

Project X: Streaming Personal Reflections

Bereket Simon

(From a recorded conversation with DISCOURSE)

Lead-In Note

Bereket Simon, a former Government Communication Affairs Minister, was head of the secretariat for public mobilization of the GERD.

In this piece, Bereket Simon shares hitherto undisclosed insider information on the inception of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

It is one of the 22 contributions in the recently published second edition of DISCOURSE. The 178-page publication, exclusively devoted to issues of the Nile, carries original articles by prominent authorities from Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia and other writers from outside the continent and including contributions of sitting and former heads of state and government.

The publication is embellished by several pictures courtesy of former The New York Times photojournalist, Chester Higgins and renowned photographer Antonio Fiorente.

A book signing event was held recently in Hawassa, Ethiopia, to introduce the latest edition to the readership and solicit feedback on the journal's content.

DISCOURSE is a quarterly journal published by the Ethiopian Foreign Relations Strategic Studies Institute (EFRSSI) and provides a platform for constructive debate on African issues of currency.

Have a taste of the publication and enjoy the reading.

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Lead-In Note

I am here to tell you a story of two greats. Both belong to the extraordinary type. Although one has created the other, they both invoke the memory of one another. This is about a man and a dam.

One of the last brain prints of the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, is inscribed on the waters of the Nile River. And I would say the first page of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's (GERD) history was written 23 years back. Our circumstance then dictated us to start slow and small; but smart. Not many people know GERD's history starts with the story of *Chara Chara*.

Chara Chara is a small dam built right at the mouth of Lake Tana in 1994. The core element of the design was the ability of using the lake itself as a natural reservoir to hold the water. The immediate plan was to use it for generating 72MW which was critically needed at the time. But *Chara Chara* was more than that; and there were grander plans attached to it. It was also meant to lay grounds in preparation for a power project and irrigation scheme to come later, named the *Tana Beles* Project.

For the acute observer, every piece fits into the jigsaw puzzle. Meles and his team were meticulously aligning every necessary piece in the making of a complete grand plan.

Ethiopia's agricultural production volume grew three fold in six years. That pointed to the pressing need for a mass transport services to and from the markets. Ethiopia aimed to structurally transform its economy from agriculture to a manufacturing industry. That certainly necessitated the supply of mass power nationwide. These were extraordinary transition times of the country calling for extraordinary leadership. A great leader's quality is not about aiming too easy and reaching it quickly but about aiming too high and fight hard trying to reach it.

Not many people know GERD's history starts with the story of Chara Chara.

We, in the leadership, already knew *Chara Chara* had a long shelf history early on when the EPRDF assumed power. Americans and Ethiopians undertook a complete

feasibility study of the project during Emperor Haileselassie's time. Upon learning how Egypt had been an obstacle to realizing the project, Meles picked it up and had it studied again. The studies came to validate the duality of the project. Meles then decided that he had to succeed in achieving two things in a single action. But he also wanted to send a clear message to the Egyptians and the rest of the world that nobody can stop Ethiopians from executing whatever project they want on *Abay*. So, we went ahead and gave the project to *Berta*, a local construction company, which did a marvelous job in completing the project. *Chara Chara* was a big deal because it was the first significant project on the Nile ever completed. That was followed by another power generation project on *Tis Abay* (smoky fall) a bit later. But there was a lot of water saved in the *Tis Abay* reservoir- more than what was necessary for that particular project.

Meles, afterwards was knocking at the doors of every international lender, including the World Bank, for a loan to develop many of our hydro projects on *Abay* and *Tekeze* rivers. All our loan requests-save one- were indiscriminately declined. The World Bank approved and agreed to finance one small dam project that had the potential of irrigating 7000 hectares of land. Although the approval was a good news, the terms and conditions of the loan for this small project were exceptionally cumbersome and complicated. Meles, however, was convinced to take the offer "as is" because he also had something

else in mind that goes beyond the transactions associated with this single project that he knew was unfair. His bigger plan was to break the culture, among financing institutions, of denying Ethiopia the critically needed loans for more and bigger hydro projects. Unfortunately, this far, that remained to be the only Nile basin-based project to have been financed by non-Ethiopian sources.

