

# **The River Nile: A hidden ‘bomb’ or promise for shared prosperity?**

*Aklog Birara \**

8 August 2011

Beyond the current fascinations concerning the “Arab Spring”, there are strategic economic and diplomatic dimensions that require deeper analysis and understanding concerning relations between Ethiopia on the one hand, and Egypt on the other. I refer to the future development and use of the waters of the Nile River. I know of no other topic in the 21st century that evokes strong emotions and national sentiments in Egypt and Ethiopia than the development and use of the River Nile and its tributaries. These sentiments emanate from the fact that water is among the most precious natural resource assets in the world. It is the source of life, identity, civilization, food self-sufficiency and security, industrialization, potential wealth and security for those who possess it and a source of jealousy for those who do not. People need water to survive. They need fertile or irrigable land to procreate and to produce food. Water meets basic needs. As populations increase and infrastructural and economic demand intensify, governments are obliged to respond to the needs of their societies as a matter of urgency. They have little choice but to harness their water resources for the betterment of their respective societies. Understandably, government officials, experts, academics, and members of civil society from both sides express views that reflect competing national interests. Elementary school children in both countries find themselves growing up with the belief that their respective perception- that is single country-focused - often underestimates the interdependence of the two countries. This mutuality must govern relations and the future.

Seifu Metaferia Firew, a well-known Ethiopian poet, expresses the widely held view among Ethiopians that, as the “origin of the Nile, Ethiopia, continues to suffer from water scarcity” and from recurring famine. He suggests that this “shameful” condition continues not because Ethiopia does not possess water; but because its government is unable to “develop, harness, and use” the country’s “vast water resources and silt to dam, irrigate, produce and feed its large and growing population. Ethiopia, he says, loses two ways: “The waters of the massive Abay River (the Blue Nile) flow into the Greater Nile; and that this river takes away millions of tons of fertile soils from the Ethiopian highlands” year after year to provide the material foundation for Egyptian agriculture. At the same time, Ethiopia faces chronic drought, famine, skyrocketing food prices, and hunger. Today, more than 4.5 million Ethiopians endure the worst famine since the 1980s. In light of this, the author suggests that “Someday, I (meaning government), will be held accountable for gross negligence to develop the Abay River” so that Ethiopians will no longer go through the humiliation of hunger, destitution and international food aid dependency. The lack of prioritization in the agricultural sector in general and irrigated farming in particular is now a “national crisis.” No government in Ethiopia will survive unless it addresses this fundamental national crisis. To-date, successive Egyptian governments have managed to marginalize Ethiopia and bar it from exploiting its major rivers including the Abay. The fact that Ethiopia is “the water tower of Africa” has meant practically nothing when measured against the food self-sufficiency and security and modernization needs of the country. In contrast, Nile-centered and dependent Egypt has succeeded to meet domestic food demand and create a strong agric-based industry that employs millions. Egypt has done this by invoking the principle of acquired or “historic rights” while denying Ethiopia fair and equitable share of the Nile. 1/

These two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives and principles lead me to the lead thesis of the article. On the Egyptian side is the principle of acquired or “historic rights,” a principle inherited from the colonial era that gives Egypt total hegemony over the Nile. This hegemony clashes with the principles of equitable and fair share, principles that most Sub-Saharan African riparian states now embrace. On the Ethiopian side is the growing recognition that “historic rights” claimed by Egypt and to some extent Northern Sudan are unjust and unfair, and that colonial and foreign interference- based treaties and legal arrangements are no longer viable or acceptable. One cannot appreciate the depth and breadth of these two contending views unless and until one goes back and examines history. Ethiopia’s claim for fair and equitable allocation is not new at all, and predates pre-the Axumite Empire and the height of

Egyptian civilization. The country's history shows that King Lalibela wanted to build a dam long before dams had become an economic necessity. Emperors such as Zara Yaqob, Yohannes, Teodros, Menelik, Haile Selassie, and leaders such as Mengistu Haile Mariam and Meles Zenawi manifest visions and perspectives that defend Ethiopia's national interests over its water resources. Emperor Yohannes IV died defending this sacrosanct principle, as did Emperor Teodros.

