

# **Ethiopia, The end of the Red Sea politics and the beginning of the Nile politics.**

**By Atakilti Embaye April 18, 2011**

## **The facts.**

The Nile is shared by 10 riparian states. From its source to its destiny the Nile stretches 6,741 kilometers. Along this stretch it is believed that 160 million people are living. Directly or indirectly 300 million people are dependent on the Nile. (1) This demographic figure amounts almost one third of the total population of Africa, which is currently estimated to be 1 billion. (2) Among the Riparian States of the Nile, the main contributor of the Nile (Ethiopia) and the main dependent of the river (Egypt) demographically constitute almost half of the population. In 2025 the total population of the Nile Basin Countries is believed to be double of the current figure. In the same contrast, in 2025, the population growth of both countries (Ethiopia and Egypt) will remain the highest, with a total number of 126.9 million and 97.3 million respectively. (3) Thus the relevance of the Nile to both countries is undoubtedly a question of life or death.

Contemporarily, Egyptians enjoy all the privileges of the Nile. After the completion of the Aswan Dam, agricultural sector of Egypt has enormously boosted, even by irrigating desert areas which had never been imagined to be inhabited. Today, the century old deserts of Egypt are areas of new settlements with high water consuming fields of rice and wheat. Annually Egypt harvests 35,000 tones of fish along with a modern processing and packaging industry. The man made Lake Nasser that stretches in an area of 5,250 sq. km. (with 550 km long and 35 km wide) is one of the most tourist destinations of our time. Almost all Egyptian villages have an access to electric power supply that generate from the Aswan Dam. (4) In modern Egypt increased agricultural production that comprises 40% of Egyptian man power, relatively cheap electrical supply, improved navigation, used for transportation and tourism are realized. (5)

On the contrary, Ethiopia was hindered from the direct benefit of the Nile due to various reasons. Poverty and lack of internal stability are among the forefront factors. As we shall see it later, to aggravate the political destabilization of the country, the role played by Egyptians goes back to centuries. To recent years, Ethiopia remained merely as a major contributor of the water share and incapacitated to utilize it. As some studies reveal, until recent times, the source of the giant Nile, Ethiopia, was able to provide only 17% of its population with an electric supply. Alarmingly, the study confirms that 94% Ethiopians rely on fire wood for cooking and heating. (6) Out of the huge Ethiopian water potential only 3% has been used. (7) By the same token 5% of the irrigable land in the Blue Nile basin has been developed for food production. (8)

In light of this, most likely, the Nile was and will remain the main source of controversy between Ethiopia and Egypt. As Ethiopia has clearly demonstrated its determination to alleviate the sources of poverty, secure the food supply of its people and guarantee a sustainable

development, it is obvious that Ethiopia shall depend on its natural recourses including the Nile. On the other hand, Egypt which considers the Nile as its natural gift will strive to turn every stone to maintain its possession of the Nile.

As pointed out earlier, Egypt had never been at ease with Ethiopia. Though ancient documents are scarce to single out as evidence what the engagement of the ancient Egyptians was, however, recent history of both countries is imbued with various confrontations. In more modern times, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt's invasion and final conquest of the Sudan was largely motivated by its desire to secure control over the entire Nile system. (9) In other words, the objective of Egyptian conquest of the Sudan was designed to impose Egypt's will on Ethiopia and either to occupy it or to force it to give up the Lake Tana area. (10)

“Hence, the conquest of the Sudan in 1820 served as a stepping-stone to the increased appearance of Egyptian soldiers in the western frontiers of Ethiopia, and to the subsequent Egyptian occupation of Kasala in 1834, Metema in 1838, Massawa in 1846, Kunama in 1869, and Harar in 1875. Khedive Ismail (1863-1879), too, wanted to make the Nile an Egyptian river by annexing to Egypt all the geographical areas of the basin. To that end, the Swiss adventurer Werner Munzinger (1832 -1875), who served him, had remarked: ‘Ethiopia with a disciplined administration and army, and a friend of the European powers, is a danger for Egypt. Egypt must either take over Ethiopia and Islamize it, or retain it in anarchy and misery.’

