

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: Africa's Water Tower, Environmental Justice & Infrastructural Power

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Global environmental imaginaries such as “the climate crisis” and “water wars” dominate the discussion on African states and their predicament in the face of global warming and unmet demands for sustainable livelihoods. I argue that the intersecting challenges of water, energy, and food insecurity are providing impetus for the articulation of ambitious state-building projects, in the Nile Basin as elsewhere, that rework regional political geographies and expand “infrastructural power” – the ways in which the state can penetrate society, control its territory, and implement consequential policies. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam should be understood as intending to alter how the state operates, domestically and internationally; how it is seen by its citizens; and how they relate to each other and to their regional neighbors. To legitimize such material and ideational transformations and reposition itself in international politics, the Ethiopian party-state has embedded the dam in a discourse of “environmental justice”: a rectification of historical and geographical ills to which Ethiopia and its impoverished masses were subjected. However, critics have adopted their own environmental justice narratives to denounce the failure of Ethiopia’s developmental model and its benefiting of specific ethnolinguistic constituencies at the expense of the broader population.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is Africa’s biggest infrastructure project, and it has been controversial since its launch in April 2011. With construction on the Blue Nile near the Ethio-Sudanese border nearing completion, the more than two-kilometer-long structure with a capacity of more than 6,000 megawatts intends to both physically and politically redraw the Nile Basin. Ethiopia is known as “Africa’s water tower” because of the extraordinary precipitation volumes that land on its northern, central, and southern Highlands.¹ However, the unpredictability and variability of that rainfall have left it unable to leverage these formidable resources as planners have long dreamed. The problem of “Africa’s water tower” resembles that of the continent as a whole:

the paradoxical story of . . . adequate renewable water resources, but unequal access because water is either abundant or scarce depending on the season or the place. Water is the most crucial element in ensuring livelihoods since more than 40 per cent of Africa's population lives in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas and about 60 per cent live in rural areas and depend on farming for their livelihoods.²

To Ethiopia's political leadership and its bureaucratic-scientific apparatus, the country's intractable poverty and international marginalization are a direct result of a failure to harness its hydropotential and build the dams, reservoirs, and irrigation systems required to actualize its water tower destiny. However, to millions of people living downstream, rhetoric of the GERD as the anchorage of a resurgent Ethiopia that determines the flow of the river instills existential concerns about their own water and food security.³

The hopes and fears engendered by the GERD cannot be understood separately from the global political economy of the environment and Africa's unique, historically contingent place within it. Since decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, Africa's share in the world economy – whether measured by income, trade volumes, or investment flows – has shrunk.⁴ While independence engendered aspirations of industrialization and economic self-determination (including the ability to use the continent's formidable natural resources for rapid development), the majority of African states have only become more dependent on the whims of the global economy and aid flows: their position as providers of primary products has largely been reinforced, at clearly disadvantageous terms of trade.⁵ This enduring marginalization provides the background for why observers from within and without are so fearful of the impact on Africa of global climatic changes and, in particular, worsening water and food insecurity. It is perhaps the most glaring demonstration of environmental or climate injustice that the youngest continent (60 percent of the population is below the age of twenty-five) is also the one that has historically least contributed to the industrial emissions of greenhouse gases yet is likely the one that will be hardest affected by meteorological shifts and least financially capable of responding to dislocation.⁶

Much of the scholarly and policy literature on the political effects of global warming, especially in the Nile Basin and the Sahel, echoes long-standing ideas of the environment as an exogenous variable overwhelmingly influential in shaping human behavior and institutions (and their breakdown) in an impoverished, peripheral Africa.⁷ Such environmental determinism is characteristically pessimistic about the ability of Africans to weather the worsening storm(s): climate change portends intercommunitarian conflicts in which pastoralists and cultivators wrangle for scarce land or water as state authority disintegrates and the specter of interstate warfare as declining resource endowments force regional rivals to secure their survival at each other's expense.⁸ The Nile Basin is frequently cited

