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Water Wars: Egyptians Condemn Ethiopia's Nile Dam Project

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"Ethiopia is killing us," taxi driver Ahmed Hossam said, as he picked his way through Cairo's notoriously traffic-clogged streets. "If they build this dam, there will be no Nile. If there's no Nile, then there's no Egypt."

Projects on the scale of the \$4.7 billion, 1.1-mile-long (1.7-kilometer-long) Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam often encounter impassioned resistance, but few inspire the kind of dread and fury with which most Egyptians regard plans to dam the Blue Nile River.

Egypt insists Ethiopia's hydroelectric scheme amounts to a violation of its historic rights, a breach of the 1959 colonial-era agreement that allocated almost three-fourths of the Nile waters to Egypt, and an existential threat to a country largely devoid of alternative freshwater sources.

But what Egyptians regard as a nefarious plot by its historic adversary to control its water supply, Ethiopians see as an intense source of national pride and a symbol of their country's renewal after the debilitating famines of the 1980s and '90s.

"People are enthusiastic. They're excited, because no leader has tried such a project in Ethiopia's history," said Bitania Tadesse, a recent university graduate from the capital, Addis Ababa. "It's a big deal that is going to be beneficial to future generations."

Intense Water Politics

Ethiopia maintains that Egypt and Sudan downstream have no reason to be fearful. The government says it's merely redressing the inequalities of previous water-sharing arrangements, which had left the nine upstream countries largely bereft of access to the Nile.

But the changing regional dynamic is a tough pill for Egypt to swallow.

For decades it has used its regional clout to stymie the dam-building plans of its impoverished

upstream neighbors. International organizations, such as the World Bank, which has financed hydroelectric ventures in the past, shied away from involvement in such a controversial proposal, handing Egypt a de facto veto.

But weakened by several years of economic and political unrest in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Egypt now finds itself ill-placed to counter a resurgent Ethiopia.

A total of "98 percent of Egypt's freshwater comes from outside its borders, and it has exceptionally little leverage," said Angus Blair, an economic and political analyst at Cairo's Signet Institute. "The answer lies with working with its neighbors."

Thus far, however, Egypt has taken a largely belligerent stance.

State and private media have whipped up a current of fierce anti-Ethiopian sentiment, with the several-thousand-strong Oromo community in Egypt bearing the brunt of public suspicion and rage. Many Oromo Ethiopian refugees have been the victims of physical assaults, according to the UN, while a number of online bulletins solicited apartments for Ethiopians after many were evicted from their homes and deprived of medical care in hospitals.

Egypt's politicians were no less inflammatory in their rhetoric.

"Building a dam is tantamount to a declaration of war," a senior Nour Party official said back in June, as he proposed Egyptian support for various separatist movements within Ethiopia if the dam's construction continued.

President Mohamed Morsi also weighed in with a veiled threat shortly before his ouster in a popularly supported military coup in early July, saying that "all options are available to us."

Some Egyptians blame Morsi and his Islamist Muslim Brotherhood group for the dam's fast progress. "They wanted an Islamic caliphate. They didn't care about Egypt as a country, so they did nothing to stop this dam," said shopkeeper Karim Abdallah. But Egypt's position has, if anything, weakened since Morsi's overthrow.

Egypt's southern neighbor, Sudan, has switched sides and chosen to support the dam, not least because Sudan had agreed to an Egyptian request to build an airbase near the Ethiopian border, according to Wikileaks.

"Sudan understands that the dam is in its interests," said Harry Verhoeven, who teaches African politics at the University of Oxford. "It will be able to import the cheap energy it desperately needs.

"Egypt [also] needs to bite the bullet," he added. "Instead of fearing the dam, Egypt should see it as an opportunity to move closer to a region it has traditionally spurned."

Former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak is often accused of having neglected his African neighbors, and some feel Egypt is now paying the penalty for its preoccupation with its place in the

Arab world. "Egypt cannot continue to hurt black Africa and the countries of the tropics of Africa," said Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni this past summer.

Need for Water

Still, Egypt's concerns are far from groundless. Its population is forecast to almost double to 150 million by 2050, so as demand for water surges, its supply will be restricted by the dam. Ethiopia says it's an "unrealistic conception" that the dam will damage Egypt, but for a few years at least (the time it will take for the dam's reservoir to fill), Egypt and Sudan will have to contend with reduced water flow.

Egypt fears that storing water behind the Ethiopian dam will reduce the capacity of its own Lake Nasser (thereby reducing the power-generating capacity of Egypt's giant hydroelectric plant at Aswan). Ethiopian officials have sought to allay fears by pointing out that storing water in the cooler climes of the Ethiopian lowlands will ensure much less water is lost to evaporation, but Egyptians are unconvinced.

"The production of electricity at the Aswan High Dam is likely to drop by almost 40 percent should the Ethiopian dam be built," concluded Nader Nouredin, a professor of agriculture at Cairo University.

Such unease has spawned a bevy of wild theories as to how Ethiopia, poorer and more populous than Egypt, can afford its extensive dam-building program (20 dams in total). "Israel and the U.S. are behind it," insist a number of Egyptian Islamist politicians. "The Chinese are funding this to get back at us for supporting the Americans," a friend in Cairo recently suggested.

The Chinese are certainly involved, but there's nothing conspiratorial about it. Chinese state-owned Sinohydro is the world's largest dam builder and accounts for over 50 percent of recently constructed dams. "China simply sees this as terrific business," Verhoeven said.

The Ethiopian government insists it's capable of raising the necessary funds itself, and the country's sizeable diaspora is helping out. Tadde Haile, a retired school counselor from Northern Virginia, has given money, and said that "everybody I've talked to [in the Ethiopian community] says they have as well." The Ethiopian Embassy in Washington even offers advice on how to buy bonds to finance the dam.

But how much longer the country will be able to self-finance its ambitious projects is a contentious issue. State employees have already been "invited" to surrender a month's salary, and "there is a collectivist pressure to accept," lawyer Daniel Berhane said. "Few Ethiopians would dare complain about anything to do with the Nile, as it's a symbol of patriotism."

The dam is now 20 percent built, and on schedule to be completed by 2017, according to Ethiopian officials. The Grand Renaissance Dam, it seems, is going to get built. But what happens next depends on how Egypt adjusts to its changed circumstances.

“Egypt needs to wake up to the new world,” Verhoeven said. “This doesn’t need to be a problem.”

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