## Demography may now be destiny

The Nile River has been a major source of contention, rivalry, and animosity between Egypt and Ethiopia since time immemorial. The fundamental role of the Nile in shaping Egyptian life is incontestable. Egyptian civilization is a gift of the Nile six sevenths of the waters of which originate from the Ethiopian highlands. The battle for control and for influence of countries around it predates Egypt's Pharos. From time to time, it has involved powers beyond riparian states for more than 7,000 years. This tradition to exercise monopoly continued under British imperial rule that imposed binding agreements on riparian nations on behalf of Egypt, a British colony at the time. Egypt signed a Nile Agreement in 1929 that offered it natural and exclusive rights over the Nile. This arrangement begun to unravel only after Sub-Saharan African states gained independence. Until then, Ethiopia stood as the sole voice in defense of the principle of fair and equitable share without success. This Egyptian inherited "historic right" and preponderance have virtually undermined Ethiopia's legitimate rights to advance its national development by building hydroelectric and irrigation dams. Ethiopians and other independent experts contend that Egypt does not contribute a drop of rain or water to the Nile. Ethiopia contributes 86 percent of the water and uses only 1 percent for irrigation. Thirty percent of Ethiopia's land mass that covers 385,400 square kilometers is within the Abay River Basin and its tributaries. This provides potential of 3,500,000 hectares of irrigable land, more than sufficient to meet Ethiopia's food demand for decades. From 1990 to present, the country used only 90,000 hectares of the available potential within this land mass. Given geographic spread, population, and size, Ethiopia possesses geopolitical and demographic advantage unmatched by other riparian states. The later suggests urgency. Ethiopia's population of 90 million--the second largest in Africa-- will reach 278 million by 2050, the tenth largest in the world. This dramatic demographic shift will have profound economic and political impact not only in the Horn but also in the rest of Africa and the Middle East. This in itself foretells the need for change in the governance of Nile waters. Ethiopia's legitimacy is firmer than ever before. There is no doubt in my assessment that Ethiopia will emerge as a leading economy over the coming 25 to 50 years.

Colonial powers and especially Britain tried to tie Ethiopia's hands at a time when the country was relatively weak. The May 15 1902 Treaty between Britain and so-called "Abyssinia" regulated the frontier between Ethiopia and the Sudan, a British colony. Article III of this treaty states that "The Emperor Menelik engages not to construct or to allow being constructed any work across the Blue Nile, Lake Tana or the Sobat which would arrest the flow of their waters into the Nile, except in agreement with the governments of Great Britain and the Sudan. " This and the 1929 agreement weakened Ethiopia's position in that both set a precedent used subsequently to justify unfair and unjust arrangements. The Nile Waters Agreement of 1959 between the Republic of the Sudan and the United Arab Republic of Egypt benefitted from colonial precedents to which Ethiopia is not a party. At the center of all these agreements, the economic principles that the River "needs projects for its full control and for increasing its yield for the full utilization of its waters" are under-scored. It is unthinkable to realize development without a project or program. This same principle of project applies to Ethiopia. "Acquired or historic rights" trace their origins to these types of arrangements that conferred on Egypt and the Sudan exclusive rights to develop and use the Nile. Both countries continue to adhere to these outdated agreements as if the world remains static. "The absurdity of the land of the Blue Nile dying of thirst (during the Great Famine of

the 1980s in which 1 million lives were lost; and today in which close to five million Ethiopians face death) was combined with fact that Egypt at that time (1980s) was about to face a similar catastrophe,” had rains not started in Ethiopia. This nature-driven interdependence between Egypt and Ethiopia virtually defines the acrimonious links between two competing societies that depend on the same river to achieve the same goals. “The intensive Egyptian-Ethiopian efforts to reach understanding that resumed in the early 1990s have not been facilitated by old legacies of mutual suspicion...Egypt was not only born of the Nile, it also lives by it, and its dependence increases with the pace of modernization and population growth.” The same forces that deepen Egypt’s dependence on the Nile are shaping Ethiopian society at speeds that no one had anticipated in the last century. I am not referring only to demographic change. Ethiopians aspire to achieve rapid and inclusive modernization, and possess the requisite talent pool and material resources to achieve these goals over the coming decades. The various dams built and proposed reflect this achievable goal. 2/

