

Decolonizing the Nile/Abbay: revisiting the ideational power tactics of Egypt over the GERD

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Abstract

The absence of harmonized and binding transboundary water law worldwide exacerbates the tensions on the states' sovereignty and hydro-hegemony (Gupta, 2016). Abbay, the name by which the Nile river is known by Ethiopia, has been captured by Egypt (and to some extent by the Sudan) through different strategies and tactics. The resource capture was reinforced by the colonial-era treaties that excluded Ethiopia and other riparian states. The beginning of the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile in 2011, has been shaking the long-existed hydro-political configurations in the Nile basin. The GERD is a self-funded mega-project with no foreign fund and is a non-consumptive hydropower dam. Upon completion, it is expected to uplift tens of millions of Ethiopians from poverty and more than seventy million Ethiopians from the darkness. From a symbolic point of view, it is considered national pride and a flagship project. Moreover, it would intensify regional economic integration. For Egyptians side, the dam has been considered a threat to its national interest. Since 2011, the transboundary water relation between Egypt and Ethiopia is jam-packed with conflicts. In this article, I examine the ideational power tactics, which have been employed in the post-2011 by Egypt towards the different actors to maintain the existing 'water allocation'. The main focus of this study is on the strategic narratives which have shaped Egypt's water diplomacy. This study is informed by the hydro-hegemony framework.

Key Words: The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Ideational power, Water narratives, the Nile/Abbay, Egypt, Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is known for endowed surface water resource availability and because of this, traditionally, it has been considered as a 'water tower of Horn of Africa'. However, more than 96% of the 123 billion meter cube (bcm) of waters are flowing away to the neighboring states (MoWIE, 2013). Except with Djibouti, Ethiopia shares its transboundary rivers with all the five neighboring states. Additionally, Ethiopia is one of the countries in the world with underdeveloped water infrastructures. The country has been suffering from recurrent drought and desertification and facing a looming climate changes which have affected millions of people. It also face water insecurity (Assefa et al., 2019) due to lack of proper water management and efficient use of rainfalls.

Ethiopia has less water consumption per capita as compared to its downstream states (Ayalew, 2018). For instance, an Egyptian consumes 8 times more than an Ethiopian consumes water per day per

litres (world meters, 2021). In terms of electricity, an Ethiopian consumes 17 times less than what an Egyptian consumes per day (Van der Zaag, 2020). Because of the relative peace and economic growth, Ethiopia has experienced in the last three decades, the country has been developing its water resources (Cascão, 2008; Ayalew, 2018). Since the Nile water combined with the Omo Ghibe comprises 80% - 90% of the country's water resources and has been the main focus of the country's water resources developments (MoWIE, 2013).

The Nile Basin is shared by eleven riparian states: Ethiopia, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The basin comprises two sub-basins; the Eastern Nile basin and the Equatorial Nile sub-basin (Merrey & Gebreselassie, 2011). The Equatorial Nile sub-basin is mainly consisted of Lake Victoria sub-basin and Equatorial lakes sub-basin, whereas the Eastern Nile sub-basin consists of the Blue Nile, Tekeze-Atbara, and Baro-Akobo Sobat (Appelgren et al., 2000). In Ethiopia, the Blue Nile River is known as Abbay. Ethiopia contributes nearly 77 BCM to the Abbay waters, which is nearly 86% of the total Nile water through its three main tributaries: the Blue Nile contributes 50 billion m³;¹ Baro-Akobo River contributes 13.5 billion m³; and Tekeze-Atbara River contributes 11.2 billion m³ (Awulachew, 2019).

the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is under construction on this river on the Blue Nile, Abbay which is shared by Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. The GERD is a mega-hydropower project with the capacity of generating over 5200 Mega Watt (MW) of electricity which is completely funded by the public and the government of Ethiopia (Tesfa, 2013). This has added new complexity to the already complex basin. Abbay/the Nile river is among the most complex basins in the world where riparian states entangled with contested legal frameworks, complex and unjust hydro-political configurations, recurrent climate changes, unprecedented deforestation and land degradations, unsteady hydrology, exploding population growth, extreme poverty, food insecurity, competing for water uses diverse interests from international actors, etc. (Abdel-Satar et al., 2017; Cascão & Nicol, 2016; Yihdego et al., 2016). In this article, I focus on the Eastern Nile sub-basin, and in particular, the hydro-political power configurations between Egypt and Ethiopia. More particularly, the focus is given to water narratives employed by Egypt since 2011.

