

The Not So Quite Nile “Diplomacy”

Entehabu Berhe, June 2013

Starting May 28, 2013, the Blue Nile (Abay) has taken a brief detour, of less than a kilometer, from its regular path to pave a way for the construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the river bed. However, Abay still continues to trek downstream without interruption or alteration in the quantity or quality of its ‘tribute’ as it has done so for millennia.

Since the temporary detour of Abay, however, some in the Egyptian media and the power circles of Cairo have been negatively casting the GERD, a regional dam, and speculating on perceived conspiratorial motives of Ethiopia and other sinister shadowy co-conspirators including the governments of Israel and the United States of America.

With clear ulterior motives, some in the media and a particular group of politicians have been amplifying the Egyptian narrative and ‘serving’ it with malice and contempt to the rest of the stakeholders of the Nile, especially Ethiopia. It is particularly jarring to be exposed to the unvarnished intent and reality of the inner thoughts of the power circles in Cairo without the benefit of the usual diplomatic filter or mask.

Some have keenly observed that the rerouting of Abay is being used as a diversionary tactic to redirect Egyptians away from the daily tumult of economic, political and social unrest that continues to reverberate throughout Egypt as an aftershock of the revolution.

Recently Egypt’s top court, the Supreme Constitutional Court, invalidated the laws that governed the only operating part of parliament and the assembly that was tasked with the new constitution. The lower house was similarly disbanded last year by the Constitutional Court. The rulings effectively diminished the legal standing of President Morsi and the new law makers at a time when many Egyptians are struggling to come to terms with the post-revolutionary let down and the severe economic distress that continues to plague the country.

Many Egyptians now feel that the post-Mubarak transition has been fraught with a democratic deficit and are openly challenging the government’s inability to effectively run the country in accordance to the ‘spirit of Tahrir’. Others observe that the core guiding principles and the views and policies of the current administration have been highly susceptible to the political muscle and sectarian views of the Freedom and Justice Party, the Muslim Brotherhood’s political arm.

It seems to me the series of serious political and economic setbacks that struck a blow to the party and government of President Morsi may be behind the recent ramping up of the rhetoric and hostile posturing against the brotherly people of Ethiopia and their individual and collective stake in their transformative signature undertaking - the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

There are also indications that Egyptian leaders may have underestimated the strength and resilience of the institutions of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in absorbing and withstanding

unanticipated shocks such as the untimely demise of the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi or the hostile Egyptian attempt to twist the arm of the Ethiopian people and their nation. However, the precedent setting interregnum period and the smooth transition that followed it have dispelled many long held myths and assumptions about the nature of the Ethiopian state and the ruling party. Despite such an undeniable reality, some still seem to have lingering doubts about the emergence of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia as a regional powerhouse and a stable anchor state.

In light of the current reality of the nation, some regional observers have dismissed the Egyptian elites' recent utterances as an attempt to delay the inevitable and inconvenient reality of regional power shift and restructuring. Whatever the case, it is regrettable that Nile politics is being used as an excuse to deny the dignity and human and democratic rights of Egyptians and as a means of distracting the people of the Nile Basin from bringing in to reality the just, equitable and sustainable development initiatives of upstream nations.

The Tortuous Journey in Search of a “Spark”

Over the last couple of weeks the Nile discourse has unbelievably gone over-the-top. Some have dubbed it as the 'political thriller' from Cairo while others are puzzled about the wisdom behind the recent sequence of actions and the packaging of the whole political drama.

Recent Egyptian videos and “live” broadcasts of supposedly 'off-air' national dialogue or strategy meetings have been tickling the interests of many. National and international media organizations, political forums, pundits, and many in the commentariat have widely covered the “blooper” from several angles. Many agree, including audiences in Egypt and Ethiopia, what unfurled on their screens is unbelievably shameful and regrettable.

...Let's now join the program already in progress...

The story starts with a supposed closed door meeting of the political elite and other persons of influence in Cairo's presidential palace; here are some of the lowlights:

"....we can 'leak' news information claiming that Egypt plans to buy advanced aircraft to increase its aerial presence to put pressurecreate the impression that it plans an airstrike to destroy the dam...." (Ayman Nour, leader of Egypt's Ghad party)

“....Egypt should back rebels in Ethiopia or, as a last resort, destroy the dam....” (Younis Makhyoun, leader of al-Nour party)

“....Egypt planned to destroy the dam could scare the Ethiopians into cooperating with Egypt on the project....” (Abu al-Ila Madi, leader of Wasat Party)

The tone of the rhetoric changed only when one of the participants seemingly drifted to discuss about his desire to fry much bigger and more powerful fish. He openly expressed how it would please him to fight the United States of America and Israel, the supposed conspiratorial backers of a perceived 'enemy' Ethiopia, before those responsible for the event realized they were venturing into uncharted

territory. He then shamelessly attempted to recalibrate his approach but ended up disrespecting and serving malice against a sovereign nation, Ethiopia, and its people.