as a case in point.⁹ As the region's ecology becomes (even) more volatile and unpredictable, Ethiopia and Egypt face clear incentives to see the river in zero-sum terms and to secure whatever they can to boost their respective water security.¹⁰ In such analyses, the GERD is the trigger of intersecting conflagrations as both states are threatened by massive internal challenges while clashing over whether Egypt should be guaranteed historical user rights in the form of specific volumetric quantities of Nile water or whether a different water regime of (nonvolumetric) "equitable distribution" should govern basin relations.¹¹ Speculation about the outbreak of regional conflict, with Ethiopia and Egypt at its center – and Sudan being pulled in on the side of Addis (as appeared to be happening between 2013 and 2017) or Cairo (as has been perceived to be the case between 2019 and 2021) – remains rife, both in and outside the region. The Nile seldom fails to feature in discussions of how climate change and water scarcity will, now and in the future, tear apart fragile societies.

The environmental determinism of "climate conflicts" and "water wars," however, obfuscates the complex interplay between political imaginaries and practices in the registry of African elites, in the Nile Basin as elsewhere, as they navigate the inequities of global environmental politics. Rather than fatally weakening fragile structures, I argue in this essay that the intersecting challenges of water, energy, and food insecurity are providing a new impetus for the articulation of ambitious state-building projects that rework regional political geographies and expand the ways in which the state can penetrate society, control its territory, and implement consequential policies.¹² Contrary to the ubiquitous assumption (especially in an age of calamitous climate change) that African elites neither have the capacity nor the will to engage in meaningful state-building, the GERD reflects the renewed ambition of incumbents to expand what sociologist Michael Mann termed "infrastructural power."¹³ Through this prism, the GERD can be understood as an instrument of social and spatial control intended to increase the state's administrative capabilities (such as to bend the river to its will and organize labor in more productive activities) and to redraw relations between those who dominate the state and those whose allegiance it seeks. Infrastructural power underlines not only the importance of the territorial structuration of authority and the relative autonomy of political and bureaucratic elites in regulating social relations, but also the ways in which infrastructure projects like dams are intended to change how the state operates, domestically and internationally, and how it is seen by its citizens.¹⁴

The latter point – the question of state identity and legitimacy and how environmental narratives impact them – will be explored later in this essay. If, following philosopher Martin Heidegger, we consider language as constitutive, then the dam is not just a biophysical rupture in river management or how Ethiopia's peripheries interact with the political-economic core, but it is also meant

as a speech-act:¹⁵ to create discursively a new social order that changes how people (should) relate to and act with each other, their environment, the party-state, and the outside world. Discourses around the GERD and the transformation of the Ethiopian state, citizenry, and environment can be approached as rival story-lines of environmental justice intended to (de)legitimize the emergent political economy and its various constituencies and blind spots. Drawing on primary documents and a decade of interview material, I argue that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – the ruling coalition between 1991 and 2019 – consistently promised that the GERD would rectify the historical injustice of Egyptian “hydro-hegemony”¹⁶ and concomitant Ethiopian underdevelopment. The EPRDF envisaged both the construction of the GERD and its operation as ushering in a rekindled state-society and regional context in which a reborn Ethiopian nation engages with its resources and its neighbors in a qualitatively different (“more just”) fashion. However, critics of the EPRDF see this approach to the GERD as emblematic of the failure of its developmental model and its rapacious, extractive tendencies that benefit specific economic and ethnolinguistic winners at the expense of Ethiopia's broader population.

To appreciate the genesis of the GERD and why constructing the dam became utterly central to the political calculus and identity of the EPRDF, the leadership's interpretation of Ethiopian history and its understanding of infrastructural power are crucial. Here I dissect the ideological underpinnings of EPRDF dam-building by placing the GERD in a broader historical context as the party-state has attempted to reshape Ethiopia internally and externally. Later, I also briefly discuss how the dissolution, rechristening, and reorganization of the ruling bloc as the Prosperity Party (since late 2019) under the aegis of its new leader Abiy Ahmed has impacted the Ethiopian state's relationship with this vision of the dam, infrastructural power, and environmental justice.