“Khedive Ismail decided to conquer Ethiopia. However, he lived to regret that decision. The series of military expeditions he launched in 1875 and 1876 resulted in ignominious defeats for Egypt. Between 14 and 16 November 1875, more than 2,500 Egyptian soldiers were routed at the Battle of Gundet. Similarly, from 7 to 9 March 1876, some 12,000 Egyptian soldiers were annihilated at the Battle of Gurae. It may be interesting to note that the Egyptians even recruited foreign military officers in their campaigns against Ethiopia. In the same year, the Afars decimated the expedition led by Munzinger in north eastern Ethiopia and Munzinger himself was killed. Yet, despite the enormous debacle, Egyptian raids against Ethiopia continued. They were eventually brought to a temporary halt only when Britain occupied Egypt in 1882.” (11)

Besides this, Egypt had been always on a manoeuvre to alienate Ethiopia from its neighbours. All Ethiopian neighbours, whether they belong to the Arab community or not, were recruited to join the Arab League which is dominated by Egypt. More interestingly, our Christian Abyssinian brothers, from next door Eritrea, were eager to join the League as means to gain more security, though they later was brushed aside to remain with an observer status. As the Ethiopian government officially declared, the main task of Egyptian lobbyists were aimed to secure that each possible window of foreign grant and loan is constantly closed against Ethiopia. Similarly the all rounded support to Eritrean armed fighters, during the armed struggle and the current indirect involvement of the Egyptian government in the Ethio - Eritrea conflict was the continuation of the Egyptian policy that triggers on weakening and destabilizing Ethiopia and distracting it from its developmental strides. In a word, though the Nile politics was not a hot issue that painfully affects the daily Ethiopian livelihood as the Red Sea (Eritrea) politics had been two decades ago, the confrontation of both countries is deep rooted and multifaceted that goes to time immemorial.

Nile and the Trans boundary waters law.

In modern politics that is gaining momentum of dominance in the international arena is hydro-politics. Hydro-politics deals with the relationship of countries or states with regard to their shared water resources and its management. This comprises cooperation of development of the shared water, its usage as well as a conflict management mechanism when ever a dispute emerges. In most cases the engagement of hydro-politics is facilitated by expressed laws (treaties), or customary laws. While treaties are legal documents signed by Riparian States, principles of customary laws emanate from repeated practices of the actors (states). While treaties contain clear guidelines for implementation of the agreement, customary law lacks guidelines and is left open to the interpretation of the parties, which usually causes a conflict.

In this respect, within the context of the Nile, Ethiopia and Egypt are neither party to a treaty nor abided by a customary law. So far, the treaties associated with the Nile are the treaty signed in 1929, between Great Britain and Egypt and the 1959, treaty of the Sudan and Egypt. Of course, the recent Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) is the third one. In the former treaty, as far as the parties to the treaty neither comply with the legal constituency, in the context of Riparian States nor the guidelines of international law in relation with the principles of laws of Trans boundary waters, it is unquestionably null and void. The 1959, treaty of Egypt and the Sudan is by the same token null and void, since it excludes the main contributors and all Riparian States of the Nile basin.

'The NBI, at its initial stage was a partnership among the Nile Riparian states that "seeks to develop the river in a cooperative manner, share substantial socioeconomic benefits, and promote regional peace and security"'. (12) It was 'formally launched in February, 1999 by the water ministers of 10 countries that share the river - [Egypt](#), [Sudan](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Eritrea](#), [Uganda](#), [Kenya](#), [Tanzania](#), [Burundi](#), [Rwanda](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#).' (13) After 11 years of negotiations and consultations with compatibility of international principles and guidelines it is endorsed by the majority of the Riparian States and is the only viable treaty that acclaims international recognition. For obvious reasons, later on the process of crafting the Initiative, Egypt and the Sudan have opted to withdraw from the Nile Basin Initiative and are not parties to it. Therefore on the cooperative management of the Nile River and its resources, Ethiopia and Egypt lack a common bilateral or multilateral agreement that could be used as a reference.