Ethiopian interest in harnessing and developing its water resources for development are not new. Successive Ethiopian governments tried to persuade the Egyptian and Sudanese governments of Ethiopia’s right to invest in its waters to meet changing needs. In 1960, the Imperial government under Emperor Haile Selassie sponsored a hydroelectric and irrigation feasibility study led by the US Bureau of Reclamation. In July 1964, the group identified 71 locations, 31 water, and 19 specific hydroelectric sites on the Abay River. It recommended the construction of hydroelectric dams that would produce 87 billion kilowatt electricity per year, more than sufficient to meet domestic demand. Irrigation dams of varied sizes would irrigate 430, 000 hectares of land and would meet the food security needs of the country for decades. Breakdowns of the proposals suggest the seriousness of the thinking and the sizes of the projects. One such hydroelectric dam would have been bigger than the Aswan Dam that contains 51 million cubic meters of water; and would generate more electricity than the Aswan Dam. The primary locations identified included Lake Tana, Mendassa near the Sudanese border and Makile. The government was able to realize only the Fincha Dam. The newly proposed Millennium Dam is not radically different in dimension or in location.3/

Why did the other projects fail to come to fruition? The primary reason is Egyptian intransigence and rejection of any move by Ethiopia to develop its waters. The Tana Beles hydroelectric and irrigation project involving five dams near Lake Tana proposed in 1958--that would have benefitted 200,000 farmers under financing from the African Development Bank-- was rejected outright by Egypt. The feasibility study conducted by the US Bureau of Reclamation and the Tana Beles project would have effectively transformed the Abay Gorge and Lake Tana into the “primary all-Nile reservoir to supply electricity and irrigation for Ethiopia while significantly enlarging and regulating the amount of water flowing into the Sudan and Egypt. “ The scheme would have benefitted Egypt too. Egypt rejected all of the projects and persuaded multilateral financial institutions not to support Ethiopia’s ambitions. This rejection curtailed Ethiopia’s potential in developing its water resources to meet its food demands and to reduce poverty. In 1977, a World Bank study of the Nile concluded that the “Waters of the Nile probably constitute Ethiopia’s greatest natural asset for development. The development of the River Nile in Ethiopia has the potential to contribute significantly to poverty reduction, meet domestic power and food demands, and become a cornerstone of a future export strategy.” 4/

## **How do riparian states move from intransigence to commonality?**

In my view, and as the World Bank study suggests, past arrangements are no longer viable and or acceptable to changing Ethiopia’s development needs. Governments must recognize the importance of averting the inevitability of war over the Nile. As a step forward, there must be willingness and readiness on all sides to build mutual confidence and trust. Ethiopians feel that the lead responsibility must come from Egypt. In the past, Egypt financed

and provided armaments and safe harbor to secessionist movements such as the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front, the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ogaden Liberation Front, and the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front. These and similar activities must cease. The evolving consensus among riparian states and the world community suggests an urgent need for radical shifts in policy and covenants among all parties. Threats and suspicions must give way to win-win options that serve all parties fairly and equitably. The alternative could be catastrophic for Egypt and Ethiopia in particular. War will have no boundaries; and no one will emerge victorious. Ethiopia is vast enough to develop its water resources without much danger. The key point is that the threat of war is not a viable option. No one including Egypt can win a war that will engulf the entire region. Egypt and Ethiopia need one another not only to survive but also to thrive. Egypt's priority is to ensure that it has adequate flow. Ethiopia's first priority is to achieve food self-sufficiency and security for its growing population. It cannot cope with demand until and unless it harnesses and develops its water resources as optimally as possible without affecting Egypt adversely. Hydroelectric and irrigation infrastructure at a massive-scale is a prerequisite in achieving this urgent goal for Ethiopia. This is a matter of survival.