The EPRDF emerged from the Ethiopian civil war when a coalition of four ethnically based parties was forged to capture Addis Ababa in May 1991. The alliance was a relatively late creation (1988 – 1989) of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as it moved out of its Northern heartlands and imagined how it might wield governmental power and pacify a fragmenting Ethiopia, where dozens of ethnic groups were deeply divided over how (or whether) to live together in one state. The TPLF, founded in 1975, had its origins in two different sociological milieus.¹⁷ On the one hand, the movement was the political heir to the 1943 Woyane rebellion in Tigray, which sought regional autonomy from imperial rule but was bloodily suppressed by Emperor Haile Selassie, who was perceived by the Tigrayan aristocracy as creating an absolutist empire controlled by and for the Amhara.¹⁸ On the other hand, the TPLF was founded by young people who participated in the Ethiopian student movement – a diverse group of individuals that agreed on sev-

eral interrelated propositions: that the root cause of Ethiopia's horrific poverty was the imperial-feudal system; that the Abyssinian empire was built on ethno-regional divide-and-rule, in which the dozens of "nationalities" that populated the territory were denied their right of self-determination; and that only a righteous vanguard could create a socialist society in which both the nationalist and economic contradictions of imperial Ethiopia would finally be dissolved.¹⁹

The TPLF's roots forced its leadership to balance its Leninist vanguardism with the recruitment of peasants driven to take up arms by poverty and nationalist narratives passed from one generation to another of historical greatness and the contemporary humiliation of Tigray.²⁰ The TPLF called itself "Woyane" too and posited that Ethiopia's central challenge was to make the double transition from empire to nation-state and from feudalism to a state-led economy. Because the diverse groups on the Ethiopian territory shared little else than their destitution and rejection of imperial-feudal expansionism and assimilationism, only socialist egalitarianism was argued to have the answers.²¹ Phrased in Mann's lexicon, the TPLF's diagnosis was that the state's infrastructural power (that is, the ability not just to control the territory but to shape state-society relations) would remain weak as long as it centralized authority on behalf of the Amhara elite and governed through indirect rule and tributary mechanisms so beloved of empires everywhere. The TPLF dismissed the imperial and capitalist modes of state-building because they were economically exploitative ("internal colonialism") and because they failed to provide a territorial organization of power that recognized the fundamental equality of all nations, nationalities, and peoples living in Ethiopia. Cracking one would help unknot the other, claimed TPLF Chairman Sebat Nega (1979 – 1989): "Resolving the nationality question means the upper-class of feudalists, imperial officials or oligarchs can't play on ethno-nationalist sentiments to distract the population from the real core-periphery problem."²²

This ideological understanding of infrastructural power informed the ambitious project that the TPLF, through the EPRDF, launched after overthrowing the military dictatorship of Mengistu Hailemariam. Such "illiberal state-building"²³ comprised three pillars to realize the intended transitions from empire to nation-state and from backward quasifailed state to order and prosperity. First, the Ethiopian state would abandon any top-down assimilation policies and recognize the sovereign right to self-determination (up to possible secession) of all nations, nationalities, and peoples in the territory, echoing Stalin's approach to the nationalities question in the Soviet Union.²⁴ Through the system of ethnic federalism, the administrative grid was redrawn to allow the major ethnolinguistic groups to govern themselves in ten federal regions and two chartered cities and for people to speak their own languages in their dealings with the government.²⁵ The TPLF/EPRDF believed that unwinding the imperial legacy would give its broader agenda unprecedented legitimacy.

Second, Ethiopia's new leadership instituted *abyotawi* (revolutionary) democracy, which because of its practice of democratic centralism, heavily qualified how much freedom Ethiopians would be given to express themselves vis-à-vis their government.²⁶ The omnipotence of the EPRDF's Central Committee and Executive Committee was necessary to maintain policy cohesion and an optimal utilization of scarce resources as a desperately poor Ethiopia sought to survive after hitting rock bottom in 1991. The centrality of a trade-off between state-building and political liberalization was also echoed by political scientist Samuel Huntington during his 1993 visit to the post-civil war country; the material conditions for facilitating (liberal, representational) government simply did/do not exist, in this logic.²⁷ According to Sebhat Nega,

liberal democracy with our class structure and our surrounding enemies [the hydro-hegemon Egypt, military-Islamist Sudan, ultra-confrontational Eritrea, and Somali jihadists] would have been suicidal. . . . It would mean oligarchic government and national disintegration. . . . Democratic centralism was necessary: it is collective leadership and individual responsibility.²⁸

