias raised high the bitterness of his rejection of the project by emphasizing its "political motive and irrelevance to development." He claims as if he knows the motive behind, but would like to keep it to himself for the time being. We might hear a different version in the future as well.
- B. Esaias, as clearly seen from his inconsistency above, comes up in 2016 with yet another strange and moody evaluation of the GERD, which is excessively reductionist in that he brought down the project to be the exclusive domain of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. This reductionist argument stands, of course, to justify his position that there has been no adequate project study before its launch. This inference of Esaias, though unquestionably deliberate, collides head on three principles and patterns of political behavior in Ethiopia: **first**, it contradicts with the established political culture of the Ruling Party where, leave alone, such an

interstate issue of greater concern, even details were determined by team work and collective decision making. **Secondly**, Esaias consciously leaves the basic Foreign Affairs and Security Policies and Strategies of the Ethiopian State of 2002, that meticulously and openly points out to what to do about the Nile River. Meles is survived by this policy, and Esaias could safely have referred to it instead of capitalizing on the man personally as the sole mastermind behind the GERD. Nobody could deny that Meles played a leading role behind the project but openly and responsibly. **Thirdly**, Esaias explicitly fails to grasp the correct personality of Meles in his assertion that Meles was guided by emotions rather than well-articulated approach in international relations, that is, Community of State Interest on the utilization of Nile River. He makes no reference to this because it contradicts with his inference of the GERD as an emotionally born project to the taste and preference of an individual leader.

- C. Gross methodological flaw is also evident in Esaias's inferences and references in that he remained silent while Meles was alive but speaks of his Cairo experience after his death. Why did not he make mention of this while Meles was in office and after the GERD started operations? Is it correct to make a reference of him in a situation where he cannot react and defend himself? Even if we accept it for granted, another challenge faces Esaias. Meles, by the time, attended the Cairo Origination of African Union Summit in his capacity as the President of the Ethiopian state. If this is true, how did the Egyptian vice president dismiss his official guest by doubting his capacity to negotiate over Nile River? Esaias is shy about giving details and clear accounts of such an act unusually strange and odd in international relations. By his close association talk with Meles, Esaias appears, as usual, to have assumed a tutorial role to the Ethiopian leadership mastering them what to do and not to do, and when to do things with Egyptians on the Nile issue.
- D. Esaias makes still another mistake in his allegation of Ethiopia's political priority over the GERD simply because he regards the project as a mere technical matter. How could this happen while Nile is a cross-boundary river affecting almost a

dozen of states? He tries to justify this inference by referring to all governments in Ethiopia, past and present, including Mengistu Hailemariam, as if they always see the Nile River as a political tool. By this, Esaias, consciously or subconsciously, forgets the exact nature of state behavior now in Addis Ababa vis-à-vis those of the past. The present regime has no any reason, whatsoever, to pick the Nile River as a purely politico-ideological instrument to intimidate and influence Egypt. No research is in demand for explaining why this is the case as the existing peace is an evidence by itself. Esaias also tries to advise the Ethiopian government to get focused on other national emergencies before engaging in such a huge and controversial project. Well, taking his advice in good faith, we should ask him an important question: what is the list of these emergencies? Is there an emergency for poor Ethiopia more important than the fight against poverty? The president could never mention any list of priorities because the GERD is never a luxurious project but a means in itself to another high goal, that is, development. If he borrows the idea from opposition parties in Ethiopia, this is absolutely a different story of domestic matter, with no service at all to an Eritrean leader.

- E. Esaias again tries to seal another outlet of poor reasoning in depicting the GERD as a useless project by belittling 6000 megawatts of electric power as a resource without an economic establishment that demands it.⁴ The point he emphasizes is that the GERD comes in the fashion of the cart put before the horse. This inference is exactly the explanation of present Eritrea where national economy has already slipped into frozen ice. Esaias, by the same comparison, is a leader of a state without any dynamic economic mover. His temptation to read Ethiopia through Eritrean prism induces him to make the grave mistake that he thinks Ethiopia is also an economy in complete mess. He might regard 6000 megawatts as an infinite resource in comparison with his own nationally generated 54 megawatts probably enough for a non-functioning economy. Whether Esaias believes or not, facts on the

⁴ During the last five years, the power demand of Ethiopia has been 25% per year, while it is estimated that in the next five years it is to grow more than 32% per annum. (www.eepco.gov.com)

ground speak louder than 6000 megawatts for Ethiopia and its dynamic economy after five or six years is still insufficient. Here one should raise an important question. So far as electricity is concerned, why does not Esaias talk about the Tekeze Hydroelectric Power, which is close to his nostrils than the GERD? He never does this because Eritreans very well know what electric shortage means while they see that Tekeze only generates seven times of energy more than they have now.

- F. Esaias also loses sight of developments in Ethiopia in his argument and piece of engineering advice to Ethiopian leaders that the cost of transmission lines would challenge them. Well, this advice appears to be consistent with his inference above that Ethiopia should focus on other set of priorities. The obvious Ethiopian reaction is one: please, president Esaias, turn your face inside out; then you immediately finds out that Eritrea bitterly demands swift political change in order to survive as a state.

Conclusion

One is methodologically safe if one concludes that Esaias suffers two major strokes because of the strong wind from Ethiopia. First, the fastest growth of the GERD toward its completion raises, at each step his nervousness and irrationality pronounced by his inconsistent inferences. This perfectly tells one that Esaias is more politicized than Ethiopian leaders as to the meanings of the GERD. It is also clear that his politically embedded hatred for Ethiopia continues to tempt him to firmly stand in opposition to the GERD more than Egyptians themselves. Secondly, most of Esaias's hostile remarks about the project vividly prove that he lags behind dynamic changes in the sub region. He denies the undeniable fact that energy is a major factor determining the very chances of many developing states.