2. Hydro-hegemony in the Eastern Nile Basin

In transboundary waters, riparian states in most cases have asymmetrical power relations, and for this hydro-hegemony is important to understand international water relations among states (Mirumachi & Allan, 2007). The inexistence of harmonized and binding transboundary water law worldwide is intensifying the tensions over the riparian state sovereignty (Gupta, 2016). Hydro-hegemony is defined as a "hegemony active at the basin scale and occurs where control over transboundary flows is consolidated by the more powerful actor" (Cascão & Zeitoun, 2013). While mentioning strategies of hydro-hegemony, Zeitoun and Warner defined it as a "hegemony at the river basin level, achieved through water resource control strategies such as resource capture, integration, and containment" (Warner et al., 2013). The concept and tools are given by Zeitoun and Warner (2006) are important to understand the past as well as the current hydro-political relations of the basin (Cascao, 2008). The

¹ Dinder and Rahad contribute 3 billion m³ to the Blue Nile

framework of hydro hegemony indicates indirect use of power employed by the state to maintain unreasonable and inequitable water-sharing arrangements (Woodhouse & Zeitoun, 2008).

In hydro hegemony, a hydro-hegemon state could be either a leader working for the collective good of the basin or dominant whereby it captures and controls the shared water resources by coercion to produce and maintain the situations that benefit itself only with unjust water allocations (Mirumachi & Allan, 2007). In the case of the Nile, Egypt has established itself as a bad hydro-hegemon state (Endaylalu, 2019; Ferede & Abebe, 2014; Tekuya, 2020). In the Nile basin, different dimensions of power in the water relations have been manifested (Cascao, 2008). The power exercised by Egypt to control the Nile/Abbay is categorized in line with Luke's three faces of power; structural power (decision-making power), bargaining power (non-decision-making power), and ideational power (Lukes, 2012).

Power has the central role and it "determines who is the hegemon" in transboundary water relations (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008). Water is asymmetrically consolidated by the downstream riparian states (Egypt and Sudan) through a degree of hydraulic, legal, and political control over the Nile River. Upstream riparian states were not been using Nile water in a great deal in their territory because of political as well as structural issues (Cascao, 2008).

3. Strategies of Hydro-Colonialism in the Eastern Nile Basin

In the Nile/Abbay hydro-political configuration, the Eastern Nile basin has a crucial geopolitical significance to the Nile basin due to the case that the eastern Nile Rivers which are coming from Ethiopia namely Blue Nile, Baro, and Tekeze, contribute around 86% of total Nile River flows that discharge to the Lake Nasser in Egypt (Cascao, 2009). However, this basin is characterized as the basin having the most unequal hydro-political relations and serious water injustices. In this article, I equate the Egyptian hydro-hegemony with colonization over the shared resources. The main foundations for this argument are the strategies and tactics used by Egypt to control the shared river where it does not contribute to the water share of the river which complies with the manifestations of European colonializations over Africa.

- I. The main strategy used by Egypt to colonize the river is political containment in Ethiopia. Egypt has been supporting radical ethno-nationalists and religious irredentists to weaken the central government politically and economically (Gebreluel, 2014; Sandstrom et al., 2016). For instance, Egypt has been supporting Eritrean People's Liberation Front, Oromo People's Liberation Front, and Ogaden People's Liberation Front. With the beginning of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Egypt has been supporting OLF-Shane and Gumuz Rebels (Ayenalem, et.al.,2021). These covert actions are intended to prevent Ethiopia-which provides the largest share of water to the Nile River- from any infrastructural developments.
- II. The second strategy is through igniting, if not creating, inter-state conflicts between Ethiopia and its neighbors. Egypt has been supporting states which are conflicting (fighting) with Ethiopia. This has been manifested when Egypt was providing military weapons and ammunition to Somalia during the Ethio-Somalia war (Mekonnen, 2018). In the Reuters News published 2007, the Egyptian presidential spokesman Suleiman Awad has admitted the involvement of Egypt in the Ethio-Somalia war by being on the side of Somalia (Reuters, 2007).