At the same time, the Ethiopian government was reorienting itself in redefining its role as a state set to lead Ethiopia to modernization. EPRDF, as a ruling party, came to embrace the “developmental state” as a preferred path to develop and transform Ethiopia fast by assuming the role of initiating and investing in massive infrastructural projects. The Ethiopian government launched huge infrastructural investments simultaneously to ease the many developmental bottlenecks the country was facing. Many of the decisions from Meles were tuned to Ethiopia’s needs to upgrade and expand its infrastructure: roads, airports, electricity, telephone services, water and irrigation; all and everywhere, countrywide. Ethiopia was soon being recognized for many of the big achievements it was registering. But still, even on the back of these successes, it was still next to impossible to secure loans for many of the projects, and none whatsoever on the *Abay* river. Meles learned the hard way that seeking loans from those sources was almost impossible. He temporarily ignored all those projects in the Nile basin and turned his attention to other areas such as roads and railways, also by seeking loans from other unfamiliar sources.

Meles was meticulously treating it as a project of “all things considered” and a project that was only destined to succeed.

In the mean time, the country’s savings were adding up, and the economy kept on growing by the day. And we started financing small to mid-size projects from our own coffers. *Tekeze* river can be considered part of the Nile basin as it eventually joins the Nile at some point north of Khartoum. In the Ethiopian context though, *Tekeze* is a basin in its own right with a separate catchment area. And yet, even *Tekeze* would not be financed by outside loans. By then, Meles clearly understood lenders were not ready to deviate from their traditions of blocking finances on the Nile nor were they willing to treat *Tekeze* as non-Nile project.

Ethiopia determinedly mobilized its own resource to complete *Tekeze* hydro project which was designed to generate 320MW. Ethiopia had to plan to bring this project to fruition on its own using its own resources. Our Sudanese brothers then discovered themselves becoming the biggest beneficiary without contributing a single cent for its construction.

Remember the earlier work of depositing water using *Tana Lake* as reservoir during the *Chara Chara* dam construction? After completing *Tekeze*, we turned to *Tana Beles* project. It was now easier to divert the water to the west with a goal of generating 420MW and irrigating 100 thousands of hectares of land. And there was one significant element to this project - that Ethiopia was not only able to produce power from the Nile waters but also use it for irrigating its land.

With that, Meles became convinced that it was about time to go even for the most daring projects ever on the Nile. To that end, he dispatched a team of surveyors to undertake project feasibility studies in 2009 which resulted in 4 potential projects. That was to be the entry point to the GERD which was picked purely for its water volume and power production capacity. Although the feasibility study was

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readily submitted a bit earlier, Meles took his time holding it in his office until the then on-going national election was over, and not for other reasons many may have been speculating. Of course, he was meticulously treating it as a project of “all things considered” and a project that was only destined to succeed. Meles never sought to shake public opinion with promises of a big Nile dam, nor did he want to be half-

hearted about perusing it once he made his mind. That said, he had no interest of keeping the GERD secret from the world. In fact, Meles pointed out at one high-level meeting that the confidentiality of GERD was either unnecessary or simply futile. First, the project was too big to hide it from all keen

eyes. Secondly, we were ready to finance it ourselves and, as such, nobody else would have the finality of decision power over its fate. Lastly, it is a public project totally and openly meant to be a public mobilizing factor.

Like I said, Meles had other reasons in mind to keep it from the Ethiopian public until the right day came. He didn't want to let it out at a time when political parties were campaigning in the national election and their candidates running for public offices. Out of the deep respect he is known to have for the Ethiopian people, Meles was not interested to make such a high sounding project an election campaign item. It was then kept locked and dubbed "Project X" up until the election was over.

There were many other speculations as well in that Meles was waiting until such time some kind of crisis hit Egypt. First of all, the Egyptian crisis came after the GERD's launch day. Moreover, the project studies were undertaken way before any signs of the Egyptian crisis were seen. The entire project plan was done and timed within Ethiopian realities and without any consideration to the state Egypt was in.

Simultaneously, Meles at this point was thinking of launching the Railway Project. He had the plotted lines of the rail connectivity plan hanging on the right side of the wall in his office. He was obsessively toying with it as he walked in and out. The railway scheme was launched as one of his huge projects; so huge that it had no precedence in our region. Around the same time, Meles also launched the initiative of constructing 12 sugar factories throughout the country. All these together could only point to one conclusion: he was breaking the new era of Ethiopia's mega projects signaling the transformation stage the country was entering.

The underlying reasons for Meles' decisive and bold moves have to do with his deep conviction on the policies and strategies that were introduced in Ethiopia. He was so eager and motivated to do more in a short time. And there were fundamental realities that pressed him to do so.

Ethiopia's agricultural yield at a national level had grown three-fold in 6 years (2004 to 2010). Meles thought, if the 20 million Ethiopian rural households were motivated and empowered to attain the standard global productivity of 40 to 50 quintals per hectare, the nation would be producing nearly a billion quintals of cereals. This, coupled with the rising animal husbandry and the mineral sector, heralded a new era where mass transit facility was an absolute necessity. Secondly, Meles exactly understood the need for accelerated power production to meet the fast growing demand for it.