Thus in the absence of common bilateral or multilateral agreement, all Riparian States should adhere to the general principles of the international agreement. In light of this, while Ethiopia opted to be a core member of the NBI, that crafted its principles in compatibility with the general principles international agreement of Riparian States of a basin, Egypt is still defiant to these modern principle of the contemporary world and is endeavoring to maintain its absolute control of the Nile. However the arm twisting attitude of the Egyptians is obsolete that contradicts the modern engagement and cooperative mentality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and unrealistic since the current Ethiopian arm is not as fragile as one may think. Therefore, the only viable option of Egypt is to refrain from its obsolete and fair tale convictions and accept the principles NBI and join the initiative as a signatory. Above all, Ethiopia is not seeking to create another Mediterranean sea in the heart of the land, but a Dam that secures the over flooding of Egyptian villages and consuming a partial water that evaporates in the man made Lake Nasser. As the Ethiopian government has time and again declared the construction of the Renaissance Dam benefits peoples of both countries as well people of the region.

### The Realities.

While EPRDF emerged as a government after the fall of the Military Regime of Ethiopia, it is true that it has accepted the general principle of liberal democracy within the socio-political context of Ethiopia. In the preliminary years of its administration, EPRDF made clear that it adheres to the core principle of liberal democracy, but the involvement of the government in some sectors of the economy is vital and crucial. (14) Inter alia Energy Generating was the area where the government selected as a key sector that the government opted to remain as an indispensable actor. (15) As declared in the foundation laying ceremony of the Renaissance Dam, the cost demanded to construct this Dam tantamount to the current Annual Budget of Ethiopia. (16) If the government was side lined from intervening in such strategy, the realization of the dam was only deemed to be a fantasy. The sensitivity of the Nile hydro-politics in combination with the viability of the project and the huge cost needed for the construction could possibly hinder foreign or national investors in daring to take such a risk. Thus the construction of the Giant Renaissance Dam became realistic with the bold and wise realization of the government to remain as an indispensable actor in some vital economical sectors. In a word, in the Ethiopian socio-political reality, it is vividly witnessing that the theory that advocates for the existence of a developmental government is not optional.

Furthermore, the bold and wise decision and declaration to construct the Renaissance Dam has nothing to do with attention diversion, as some naïve compatriot members of the opposition block advocate. Prior to this, Ethiopian government was seriously engaged in a constant and constructive negotiations and consultations with member states of the Nile Basin Initiative. While the Egyptians stick to their centuries old declarations asserting that “Egypt reserves the right to take what ever course it sees suitable to safeguard its share, Egypt’s share of the Nile’s water is a historic right that Egypt has defended throughout its history,” (17) by being defiant to accepted international norms and principles, the Ethiopian government, in one hand, pursued to create legal institution along other sisterly Basin Countries, on the other hand, endeavored to build its all rounded capacities.

Some 25-30 years back, while the Egyptian leaders threaten proudly “the only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water,” (18) weighing their heavy military and diplomatic muscle and in contempt of the other Riparian States, in contrast, the diplomatic and economical status of Ethiopia was not only weak but the existence and continuity of Ethiopia as a nation was questionable. The then Ethiopia which was administered by the leading present Diaspora opposition elements (Not all Diaspora opposition members) the status of Ethiopia derogated to a quasi state that could dismember easily. In other words, then, the diplomatic and economical leverage of Egypt and Ethiopia could be contrasted as Goliath and David respectively.

In recent years the status of Ethiopia is tremendously changing. Recent studies reveal that Ethiopia is ranked as third African country in deciding African politics, after Nigeria and South Africa and followed by Egypt. Three, four decades ago as Egypt was a power house of the middle east, because of its role in the Arab- Israeli conflict and its geographical position in the Suez Canal, today Ethiopia is the powerhouse of the Horn of Africa because of stable and sound political and developmental achievements. Today Ethiopia is not only a pride to its citizens, but it is also a strong nation that makes many of its neighbors to rely on. Therefore the fruitful realization of Nile Basin Initiative, in the absence Egypt and the beginning of the construction of the Renaissance Dam, is the manifestation its strength. In this sense, when the Ethiopian government announces to construct this huge Dam, though the main capacity and support emanates from its own and the Ethiopian people at large, it is unwise to subordinate the backing of the other member states of the Initiative.

When the Ethiopian government announces to construct this Historic Dam at this particular time, it is also total naivety or political ignorance to think that the government is attempting to divert attention from the “Arabs’ Revolution”. Rather it is manipulating the regional and national opportunity at hand. Only naïves burn their homage while the house of their neighbor is ablaze. Since the construction of the Dam was publicized as part of the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) to the Ethiopian public months ahead of the so called “Arab Revolution”, as “Dam X”, it is neither logical nor rational to murmur or shout about attention diversion.