Since the fall of 2020, Egypt has been igniting border conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan. Since Sudan has entered and controlled Ethiopian sovereign land, the Egyptian government has been releasing a press statement assuring that the Egyptian government is in full support of any kind, and on 17th of December 2020, the spokesman of the Foreign Ministry of Egypt has said "Egypt reiterates its full solidarity with brotherly Sudan and affirms its support to the country's right to protect its security and sovereignty over its territory" (Sabry, 2020). Since November 2020, Egypt and Sudan have conducted joint military pieces of training (the Nile Eagles 1, the Nile Eagles 2, and the Nile Protectors), ahead of the second year filling of the GERD (Addisstandard, 2021).

- III. Resource Capture through constructing extensive infrastructures unilaterally like Aswan High Dam is another strategy, and through this Egypt has captured the Nile River and altered the competition from other riparian states mainly from Ethiopia (Cascao, 2008). Egypt has mobilized human and natural resources through external assistance and funding (Negm & Abdel-Fattah, 2017).

The resource capture is also reinforced by treaties that excluded Ethiopia as anything 84 billion meter cubes that reach to the Aswan High Dam is the main narrative that conquers the negotiation and the hydro-political discourses (Ferede & Abebe, 2014). The huge water diversion projects (Toshka and El Salam) which divert the water of the Nile out of its basin are important strategies to control the Nile river (Kanater, 2014). For instance in the Toshka project, more than half of the investment belongs to investors from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, etc that will further invite more actors to the already complex Nile basin governance (Tellioglu & Konandreas, 2017).

- IV. The other major hydro-colonization strategy is through the colonial-era treaties. The 1929 and 1959 treaties signed between Sudan (under Great Britain in the case of 1929) and Egypt have been used as the foundational legal frameworks for these states (Ferede & Abebe, 2014). These treaties were never accepted by the riparian states (Endaylalu, 2019). These colonial-era and exclusive treaties offer the veto power to Egypt regarding any upstream water developments and awards Egypt is awarded to utilize 66% of the Nile water, whereas Sudan is awarded 22% and the rest 12% was left to the evaporation (Messay, 2020; & Jackson, 2020). Other riparian states, mainly Ethiopia which contributes more than 86% of the Nile water are allocated nothing and these treaties have been used as the play-card in the Nile Water Negotiations (Messay, 2020).
- V. Blocking funds from the international financial institutions. The World Bank has granted Egyptians professionals a privilege to occupy "the Bank's key political and environmental positions" since 1980s and through the World Bank's Operating directives 7.5 which favors the downstream states, Egypt has been blocking funds to Ethiopia to develop its water resources, mainly on the Nile/Abbay basin (Tekuya, 2020). Through its strategic position being in the middle of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea as well as its position in the middle east politics and its Suez Canal, Egypt has been blocking any funds and financial assistance in the water infrastructural developments on the Abbay basin in Ethiopia (Endaylalu, 2019; Ferede & Abebe, 2014; Gebreluel, 2014).

- VI. Additionally, Egypt has securitized water and water-related issues as a national security concern in line with knowledge construction by sanctioning the discourses not to go beyond its proposed discourses and to be in the favor of Egypt (Cascao, 2008; Ferede & Abebe, 2014). Ideas (re)constructed by the elites are powerful as they shape the perception of the weaker party (Bell, 2012). In transboundary water relations, the hydro-hegemon utilizes its ideational capacity to control or maintain the status quo as ideational power gives the hegemon the power to “build and sustain their legitimacy” as if it is normal.(Carstensen & Schmidt, 2018).

4. Ideational Power in the Eastern Nile Basin

Water flows uphill to power and money ignoring the rules of gravity that requires water to flow downhill from higher to lower point (Reisner, 1993). This famous concept indicates that riparian states exercise the power to attain, control and maintain the water allocation in favor of their interest by going against nature. In the transboundary waters, "power determines what is known, what is emphasized and who prevails"(Zeitoun & Allan, 2008). For this, states can use four forms of power: “geography; material power; bargaining power; and ideational power” (Cascao & Zeitoun, 2013). One with ideational power, practices its power to influence others' beliefs by promoting their ideas as legitimate at the expense of others (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2018).