The GERD's location, right before the border with the Sudan, should exactly reflect Ethiopia's real intentions. Definitely not for irrigation, it is all meant to meet Ethiopia's massive demand for power. Egypt can and will never worry if the entire Ethiopia is electrified. But they are worried that there might be a reduction of water flow as a consequence of such projects. And we perfectly understand and sympathize with their justified worries. However, as far as the GERD is concerned, their worries of water reduction from Ethiopia are totally misplaced. There are no irrigation schemes planned or feasible from that dam in Ethiopia. Of course, the Sudanese are going to benefit from the GERD but that is a matter to be left for both lower riparian countries. For Ethiopia, it is all about power. We are or soon will be a 100 million. Meles made it his life call to make poverty history in Ethiopia. To that end, he wanted to mobilize Ethiopians and use all their resources without violating international laws and norms. Meles was very conscious of following the principle of not harming the lower riparian countries while using our water resource for our development needs. We are still subscribing to the same principles.

The only product of the GERD the lower riparian countries may expect to receive would be the surplus electricity Ethiopia plans to export to the region.

One of the worries from Egypt is the filling up scheme and schedule. The concern comes from the perception that Ethiopia might opt to fill up this huge dam first by temporarily blocking the entire water flow. But that would not be contemplated even for a minute on the Ethiopian side; and we have

been giving every assurance to our Egyptian brothers about it. Actually, the project is designed for an early power generation which will start while the gradual process of filling up continues. It is absolutely important that we as a country are very considerate to our brothers and sisters down the stream. Life in Egypt is totally dependent on the waters of the Nile. We can't afford to be indifferent to that reality. Egyptians are our African brothers and we have a strategic relationship with them that compels both of us to care for each other. We are two peoples and countries that started walking on this planet a long time ago. We both have come through thick history of civilizations, at the center of which is a common destiny.

Likewise, Egyptians should show considerateness. They cannot say Ethiopia should not build dams of any kind. They cannot say we Ethiopians cannot use any drop of water from our rivers. While justifiably demanding fairness and considerateness from Ethiopians not to cause any appreciable harm on them, they should be ready to reciprocate. On our part, Meles showed the wisdom of high-mindedness when Egypt was in a political crisis. When asked by members of the Egyptian public diplomacy troupe who were visiting Ethiopia at the time to halt the process of ratifying and legislating CFA until Egypt got a legitimate government, he didn't hesitate to accept the request and act accordingly. Again, when Egypt later flagged doubts about the authenticity and reliability of the studies regarding the GERD done by Ethiopia, Meles proposed an international panel of experts, which also involved Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia to look into the concerns and come up with workable and binding recommendations.

Now, ask how old the Nile River is! Definitely, it is older than Egypt or Ethiopia as countries. If so, when in this long history has Ethiopia ever tried to use the Nile waters irresponsibly? Not even once! And it is not because Ethio-Egyptian relations have always been great; and one of cooperation. There were many periods when relations of the two were thorny and sometimes tense and hostile. Nor was it, because Ethiopia had never been hit by terrible droughts resulting in a total failure of agricultural production, which in turn led to famine and hunger. Ethiopia had them in plenty. Yet, it always played a fair game. In regards to the Nile, Ethiopia has never been an inconsiderate or indifferent country at any time and situation throughout history.

Meles was aware that some of the anxieties over the GERD came from geopolitical considerations by the Egyptian side. What if Ethiopia uses this huge dam as a bargaining chip? Let's assume for a second that, for some reason, Ethiopia will harbour a motive to do so. It is so impossible to "weaponize" the Nile. Basically, Nile will remain Nile. Nobody has the power of unmaking it from being the Nile. Once the dam is filled, the water has to flow as usual unless someone has a sinister plan of flooding Ethiopia. The only product of the GERD the lower riparian countries may expect to receive would be the surplus electricity Ethiopia plans to export to the region. Meles had a solid conviction that the GERD will survive all these mistrusts and suspicions and eventually become a unifying factor for the advancement of regional cooperation and integrations.

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Ethiopia is growing and rising without a doubt. It has never been pushed around in the past. If it was hard in the past, it must be harder now. That said, Meles' vision for Ethiopia is not just to rise but to rise as peaceful and responsible African nation that must inspire hope and not a threat to anyone. We have enough good reasons to pursue that vision vigilantly. The GERD must serve to promote that hope.

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