The incident clearly demonstrated that it is not completely lost on the leaders of Egypt that emotionally charged slights be it against more powerful adversaries or friendly neighbours - who throughout their history have stood tall and defended their country's dignity, sovereignty, god given and human rights – could end up compromising Egypt's standing and its future.

It is apparent the smack down that many of the participants laid on Ethiopia and it's on air dissemination were intended: (1) to rouse emotion among the uninformed and the supporters of the government, and (2) to bully Ethiopia; in an attempt to discourage Ethiopia and the rest of the Nile basin countries from challenging the existing Egyptian hegemony of the Nile.

The Egyptian President and his government have since escalated the situation by declaring all options were on the table, unless Ethiopia halts the construction of the GERD. Mr. President, I do not think you are looking for a response, for the response is obvious. It seems to me Egypt like Ethiopia is looking for a 'spark' albeit of a different kind.

Mr. President, the only 'spark' Ethiopians are looking forward to is the spark from the GERD's hydroelectric power generators; which they can happily sit down and discuss with their Egyptian counterparts in order to supply Egypt with power at mutually acceptable and reasonable prices. Any other spark would be considered an act of war and would not in any way benefit the long term interests of the Egyptian people and it would ultimately be a self-defeating proposition.

The fallout

The irresponsible utterances from Cairo have wrongly rubbed the sensibilities of many Ethiopians and the inhabitants of the Nile Basin and could end up doing more damage to a region that continues to suffer from a trust deficit, historical misunderstandings and decades of conflict. Whatever the 'wisdom' and intentions of the broadcast the optics and the reactions from some responsible Egyptian politicians and citizens, Ethiopians, Sudanese, and the wider regional and international audiences indicate that it has started to backfire on those who are responsible for this embarrassingly low moment.

Going forward such an open display of hostility and insensitivity could exacerbate the already strained relationship between the brotherly people of Egypt on the one hand and Ethiopia and the larger family of the inhabitants of the Nile Basin on the other. All responsible parties need only take a cursory survey of online news about this unfortunate incident and read the comment sections which are littered with emotion and vitriol against the government of president Morsi and Egypt from all concerned parties including Egyptians. It is time for all concerned to tease out the excesses and start a meaningful diplomatic discourse.

Ethiopia, Unimpressed and Not in the Mood

Over the years Ethiopia has chosen to studiously watch the series of ominous sounding ‘comedy sketches’ that periodically continue to be served by the Egyptian elite and some in the Arab media. Similarly the people of Ethiopia remain nonplused and unperturbed by the current noise and tragic-comedy from Cairo. In fact the Ethiopian people continue to confidently and stridently move forward hand in hand to realize the goals of the Growth and Transformation Plan; with a particular attention to detail and the successful and uninterrupted completion of the GERD within the scoped plan period.

On the other hand though the Ethiopian government initially expressed its displeasure in a measured critical language and chose to reassure the Egyptian people that Ethiopia means no harm and is not the “enemy” that some would like to make it. A subsequent statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia condemned the “belligerent rhetoric” while reaffirming that Ethiopia’s foreign policy will remain to consistently be based on promotion of mutual respect and mutual benefit with all the countries in the immediate neighbourhood and beyond.

Some of the most recent communication indicates that the Ethiopian government is becoming increasingly aggrieved and irritated. In a recent interview, Prime Minister Haile Mariam sternly warned:

“ ... I do not think they will take that option (war) unless they go mad. I urge them to abandon such an unhelpful approach and return to dialogue and discussion.”

Ethiopia’s Ministry of Water and Energy on the other hand continued to reassure the Egyptian people by referring to the findings of the International Panel of Experts on the GERD which confirmed that:

- (1) the project design and specifications of the GERD were consistent with international standards,
- (2) the GERD would not cause any significant harm to the lower riparian states and
- (3) the GERD would in fact significantly benefit all, including Egypt and the Sudan.

The panel of experts tasked with the independent verification of the impacts of the GERD had indeed confirmed, in a report to the respective governments of the Eastern Nile Basin countries, that the construction of the grand renaissance dam will not adversely affect the interests of the brotherly peoples of the downstream nations and the environment. In a nut shell the study indicated that there were no significant adverse environmental impacts, immitigable and/or unmanageable environmental concerns or dam engineering related safety issues.

In light of the revelations of the study many are asking, why are some Egyptian leaders still crying wolf? While others are wondering, could this be an ill-advised last ditch effort to retest the mettle of the people of Ethiopia?

Ethiopians are befuddled why despite the transparency and goodwill of the people and government of Ethiopia, more than two years since the start of the construction of the GERD and the all clear bill from the tripartite committee, some Egyptian leaders continue to outrageously assume an increasingly hostile posture against the people and government of Ethiopia. It is apparent that the Egyptian leadership

recognizes that the horse is out of the barn and that it has very little recourse left; unless it negotiates with Ethiopia for a mutually beneficial outcome.

