

# TRANSCRIPT OF THE RENAISSANCE

## DAM

### CLEANER ENERGY: CLEANER WATER

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Two successive events, each equally significant as the other, have grabbed headline spots in all major global media networks. Naturally, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit of the African Union hosted in Addis Ababa on May 24-27 could not be ignored. No news organization of global-reach could overlook the gathering of almost all African heads of states and several other world leaders, including the vice-president of China and the US Secretary of State. Neither could any serious media overlook the May 28 rerouting ceremony of the famous Nile River at the Renaissance Dam project site. An event held in the presence of high-ranking state officials to mark the crossing of a crucial threshold in the construction process of Africa's biggest hydroelectric dam. On the longest river in the world to boot which on the Ethiopian side is fittingly called the 'Black' as opposed to the Blue Nile.

By and large, the write-up on the AU summit has been positive all round since the focus lay, as it should, on the continent's impressive economic as well as political turnaround particularly in the last ten years. In contrast, coverage of the Nile story so far, at any rate, appears to be somewhat uneven, even discrepant. On the positive side, praise to Ethiopia's resolve to finish what it started with responsible sensitivity to the concerns of all Nile stakeholders is legion. Whereas, on the down side, an overdose of speculation abounds that harps on the dire consequences of the completion of the project to downstream countries of north Sudan and Egypt. Unsurprisingly, the contrasting emphasis that media is placing on the immediate and long-term implications on Ethiopia's hydraulic project has spilt public opinion in Egypt. As in all public opinion, the informed minority view tends to be moderate as the bearers generally refrain from rushing to conclusion before all the facts are in. The uninformed majority opinion, however, appears to border on the hysterical, thanks to those with vested interest to keep it that way. This divergence of Egyptian response has in turn triggered mixed feelings among Ethiopians at home and abroad. As it is always the case, on one

level, the promises of cooperation made by president Mursi himself at a face-to-face side-talk with his Ethiopian counterpart during the AU summit was warmly received. On another level, palpable concern is in the air following the flurry of harsh and alarmist statements that opposition parties in Egypt are currently churning out in rapid succession.

In this regard, perhaps the word –divergence — used to describe the rechanneling of the flow of the Nile River at the Renaissance Dam construction site, though not entirely incorrect, has unfortunately lent itself to deliberate misuse. Mostly by Egyptian opposition parties who, driven as they are by ulterior motive, are bent on spreading mass hysteria whenever any upper Nile activity attracts media attention. As minister Bereket Simon explained in his well-received recent interview with Aljazeera, what Ethiopia did on may 28 is -- reroute -- the river along, as Habtamu Aby put it, through “a temporary water conveyance canal of 120m wide, 21m deep and nearly a km long”. On the face of it, therefore, one would have thought that the minister’s reassuringly accurate explanation of Ethiopia’s intention would suffice to alley the current wave of artificially- induced public fear. Or, at least, dent the panic stoked by those who hope against hope to gain most from heightened tension between Egypt and Ethiopia and by extension with all upper riparian countries.

Apparently, though too early to tell, the minister’s briefing has not cooled off flared emotions in Egypt. In fact, by all indicators there is more hyped commotion to come that needs close monitoring as the real issue is broader and deeper than meets the eye. To make a better sense of Egypt’s kneejerk reaction, it is useful to bear one thing in mind. This is to say that Cairo has a long history of going haywire at the slightest mention of even a small-scale waterworks on the upper Nile. This has a lot to do with the fact that right from the day Britain chose to quit Egypt, the country’s unelected rulers were quick, as it were, to put on the mantel of the ancient Pharos who fancied themselves as lords of the earth under the sun. From there on and up until their downfall, Egypt’s modern-day *Sultans* spoke and behaved as if they were vested by higher on with a non-negotiable veto-power over all Nile-related issues, including on any upriver water management schemes. So far, this received hegemonic stance has not been officially rescinded despite an explosive regime change detonated by an earthshaking popular upheaval that tore Egypt apart and continues to polarize its political landscape.