Ideas, indeed, matter in politics. In International Water Relations, ideas matter. One with the power can (re)construct ideas at the expense of the ideas of others. Before getting compliance from others, ideational power is important since ideas unveil the relations and configurations of power (Curran et al., 2020). According to Carstensen and Schmidt, ideational power is defined as the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). Ideational power in asymmetric transboundary water relations is defined as the capacity of a hegemonic state to influence and control non-hegemonic states' normative, and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational tools to secure its interest at the expense of others. Knowledge (re)construction is a key determinant element which is often considered as an ideological hegemonic compliance-(re)producing(and also maintaining) mechanism to decide who gets what water when and how (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008).

Luke's (2005) third dimension of power is about ideational power, and hegemonic states exercise this power to (re)write the rule of games and also (re)construct certain ideas in their way ((Warner et al., 2013). "Those in power within the institutions of the hegemonic state become the deans of world politics, the administrators, regulators, and geographers of international affairs" (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). The hegemonic states are active in the world water events and also basin initiatives so that they can depoliticize the idea/discourse and sanction when it is not willing and also institutionalize and normalize so that its ideas would not be challenged by those, not in power (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008). Carstensen & Schmidt have introduced three types of ideational power: power through ideas, where actors have the power to persuade others to accept and institutionalize their views; power over ideas, actors impose ideas and resist others alternative ideas; and power in ideas, power practiced through establishing of hegemony or institutions blocking what ideas are to be considered impose through ideational elements (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016)

In the transboundary water relations, hydro-hegemon employs its power influence/persuade non-hegemons to believe that their predicaments are reasonable, and not worth questioning at all Force, deals, and ideas: and the greatest of the three is ideas (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008). The main ideational elements in which the hegemon employ are “discourses, practices, symbols, myths, narratives, collective memories, stories, frames, norms, grammars, models and identities” (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). In this article, I focus on narratives of the negative hydro-hegemon, Egypt, which are communicated through official press releases, mainstream media, and the academic community.

5. Nile Water Narratives

Among the other forms of power ideational power is the most effective for establishing and maintaining the status quo since it is the most cost-effective and it is more about controlling the cognition of other parties (Zeitoun & Allan, 2008). From the ideational elements, narratives are important. The role of narratives in international relations is important since they shape the perception of states and also shape the state's foreign policy approaches (Campbell, 1992). In the Eastern Nile water relations, states have been utilizing their respective narratives to access, control and preserve the shared water. Strategic water narratives have been the main tools in the Nile-hydro-politics. In the next sub-section, I will explore the dominant water narratives employed by Egypt since the beginning of the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Egypt has been employing different narratives to different audiences. (Counter) Narratives employed by Ethiopia since the beginning of the construction of the GERD needs another study.

A. Historical Right

The famous phrase ‘historical right’ has been at the center of the Nile/Abbay hydro-politics since 2011. In this case, the colonial-era treaties which excluded Ethiopia that contribute more than 86% of water to the Nile/Abbay river have been used as a normalizing tool for the prior appropriation doctrine, the historical right, (Abebe, 2014). This seemingly normal concept awards Egypt 55.5 billion meter cube of water to Egypt and neglects a cup of water to Ethiopia (Mehari Taddele Maru, 2020). Most of the press release of the government of Egypt about the GERD contains the historical right, directly or indirectly. Since the short stay of Egypt’ first elected president, Mohammed Morsi, the historical right narrative is on the stake and he said Ethiopia could build the GERD but on the condition that the dam “does not affect or damage Egypt's legal and historical rights” (Ahram Online, 2013). By magnifying the impacts of the GERD on Egypt, Egyptian elites have linked these predicaments to the farmer's life: the “project (GERD) will cut their(farmers) historic dependence on their(farmers) share of Nile water” (Youssef, 2020).