In light of the above, Ethiopians within and outside the country agree that fair and equitable allocation and use of the Nile is a necessity. The vast majority of 11 riparian states, including South Sudan, endorse this fundamental principle. The Ethiopian government, other riparian states, and independent experts point out to successful examples in the rest of the world where riparian nations negotiated fair and equitable allocation and use of major rivers such as the Mekong, the Amazon, Indus/Ganges, and Okavango. Ethiopian experts suggest that the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) of 1999 provides an institutional framework for genuine negotiations and program implementation that will lead to cooperative development of the Nile. Egypt places numerous conditions on NBI to undermine its effectiveness. Professor Majeed Rahman recognizes that Ethiopia has needs and points out that "Egypt's defiance of the NBI and its lack of participation in the NBI's initial attempt to convene such a cooperative agreement is a crucial aspect of the NBI's objective to consolidate through cooperation in the negotiation for equitable distribution." This lack of engagement and inflexibility by Egypt leads Rahman to conclude that Egypt "has denied other riparian countries complete access to water resources along the Nile and for that matter has exercised her hegemonic power over the development and control of water resources in the Nile River Basin for decades." 5/

Tesfaye Tadesse believes that Egyptian government attitude on the status quo began to change slightly for three fundamental reasons:

1. "Pressure" from the global community including the World Bank and UNDP;
2. "Threats" from riparian states that they will go ahead and develop their waters with or without Egyptian consent; and,
3. "Changes in Egyptian public and political" sentiments. 6/

This turned out to be an optimistic view in that the Egyptian government dragged its feet with the hope that other riparian states will be willing to wait for decades more patiently. Egypt continues to adhere to its hard-line policy of maintaining the status-quo. Against this, Ethiopia pursues its ambitious water infrastructure project at a pace never witnessed in the country's history. This includes "the controversial multibillion-dollar Nile River (Millennium) Dam that could supply 5,000 megawatt of electricity for itself and its neighbors including newcomer South Sudan. " Ethiopia plans to build four additional dams, "together, 20 dams either built on planned, the largest number if Africa." Concerns include the environment and the political and diplomatic fallout that could ensue. "Egypt and North

Sudan have expressed concern that the mega dam project could seriously reduce the downstream water flow of the Nile River to their countries. “ As worrisome is the lack of a proper environmental and social assessment by the Ethiopian government. In my mind, the Ethiopian government did not consider smaller irrigation and hydroelectric dams that are more cost effective and less costly to maintain. Further, the government initiated these mammoth projects at a time when it is granting millions of hectares of irrigable farmlands to foreign investors from 36 foreign countries. 7/

## Is there a way out?

In my view, the most sensible way forward is to accommodate the needs and aspirations of all riparian nations in a fair, equitable and balanced manner. The World Bank, the Canadian Development Agency (CIDA) and the UNDP tried to promote shared, fair and equitable use of the Nile through the auspices of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI). It is clear that no single state has monopoly over the Nile. Article 5 of the UN General Assembly Convention A/51/869, 1997 on the Law of Non-navigational uses of International watercourses recognizes the need for “equitable and reasonable utilization and participation” explicitly. “Watercourse states shall in their respective territories utilize an international watercourse in an equitable and reasonable manner,” with the intent of serving social, economic, hydraulic, ecological, conservation and development needs. NBI is consistent with this UN mandate. This first the first multilateral initiative provides a solid framework for the 11 riparian states: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, North Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda representing more than 300 million people that depend on the Nile to pursue a shared vision and set of programs along the following lines:

- “Develop the Nile in a sustainable and equitable manner to ensure prosperity, security, and peace for all its peoples;
- “Ensure cooperation and joint action between riparian countries seeking win-win gains;
- “Target poverty eradication and promote economic integration; and
- “Ensure the program results in a move from planning to action.” 8/

These objectives are noble; but require political will. Many years after NBI, there are yet no clear commitment and or political will to advance a cooperative approach. The current impasse on the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) that curtailed by Egypt and North Sudan has not been helpful to moving from rhetoric to action. My own view is that it is tantamount to madness for anyone to use force or the threat of force against any African state that asserts its right to use its waters to dam, irrigate and feed its starving population. The Egyptian position “We want historical use of the Nile water to be recognized by other Nile Basin countries because this is the only source of water we have,” before it would sign the agreement restrains MBI. Egypt insists on the three preconditions:

- 1) Maintain its share of 55.5 billion m3 of water” per the 1959 Treaty;
- 2) Prior notification by upstream states before they can construct hydroelectric and other projects; and
- 3) Basin decisions to be mad by consensus not majority vote” giving Egypt veto power. 9/

These three preconditions prevent an otherwise promising agreement from bearing fruit. The spring 2011 high level Egyptian delegation to Ethiopia mirrors the emerging reality on the Nile that requires compromise rather than confrontation. All sides must recognize that fair and equitable allocation of the waters of the Nile is here to stay. Although controversial, the proposed Millennium Dam has galvanized a cross-section of the Ethiopian population. Ethiopia has gone ahead with this mammoth project without prior notification thereby reinforcing its sovereignty over waters within its own borders. This is a position Ethiopian experts defend. 9/

I should like to conclude this article with an optimistic note that riparian nations can derive substantial benefits from a cooperative rather than from unilateral approaches in the use of the Nile River. I am convinced that meaningful dialogue, negotiation and confidence-building rather than destructive and costly confrontation should usher in a new era of cooperative development and shared benefits for the populations of member countries. Within this spirit, governments have an obligation to their respective people to draw upon the state of the art technical, hydraulic, environmental and water resource knowledge and experience that will ensure sustainability and peace, avail waters, protect long-term security, reduce un-necessary sedimentation and loss and promote greater regional economic integration. This is the only legacy that makes sense.

### **Reference notes**

One/ Firew, M. Seifu, *Abay: Fengie yekebere wuha*. Daraku Publishing Inc. Boston, 2009. The author presents a penetrating notion that, left unaddressed, the Abay River contains the ingredients of a massive “bomb buried in water” and waiting to explode. The Amharic symbolism is not academic. The current famine in the Ogaden and persistent hunger among the Ethiopian population suggest that the demand on the government to respond will be far greater in the future, than it has been over the past 3,000 years of Ethiopian history.

Two/ Haggai, Erlic, *the Cross-and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder. 2012. Haggai brings to the debate on the Nile a feature often ignored by most experts on the Nile, namely, the broader cultural, historical, religious, and other relationships between Egypt and Ethiopia that reveal commonalities. One commonality is the Coptic faith. Ethiopia is predominantly a Christian country with strong links to the Egyptian population that belongs to the Coptic faith. This long tradition in the evolution of this faith and Ethiopia’s capacity to accommodate all three major faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam portend potential for mutuality that both sides must explore and strengthen.

Three/ US Bureau of Reclamation, *Land and Water Resources of the Blue Nile*. Addis Ababa. July 1964. The Bureau identified that Ethiopia possessed ample irrigable land to meet food self-sufficiency and security for decades to come. Ethiopia would have avoided hunger and would have managed famines on its own if it translated these projects into action.

Four/ The World Bank, “The World Bank, Ethiopia and the Nile: a strategy for Ethiopia.” Washington, DC. 1998. Internal draft document. While the Bank endorses Ethiopia’s fundamental rights in the development of the Nile to meet growing demand, it has refrained from financing major hydroelectric and irrigation dam projects. In fact, its role in agricultural development has been disappointing. The Bank continues to present analytical and policy pieces without backing them with real resources.

Five/ Rahman, A. Majeed, *the Geopolitics of Water in the Nile Basin*. Global Research. July 24, 2011. Rahman points out the danger of war in the event that a win-win solution that will serve all parties cannot be reached. In my view, the NBI provides a good framework for further negotiator.

Six /Tafesse, Tesfaye. Water conflict resolution and institution building in the Nile Basin. Monograph 178. Institute for Security Studies.

Seven/Than, Ken. Ethiopia: why a massive dam on Nile? National Geography News. July 14, 2011.

Eight/International Roundtable: the Nile: sharing experiences, sharing visions. Berlin. 2002

Nine/ Wolde Giorgis, Hailu. Le Abay Wuha Mugit. Addis Ababa University Press. 2001.

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*\*Aklog Birara, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Trinity University, Washington, DC, Senior Advisor, the World Bank, retired*