Indeed to this day the political situation in Egypt remains fluid as the core contested ideological issue has yet to play itself out. Doubtless there is no power vacuum *per se*, as there is a narrowly elected

president in office. Though all is quite at Tahrir Square, stalemate nonetheless continues between, on the one hand, the secular and democratic oriented forces that made the revolution. And, on the other, the moderate to extremist confessional rival parties, where the real king-maker--the military industrial complex—plays both sides. Until a clear winner emerges, hopefully with an inclusive democratic political platform that commands popular allegiance, perception of the Renaissance Dam is bound to be over-politicized. Worst still, given the current confusion, those tenuously perched at the apex of state power, could try to whip clamorous call for national unity against the perceived national-security threat associated with the Renaissance Dam to beef up their thin political base. On their part, each contestant party that vies for public acceptance could up the ante by casting itself as the most nationalist in the country that unlike any brooks no compromise when it comes to the Nile. That such a scenario is possible is evinced by these parties' self-promoting gimmicks, including the shameless theatrics of accusing Ethiopia of stealing Egypt's Nile waters. If this prognosis is right, incriminating charges of treason is likely to mount against any party in office that might otherwise be inclined to credit Ethiopia's fact-based and verifiable account of the Dam's purpose and function.

In any event, the apparent paradox of depicting the Renaissance Dam as material evidence of Ethiopia's intent to rob Egypt of its Nile waters is not lost on any of Cairo's political factions, opinion-makers or think tanks. In fact, by now the political actors across the ideological spectrum are aware that the sole purpose of the Renaissance Dam is to generate clean and renewable energy. Not even the most fanatic of the faith-based parties can feign ignorance that there is no intention in Ethiopia to divert even a liter of water for domestic consumption. The internal political reason why none of the contending parties openly vouch for this incontestable claim has been broached above. What needs mention here is that it is not loss of water *per se* that Egypt's political establishment is most worried about. Rather, the deeper concern has to lie in the geo-political implications of Ethiopia's increased- capacity to undertake such a gigantic project. This certainly seems to have come as a rude awaking since from the time of the Ottomans, Egypt's intelligentsia had a very dim view of Ethiopia's potential. None among their many experts could anticipate that the country and people they had for so long scorned could quietly develop a capability that Egypt can no longer ignore much less dismiss.

Surely Egypt knows that the capacity to build a \$4.5 Billion worth hydraulic power plant could not have been a contingent outcome. For it is apparent to all that it is a consequence of sustained growth and development, spanning over a ten successive year of upward

trajectory. Indeed without such an accelerated development, Ethiopia could not have leaped into a major regional power much less soar into the flag-bearer of Africa and the voice of the continent in all international forum. Close to home, Ethiopia's growing influence in the Nile basin and the role it played in the lead-up to the signing of the FCA could not have escaped Egypt's notice. Nor could it have been lost on its foreign policy experts that in an important sense, the FCA represents a breakthrough, heralding the African awakening. For the centerpiece of the accord rests in principles of equitable-sharing of the Nile waters. Unsurprisingly the prime mover of the FCA and its content which negates the two existing Nile treaties has not been to the liking of Egypt's maximalists. Here lies Cairo's real concern accentuated by a retrograde thinking that the more Ethiopia gains political and economic clout, the lesser would be Egypt's say on the politics of Nile basin, shifting the balance of diplomatic influence, as it were, in favor of Ethiopia.

But for Ethiopia this is a relic of 19<sup>th</sup> century zero-sum thinking where one nation's gain was thought to accrue only at the expense of another. As Ethiopia's late prime minister, Meles Zenawi, repeatedly pointed out, in this day-in-age -- zero-sum thinking -- is bunk as it has been found wanting many times over. Instead, as he often explained, what in the present era of global interdependence is desirable and works best is when a national project is conceived to produce a win-win outcome similar to the intent behind the Renaissance Dam and all Ethiopia's power-generating enterprise. Whereas what, according to Ethiopia, is untenable is Egypt's groundless claim to retain its de-facto final say over all Nile matters per the 1929 and 1959 Nile treaties. Today both these accords are deemed by all upstream countries not only as an impediment to inter-riparian development partnership, but also as woefully obsolete as they predate the formal declaration of independence of all upriver states except Ethiopia. It is obvious, then, that in this post-colonial age, these closed deals cry out for radical amendment. As it will be recalled, the former treaty, signed under the auspices of colonial Britain for the benefit of Anglo-Egypt, allocates total control of the Nile waters to only one out of the eleven riparian states against which, so far at least, none has any legal means to redress its glaring inequities. Whilst the latter bilateral agreement signed in 1959, divides the Nile waters between the two Arabic-speaking downstream countries, namely Sudan and Egypt. Here too predictably the northernmost of the two states reserves to itself the lion's share despite the fact that according to Mohamed Salem of Egypt, the country is "the reigning champion of wasting drinkable waters in the world."

