

Book Review

Ethiopia and the Nile: Dilemmas of National and Regional Hydropolitics, by Yacob Arsano. Zurich: Center for Security Studies, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, 2007. ISBN 3-905696-14-2.

*Book Review by Semahegn Asmare Belay**

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The increasing structural and physical scarcity of water across the globe calls for a deeper understanding of trans-boundary water conflicts. It has also an increasing relevance in regional, national, and international security studies and is researched by many scholars. In his recent book, *Ethiopia and the Nile: Dilemmas of National and Regional Hydropolitics*, Yacob Arsano gives a detailed analysis of the prevailing national and regional dilemmas of hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile Basin. At the national level, he examined the dilemma between the great need to develop the available water resources to overcome the debilitating poverty on the one hand, and the risk of limited institutional and financial capacity to develop these water resources on the other. At the regional level, the paradox between the unifying and divisive factors is examined.¹ To address such issues, the author has used qualitative research methods and used interviews, field visits, document analysis, and a series of interactive workshops as the main data sources. His book is divided into three main parts and eleven chapters.

In the first part of the book consisting of two chapters he examines the dilemma of hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile basin. This part tries to explain the long-standing unifying myth and hydropolitical unity of the Eastern Nile basin states. Moreover, the dilemma between the unifying forces of myth, i.e., the environmental reality, and the need for economic development on the one hand and the dividing forces of the colonial legacy and national insecurity perception on the other hand are examined in detail.

In part two, Arsano provides an in-depth examination of the national dilemma of water policy and management in Ethiopia. This part consist of an explanation of the legal predicaments, institutional issues, the role of non-state actors, past & present water

1 Yacob Arsano, *Ethiopia and the Nile: Dilemmas of National and Regional Hydropolitics* (Zurich: Center for Security Studies, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, 2007), 21.

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development situations, and the strategies of water development in Ethiopia.

In part three, regional hydro-political dilemmas in the Eastern Nile basin are identified and examined. To this end, the author has discussed the inter-state and regional relations, and opportunities to overcome such dilemmas and to promote sustainable water development among the three Eastern Nile basin countries.

As it is stated above, the author has carefully examined the myths and geopolitics in the Eastern Nile basin. He argues in favor of the presence of commonalities among the three countries in terms of myth, perception and common beliefs. These commonalities are in terms of the identity of the Nile and its healing power. Arsano argued that, 'there is a daunting similarity in the perceptions and stories told by the people living in downstream Egypt and upstream Ethiopia. Both cultures identify themselves with the greatness, powers and bountifulness of the great Nile River. The ancient Egyptians did not have a clue about whence the Nile came from to their land. Nor did the ancient Ethiopians know where the Nile went.'² The author also adds the link between spiritual and material lives between the people of the upstream and downstream countries. Environmentally, the Nile is a resource that links the plateau of Ethiopia and the deserts of Egypt and Sudan. In this part, the author has shown that myths and hydrology can function as unifying factors, while the diplomatic history of the region reveals diverging interests, which are only aggravated by colonial administration and the Cold War polarity.³

Part two of the book discusses the national dilemma in Ethiopia- the need to use its water resources and limited financial and institutional capacity. The five chapters of this part are each supported statistical data, pictures and legal documents. The author also gives a detailed explanation of customary practices and legal frameworks and state institutions, the role of the non-state sector in water resources development, the economics of water resource development, and the national strategies for water development in Ethiopia. Accordingly, among other things, the author has pointed out that inadequate policy frameworks, inadequate and uncoordinated role of non-state actors in the development of water resources and lack of consistency and institutional stability were the factors that lead to limited capacity in public administration, economy, and technology.

In the last Part, Arsano has examines bilateral and multi-lateral relationships of basin states and states outside the basin. He gives a brief narration of the historical and contemporary relationship of Ethiopia and Sudan; Ethiopia and Egypt; Sudan and Egypt; as well as Ethiopia and other upstream countries. The author argues that, "Sudan shares the longest borders with Ethiopia, but the two countries also have cross-border settlements of communities that have existed since time immemorial,"⁴ and religion as the major cause for the antagonism and conflicts among the countries.⁵ Regarding the Ethiopian-

2 Arsano, *Ethiopia and the Nile*, 69-70.

3 Ibid., 104-188.

4 Ibid..

5 Ibid.

Egyptian relationship, he stated that, “historically, the two permanent and most important elements in Ethiopian-Egyptian relations have been religion and water.”⁶ However, Egyptians’ perception on the Nile River has changed after the coming of Mohammed Ali Pasha in 1805 (p. 197) and Egypt has made various military expeditions against Ethiopia. Furthermore, an explanation of the role of external actors in the Nile basin is given.