Additionally, Ethiopians are emerging to a new and strong chapter of unity through the Renaissance Dam. When we examine the century old Ethiopian modern history, except some historical events, like the battle of Adwa, most of the agendas pursued by Ethiopian political parties and governments were not all inclusive. Even if some agendas and events enjoy mass support they remain to be a sector oriented phenomenon. The “socialism Order” of the Dergue and the subsequent proclamations were party oriented or party politics. The issue of claiming Eritrea was never an all inclusive agenda to all Ethiopians.

Similarly, the “Revolutionary Democracy”, of the EPRDF, the stance of EPRDF on land ownership, the current Federal system administration, etc, though they enjoy majority and popular support, they all are party oriented beliefs and convictions. On the other hand, the issue of developing the Nile River is a national asset. So that it is beyond party politics and it is a national agenda, which should be welcomed by every citizen of the nation. Thus by this mere fact, EPRDF has introduced a new national agenda that transforms the unity of the Ethiopian people to a new peak. With the new GTP, Ethiopian unity will be simultaneously transformed.

At last but not least, the construction of the Renaissance Dam and the consequent developmental activities related with the Nile will introduce a new political landscape. For the last century or more, Ethiopia and Ethiopians’ political engagement was mainly associated to the politics of the Red Sea. While the colonial powers, and of course Egypt too, tightened their grip to annihilate the existence of strong Ethiopia by controlling the coastal area of the Red Sea and harboring anti Ethiopia forces, Ethiopians remained defiant and fought for the realization of access to and from the sea. In a bitter and multifaceted strive, even if Ethiopia couldn’t achieve the sovereign right to control the coastal area of the Red Sea its existence and continuity as a dominant and respected nation state is not bargained. However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Ethiopia emerged as a land locked country engineering its politics to internal issues of democratization and development.

At this juncture, it is true that the politics of the Red Sea is not side lined. Along the ruling party, EPRDF, which believes efforts exerted to regain the coastal area, including Eritrea, are legally and politically impossible and erroneous, the opposition parties still believe and stride towards this goal.

Nevertheless, the recent bold decision of the EPRDF led Ethiopian government, to build the Giant Renaissance Dam, on the Nile River, will change not only the economical status and benefit of Ethiopia but also changes the road map of the Ethiopian politics. Egypt which was engaged in proxy war against Ethiopia through various ways will either cede to the legal norms or flounder to apply other mechanisms.

Confrontations and maneuvers were already taking place. Even though the confrontations were not manifested in their highest form, with armaments, in a form of a war, as the government of Ethiopia was busy to exploit the resource of the river with its limited capacity, on the other hand,

the Egyptians were similarly active to tackle this. Now the utility of the Nile by the Ethiopian government is upgraded. The government is enjoying unparalleled support of the Ethiopian people. Similarly the supreme task and concern of the government of Egypt will be unquestionably the Nile.

For the generations to come, no more indirect deal or proxy contact with Egypt. The service rendered by agents like Shaebia will be reduced or will be obsolete. Therefore, for uncertain eventualities we Ethiopians should join arms at least on this Grand National Issue. Political parties and their leader should evaluate the current reality. For me, this is the right time at which Ethiopia is beginning to secure its historic position for generations to come. Advocating and praying for an “Arab Revolution” at this particular period, in the land of Abyssinia, is unrealistic for uncountable reasons and is wasting a golden opportunity. At least, let the current voice and ambition of the Ethiopian people prevail. In its history, really, Ethiopia is conducting a revolution, revolution from the Red Sea politics to the Nile politics. And it is part and parcel of the Growth and Transformation Plan.

#### References.

1. Aljazeera inside story broadcasted 26 April 2010.
2. Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, water politics in the region.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Tegenu, A, “United Nations Commission on sustainable development.” Review session,
7. World energy council, 2006.
8. Ararso and Tamrat 2005, Ethiopia and the eastern Nile basin.
9. Daniel Kindie, Egypt and the Hydro-Politics of the Blue Nile River, 2001.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Official document of the Nile Basin Initiative.
13. Ibid.
14. EPRDF, ye ehiadeg meleya emnetoch. Amharic version.
15. Ibid.
16. Speech made by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.
17. Mohammed Allam, Minister of water resources of Egypt.
18. Anwar Sadat, Formed president of Egypt.