Most riparian countries consider honoring such a brazenly iniquitous arrangement, entered in their name without their consent as tantamount to abdicating partial sovereignty and a downright mockery of their hard-earned independence. For Ethiopia in particular, the country that contributes 85% of the Nile waters, few reminders of the era of heavy-handed imperial imposition stand out as a shameful colonial legacy than these Nile treaties. The injustice of it all that understandably incenses Ethiopians most is the claim that Ethiopia has legal obligation to abide by treaties that none of her successive interlocutors had ever ratified. Those who make such claim forget that, though Ethiopia's rulers at the time were lacking in many respects, they were neither foolish enough as to be signatory to such a raw deal. Nor were they your ordinary pushovers that could with little effort enter an unequal treaty without a fight. Even in the heyday of the Scramble for Africa, Ethiopian rulers were not amenable to arm-twisting tactics aimed at forcing them into forfeiting their sovereign right to exploit any natural asset that lay within Ethiopia's self-defined national boundary. Much less to be easily tricked into signing an accord of zero-use of the Nile waters, even though Ethiopia's previous power-holders were derelict in their responsibility of harnessing the country's abundant natural resources.

Hence harping, as Egypt does, on Ethiopia's obligation to abide by a treaty that she had never been a party to is by any measure a nonstarter. Rather, lower riparian countries ought to start from recognition of the indisputable fact that there is no legal ground to prevent Ethiopia from converting its rapids into renewable energy. Particularly now that the country's present leadership has the resolve, the capacity, and the mandate to build mega-hydraulic dams to the country's maximum power generating limits. If anything, impeding an indigent country such as Ethiopia from converting its natural resources into means that could help lift the people out of poverty is wrong by any ethical principles. Including, one must haste to add, by the moral precepts of the very religion that Egypt's most vociferous political parties claim to uphold.

Yet the extremist Salafist parties in Cairo continue to spread mass hysteria as if the Renaissance Dam spells doom to Egypt. As the shrill cry in Cairo escalated, Ethiopia only response was to counter the panic-mongers by submitting the question to an international panel of experts composed of European and an equal number of Egyptian, Sudanese, as well as Ethiopian engineers. But the findings of the experts, which gave the lie to the Salafists' self-serving claim, seem to make no impression on them. So far at least, despite disclosure of the truth, Cairo's zealotry preachers seem to see no reason to tone down their inflammatory rhetoric. Or quit fanning the worst instincts of the

Egyptian people to hate Ethiopia, whose only sin to deserve Cairo's animus seem to be its daringness to use the Nile at no cost to its neighbors.

Nonetheless, Cairo's blind obstructionist stance notwithstanding, it is important that the finding of the experts, which categorical confirms Ethiopia's long standing position, has now entered the records. Henceforth, no secular party in Egypt, save those who lay claim to heavenly mandate, can openly dispute that not even a liter of Egypt-bound water would be diverted on account of the Renaissance Dam. The puzzle is, even after they heard this independently verified truth from the horse's mouth, Cairo's fanatics are unabashed to openly talk about sabotaging the construction process of the Renaissance Dam inside Ethiopia. Though these saber-rattling fanatics seem to lack the courage of their conviction, they are nonetheless bold enough to openly declare their readiness to pay thirty pieces of silver to any émigré *Habasha* band of perennial political malcontents willing to do the sabotaging for them.

