

A DAM OF CONTENTION IN AFRICA

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Physical Geography of Africa incl. important Geopolitical regions

A general view of the Saddle Dam, part of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Ethiopia, near Guba in Ethiopia, on December 26, 2019. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

As the July deadline draws closer for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the river Nile to become functional, the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt, with Sudan caught in between, has escalated into a diplomatic stand-off. Differences were laid bare recently when Ethiopia skipped the latest round of tripartite negotiations with Egypt and Sudan in Washington, being mediated by the U.S. and the World Bank.

The Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, who won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, even said last October that “no force could stop Ethiopia from building a dam,” though he stressed that war was not a solution, echoing similar rhetoric from Cairo. The Arab League earlier this month underscored Egypt’s historical and civilisational links to the river region and opposed any unilateral action by Ethiopia.

The contentious issue around the GERD, Africa’s biggest hydropower project, concerns control of the flow of water in the world’s longest river among the riparian states. Ethiopia, Africa’s second-most populated country and a manufacturing hub, views the mega dam as a symbol of its sovereignty. It began construction on the Blue Nile (a tributary) in 2011 at a cost of \$4 billion. The government wants to extend power supply to some 60% of the country’s population and bridge the infrastructure gap. Addis Ababa is hence impatient to fill the gigantic reservoir within six years, and generate 6,000 MW of electricity.

But the GERD’s storage capacity of 74 billion cubic meters of water has raised hackles in Egypt. Cairo, which relies on the Nile for 90% of its freshwater supply, is apprehensive that a rapid filling of the reservoir in upstream Ethiopia would cause a drastic reduction in supplies. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has insisted on a staggered approach to fill the reservoir, say, between 10 and 21 years, and for the release of a minimum of 40 billion cubic metres annually. No less is the risk Egypt perceives from the diversion of waters to its own High Aswan Dam.

Conversely, Addis Ababa is concerned that a long delay in filling the reservoir would jeopardise returns on its investments and hamper the prospects for overall growth. The GERD is said to have been financed almost entirely from domestic resources, in part due to the resistance mounted by Egypt against global funding for the project. There is in addition the element of national pride in the timely completion of the GERD, as Ethiopia’s recent economic resurgence has revived the old vision of Great Ethiopia. There is also a lot at stake for the government of Mr. Ahmed, who faces a difficult general election this year after the euphoria of the 2018 peace process with Eritrea has largely faded.

Cairo’s strong reservations over the GERD are also rooted in history and geopolitics. Under the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement, the two downstream riparian states Egypt and Sudan, respectively, were allocated 55.5 billion cubic metres and 18.5 billion cubic metres of Nile water annually. That settlement reduced Cairo’s control of the waters, compared to the virtual veto over utilisation it was granted under a 1929 treaty.

Ethiopia was outside the purview of the 1959 treaty, as also other upstream states including Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda. But Addis Ababa’s assertion of its rights for an equitable share of the Blue Nile flows from the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) signed by some of the 10

Nile Basin Initiative nations (under the initiative, Eritrea participates as an observer).

The establishment of the Nile River Basin Commission mandated by the CFA has not materialised so far. The challenges for the fair utilisation of waters among the riparian states have only been compounded by the pressures of population growth and the effects of global warming. While the parties have sought international mediation from the U.S. and South Africa, that is no substitute for regional cooperation among the parties.

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