Close observers also believe, deep down the new Egyptian leadership knows it can't bend the will of the people of Ethiopia and the trajectory of transformation already in progress. However, it lacks the necessary courage, honesty and audacity to tell the Egyptian people that the construction of the GERD doesn't in any way endanger their security and Egypt's future. The GERD is indeed intended to benefit the whole region in securing a clean, green, renewable and sustainable energy. The GERD is also expected to be a catalyst for regional infrastructural and economic integration and a common prosperous future for the whole region.

So it is clear many of the erudite Egyptians need to weigh in and clear the fog of ignorance afflicting some of their fellow citizens. Others need to give their heads a little shake and smell the climate of change surrounding them and the changing regional economic and geopolitical map.

Some Egyptians are suggesting the president is surrounded by people who are prone to emotion and excesses instead of people who can provide reasoned and sound strategic options and an enlightened discourse. It is evident to all that the current hysteria has ulterior motives and is solely concocted in Cairo to change the topic of conversation by externalizing problems and hence delaying much needed solutions.

Wading into Ethiopia's and the rest of the region's domestic affairs will neither cure Egypt's domestic problems nor advance its foreign policy vis-à-vis Egypt's immediate neighbours, the Horn of Africa, the Nile Basin countries and the continent.

Some of those who are bristling with a misplaced anger and a false sense of righteous puffery will live to regret their words if they intend to go beyond rhetoric. Some think the new Egyptian leaders will soon regain their senses. At the end of this week, the Egyptian Foreign Minister is travelling to Addis; however, it is not clear whether his government is prepared to pursue win-win approaches, set a ground work to re-establish good neighborly relations and diplomatic solutions.

Cropping Out Excesses Out of the Nile Frame

For years Egypt relied on its client states, mercenary fronts, and its long tentacles to put a lid on the legitimate aspirations of Ethiopia and the peoples of the Nile basin.

What unfolded on our screens on that day of infamy for the government of President Morsi and national shame and disgrace for Egypt was not surprising given the belligerence of successive Egyptian regimes against the brotherly peoples of the upper Nile including Ethiopia, Sudan, the republic of south Sudan and other Nile riparian countries.

No matter what the justifications for the recent saber rattling and escalation from Cairo may be, it has ended up exposing the malevolence, ill will and incompetence of the regime and some of Cairo's elites. Others are saying this is a pattern consistent with previous observations about the double faced nature

of the new Egyptian administration. Recent developments certainly seem to have exposed the “Janus” in the inner workings of the Egyptian power structure.

Many Egyptian leaders continued to be unperturbed about the open display of hate and contempt towards Ethiopia, Sudan and the rest of the Nile basin states. The not so secret derisive approach frequented by the Egyptian elite badly reflects on Egypt and the Egyptian people. The distaste and disdain for the brotherly peoples of the region is palpable. No matter how hard the Egyptian elite attempt to disguise their contempt for the aspiration of their African neighbours, the pretense is too conspicuous to fool any of the affected parties. It is becoming obvious that some Egyptian politicians and elites are not the most polished characters.

In any case, it would be most unfortunate if Egyptian leaders continue to entertain antiquated solutions and choose to count on their ability to insert a wedge between brotherly peoples in order to detract their perceived enemies from development, prosperity and the pursuit of happiness rather than being positively engaged in a cooperative push towards a better tomorrow.

Beyond the moral imperatives, the strategic impacts of such a decision would have reverberations that would last for generations; that would accelerate the ongoing economic decline and a race to the bottom for all involved. So Ethiopia and most of the Nile riparian countries have made a choice for a common and prosperous future; however, it looks like Egypt wants to have its cake and eat it too. Egypt is making its choice known by not making one. The cosmic nature of the Egyptian proposition as an ‘all or nothing’ choice is, often made without trepidation and the slightest hint of irony, keeps to astound most reasonable observers.

But how can Egyptian leaders repeatedly fail to see the inherent danger in their unjust, inequitable and unsustainable colonial inheritance? The Nile hegemony like all relics must give way to modern and sustainable solutions. All stakeholders must recognize that only win-win approaches are viable. Egyptian leaders need to realize that they can’t wish away the aspirations of the Ethiopian people and the people of the larger Nile basin. It is a stark choice; but one all stakeholders must make together to secure a common prosperous future.

Finally it is clear that the recent antiquities from Cairo have left an indelible mark on the difficult and often tenuous relationships between Egypt and Ethiopia. This incident has inflicted significant damage; Egypt can’t spin or explain the exposed unvarnished reality away without digging deeper and a heart-to-heart with all aggrieved parties. However, such an act calls for leadership and integrity which it seems to me is in short supply in some Egyptian quarters.