Sad as it is, it appears that they have in mind the frustrated remnants of the now extinct Ethiopian opposition abroad that eagerly avail themselves for hire. As we speak, these dispirited desperados could be on their way to Cairo to sign a secret dam-demolition contract, knowing deep inside that such a covert operation even at the edges of the Ethiopian border is easier said than done. However, before making any pre-payment to these turncoat recruits, Egypt's sponsors of proxy-war at no cost of blood to any Egyptian would do well to consult with the Eritrean President. For more than anyone else, Issayas Afworki knows from his own frustrating experience that first, what is available in the Ethiopian offshore mercenary market is notoriously unreliable and extremely incompetent. And, second that as a policy, underwriting terrorism against a country that hosts the headquarters of the AU and home to the third largest concentration of resident diplomatic corps is inadvisable. For, it is likelier to backfire and invite serious UN scrutiny that often results in Security Counsel sanction-resolution against the offending state-party.

Be that as it may, one hopes that in the days ahead, the saner among Egypt's political parties and policymakers will calmly examine the findings of the experts' investigation and pattern their political behavior accordingly. For there is no sense for those in Egypt who hold political and spiritual authority or both to remain skeptical in the face of scientific evidence marshaled against the obscurantist reading of the doomsayers in their midst. But if incredulity to hard data persists, their option is one and one only. This is to say that their best bet is, though a tall order, to patiently wait until the completion

of the dam. For surely by then, even the most suspicious among them are bound to discover for themselves that the perilous impact that the gullible apparently dread most is only a figment of their own imagination. In the meantime, however, patience could wear thin within the ranks of Cairo's hawks, tempting the edgy to jump the gun. In that event, Ethiopia's preemptive first line defense could only be to take its case directly to the people of Egypt. For Cairo's aggressive muscle flexing, which could potentially skid out of control, can in no small measure be thwarted by drawing the attention of the Egyptian people to the justice of the Ethiopian cause. First and foremost this requires exploring ways of reaching the peace-loving multitudes Egypt's politically divided society if only to disabuse the majority of their misperception of the Renaissance Dam.

A communication strategy tailored to the grassroots in Egypt is bound to go a long way in terms of raising their awareness that, contrary to saturated negative disinformation, the Renaissance Dam has in actual fact several advantages to all lower Nile basin countries, most of all to *Messer*. Indeed it is imperative that the farming and agriculture dependent population of Egypt in particular is fully aware of the situation. Primarily that there are advantages to be had from Ethiopia's much maligned Nile project. Like its forerunner, the Tekezay hydropower plant, the Great Renaissance Dam will inevitably: A) Help to regulate the flow of the river and thereby prevents flooding. B) Guarantees a steady and sufficient level of water during dry seasons. And C) reduces siltation which in turn increases Egypt's water reservoirs vital in meeting its farmers' irrigation needs. Once the people of Egypt grasp these facts, they are less likely to be swayed by the jingoistic and inflammatory rhetoric of their self-appointed *viziers*.

For by any calculation of enlightened self-interest, bracing for hostility against the water-tower of Africa is self-defeating. And runs counter to the interest of the toiling masses whose aspiration is identical with the hopes and dreams of their counterparts in Ethiopia. Indeed there is an instinctually-felt affinity between the two working peoples of the upper and lower riparian countries. Recall, if you will the eager intensity with which ordinary Ethiopians followed as the masses of Egypt waged a civilized struggle without precedent on the open terrain of Tahrir Square. Remember too, the relief felt in this land of upper Nile at news of the partial victory which their downstream counterparts scored against the injustice of those who refuse to acknowledge the unjustness of their ways in dealing with Egypt's Nile neighbors. Hence, it is fair to say that the mean-spirited elements among Cairo's political big shots can't fully count on the support of the just citizens of Egypt to bully Ethiopia. Nonetheless,

even otherwise, regardless of the size of their bogus army of shifty local saboteurs, Cairo's buccaneers can't intimidate this country into complying with Egypt's dictates. Not at least, enough to frighten it into conceding to halt the building of the Renaissance Dam on which hinges Ethiopia's national plan to graduate from a foreign-energy dependent state to an energy exporting country.