B. Water securitization

The water of the Nile/Abbay is securitized and considered a national security issue. The constitution of Egypt amended during Moris in its article 19 states that “the Nile River and water resources are a national wealth. The state is committed to conserving and developing them, and preventing abuse. The use of such resources is organized by law” (Egyptian constitution, 2012). With the coming of Al Sisi to power through a coup d'etat, he has amended the constitution and has legalized the securitization of the Nile water. The 2014 constitution states in its article 44 states "The state commits to protecting the Nile River, maintaining Egypt's historic rights thereto, rationalizing and maximizing its benefits, not

wasting its water or polluting it. The state commits to protecting its groundwater, adopting methods appropriate to achieve water safety, and supporting scientific research in this field. Every citizen has the right to enjoy the Nile River. It is prohibited to encroach upon it or to harm the river environment. The state guarantees to remove encroachments thereon. The foregoing is regulated by law" (Egyptian constitution, 2014). The securitization of the transboundary river shared among 11 states is a challenge for the water cooperation and instead it (re)ignited the water war narrative.

After concluding a peace treaty with Israel, David Camp, the then president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat in 1979 said "the only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water" and also in 1988 former Egypt's foreign minister and the UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Gali said the next war in the Middle East would be fought over the waters of the Nile (Kameri-Mbote, 2007). Since then the successive leaders of Egypt have been using a water war narrative as if the single drop of the Nile water is touched then Egypt would be obliged to go to war. With the beginning of the construction of the GERD, the water war narrative has controlled the discourses and narratives on the Nile/Abbay water relations. The then president of Egypt, Morsi has vowed to its Islamist supporters in his speech as "If it (water of the Nile) diminishes by one drop then our blood is the alternative"....and his speech is followed by another "Egypt's water security cannot be violated in any way," Morsi said. "As head of state, I confirm to you that all options are open..... we will never permit our water security ..." (Ahram Online, 2013).

While inaugurating the Secured and Smart Documents Complex, Al Sisi, has said "I tell our Ethiopian brothers: we should not reach the level that you mess with a water drop in Egypt, because all options are open" (Egypt Today, 2021). In most of the press statements of the government of Egypt, there is a famous phrase 'all options are on the table'. From Morsi's government to the present government, Al Sisi's government, most of the press releases and government officials speeches conclude with the phrase "all options are on the table" (Ahram Online, 2013; Magdy, 2019; Abu Zaid, 2021; and Egypt Today, 2021).

C. Migration Narratives

With the beginning of the GERD, the Egyptian government has been trying to obstruct the construction of the dam and if not to obstruct the filling of the dam. For this get an appeal and support from the international community, in particular, from the West, Egypt has been using the migration and terrorism narratives. By falsely claiming the impacts of the dam, the government of Egypt has been portraying that the dam would affect the 'water security of Egypt. This would further lead to regional instability and in the end, Egypt would be the playground for terrorists and its people would be fled illegally to the West. Egyptian ambassador to the USA, Motaz Zahran, has stated that if Ethiopia is not signing a binding agreement which is favoring Egypt then the consequence would "unleash a wave of illegal migration to the West, and open the door to new conflicts and even terrorism in the Middle East and East Africa" (Zahran, 2021). Egyptian elites insist the international water community pressure Ethiopia to agree on the filling and operation of the GERD with Egypt and if not they the international community "would only feel the existence of a crisis when illegal migration rates soar"(El Tawil, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The ideational power elements, in particular, strategic narratives of Egypt over the Nile/Abbay are significant as many of academia and International public space have been considering as if these narratives were accepted for granted. For instance, the narrative that “there is no Nile, there is no Egypt” has been widely accepted as normal without getting contested until the scientists have proved that Egypt has alternative waters: plenty of groundwater, rainwater harvesting, and infinite desalination advantages. The narratives employed by Egypt are multiple in nature: the historical rights narrative; water wars narrative; and migration. However, most of the narratives are revolving around article 7 of the UN watercourse convention, the obligation not to cause significant harm. All the narratives of Egypt are depicting the victim mentality of Egyptians and how Egypt is harmed followed by the aggressive diplomatic words like 'all options are open.’ As water narratives are important to influence the water communities and riparian states, a due emphasis needs to be given in to neutralizing and decolonizing the narratives. Decolonize the Nile through decolonizing narratives that maintain the existing status quo and hydro-political configurations is required to bring the transboundary water justices and healthy water diplomacy.

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