At the end of part three, Arsano has clearly articulated the upstream-downstream hydropolitical tensions and the source of the tension, as well as each party’s negotiation strategies. Accordingly, he has identified four major sources of the tension in the basin states. The first factor are the downstream insecurity versus upstream countries actions; this has mainly resulted from the dependence of downstream countries on the Nile water resource and plans to use water resources by upstream countries. Secondly, lack of legal and institutional frameworks- absence of accepted principles and procedures, based on a legal/ institutional framework at basin-wide level. The third one is the unilateral expansion of water use including any attempt of transfer of water to places out of the natural basin by downstream nations. The fourth aggravating factor are ‘military threats’ which are perceived by downstream countries originating from upstream states. The fifth factor is the Afro-Arab division between the riparian countries.⁷

By the end of this part, the author has established the negotiating strategy of the three countries. *Egypt’s negotiating strategy*: to bring the upstream country in line with its wishes, if this does not work, the upstream country is isolated, and Egypt goes ahead unilaterally with its water development plans, which is based on the doctrine of ‘prior appropriation’ and ‘absolute territorial integrity.’⁸ *Ethiopia’s negotiating strategy*: Ethiopia wishes to change the status-quo, embedded in the previous agreements, and to reverse and replace it with a new institutional and legal regime, whereby the riparian countries have “equitable” and “judicious” use of the water resources that bounteously traverse their respective territories.⁹ *Sudan’s negotiating strategy*: Sudan as a middle state wishes that each country in the Eastern Nile basin specializes in what and to develop a cross-regional comparative advantages working for everyone’s benefit.¹⁰

In the final two chapters, Arsano gives recommendations aiming to overcome national and regional dilemmas. Some of the measures are; creating a community of interest, enhancing shared vision, and replacing unilateralism and hydropolitical anarchy by regulatory norms based on an institutional mechanism.¹¹ At the end, the four hypotheses developed in the literature part are tested and concluding remarks are drawn. However, the author did not give any suggestions what topics and questions may be addressed in

6 Arsano, *Ethiopia and the Nile*, 197.

7 Ibid., 222-225.

8 Ibid., 225-226.

9 Ibid., 227.

10 Ibid., 228.

11 Ibid., 231.

future research.

The flow of ideas in the book are consistent from introduction to conclusion. It gives a clear picture of the national and regional dilemmas of hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile basin. Many of the arguments in this book are supported by various legal and historical documents and scholarly articles. Moreover, the book will be a valuable resource for students and researchers in the field.

Notwithstanding the strengths of the book raised above, the reviewer of the book has found three major limitations. First, the author is too optimistic and failed to see the issue from a realist's perspective. Second, the author is arguing in favor of the application of the doctrine of 'equitable utilization of water resources'. Robert O. Collins argues that equitable utilization may remain in the eye of the beholder and not enforceable by law.¹² A powerful downstream state will undoubtedly marshal its influence to persuade or convince by force weaker upstream riparian states to desist from claims for equitable use. Hence, the author does not give a clear explanation regarding the interpretation of this doctrine. Lastly, the author has proposed the application of "win-win project on the ground." However, for Tesfaye Taffese, "the catch-word 'win-win' is easier said than done. It clings good to ear but complicated to translate it into reality."¹³ The solution in the Nile could be found if the downstream states prepare themselves for a 'lose-win' solution in the short-term which could bring about a 'win-win' solution in the long-term.¹⁴

12 Robert Oakley Collins, Collins, *The inscrutable Nile at the beginning of the new millenium* (University of California Santa Barbara, 2003).

13 Tesfaye Tafesseis, *An Appraisal of Transboundary Water Dispute Resolution in The Nile Basin* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 2008).

14 Ibid.