Revolutionary democracy is all about infrastructural power, as Huntington pointed out.²⁹ The single, hierarchically structured party, as Mann reminds us, is the instrument of choice of those who believe state power can only come from the party-state's autonomy from civil society and its ability to penetrate it at will.³⁰

The third pillar of the TPLF/EPRDF party-state has been the "developmental state." Often described as an attempted emulation of the "tiger" economies of South Korea, Vietnam, and China,³¹ the impetus for the Ethiopian economy's spectacular expansion in the twenty-first century is heavily shaped by the leadership's obsession with the double transition. Although the Woyane's origins stem from long-standing Tigrayan imaginaries of self-rule within (or Tigrayan dominance of) the Ethiopian state, the Central Committee has been controlled by Marxist-Leninist-minded individuals for whom too much ethnolinguistic fervor reflects what philosopher Friedrich Engels termed "false consciousness." The TPLF/EPRDF had assumed that ethnic federalism would draw the sting from the transformation from empire to nation-state and reconcile the different nations, nationalities, and peoples with each other; however, the 2005 elections and subsequent violence offered a rude awakening. Especially in urban centers, voters re-embraced unitary nationalism as the oppositional Coalition for Unity and Democracy denounced the Woyane government's institutionalization of "ethnic divisionism," favoring Tigrayan political and economic interests amidst rapid societal change.³² This setback led the party-state not only to double down on revolutionary democracy, but also drove it to re-intensify its ideological axiom: only through a transformation of the material conditions of people (the substructure, in Marxist vocabulary) can durable changes in political identity (superstructure) crystallize.³³ State-driven, rapid econom-

ic growth would, the leadership believed, save both the country and the party;³⁴ it would be both cause and effect of an expansion of infrastructural power in Ethiopia.

This then is the context in which dam-building, and especially the construction of the GERD, would become a linchpin of the EPRDF's long-term political-economic stratagem. "Every spare cent has been directed to infrastructure and energy," noted Finance Minister Abraham Tekeste (2016–2018).³⁵ The TPLF had been created in the wake of famine in the 1970s and had never ceased to talk about the rural poor, but now the developmental state declared a veritable "war against poverty." Prime Minister Meles Zenawi redefined Ethiopia in the world by setting this domestic war at the heart of his external outlook: "our foreign relations and national security policy and strategy can only have relevance if it contributes to the fight against poverty."³⁶ Long-serving Minister of Information Bereket Simon concurred, "Poverty and backwardness are the number one enemy. We need full mobilization, war footing."³⁷ The "securitisation of development"³⁸ helped of course to re-legitimize revolutionary democracy, or as one TPLF politburo member put it: "The Ethiopian government has one priority: development. A hungry man will not be interested in party politics. We can address all human rights and democratic questions through development."³⁹

The developmental state has made an extraordinary push by African standards to transform agricultural and industrial productivity to simultaneously boost food security, wages, tax revenue, and exports. "Agricultural Development Led Industrialization" and the "Growth and Transformation Plans" have guided massive investment in public education and primary health care, combined with a big leap in infrastructure.⁴⁰ The party-state's war on poverty has been waged through the paving of thousands of kilometers of roads and railroads; the construction of dozens of airports, transport terminals, and dryports; and a program that envisages more than twenty big dams irrigating and powering the transformation of productivity, including Africa's biggest: the GERD.

This penchant for record-breaking megaprojects is all the more striking because, during the 1980s, the TPLF drew many of its recruits from the victims of massive development interventions (such as villagization and forced resettlement)⁴¹ and advocated local self-sufficiency and micro-infrastructure. This dramatic pivot toward large-scale infrastructure like dams is explained by the party-state's frustration with what it felt was the slow pace of organic transformation threatening its state-building project. Sebhat Nega opined that

When we entered Addis in 1991, there was no middle class. We developed instruments to develop one – easy credit, provision of land, dams, electricity. . . . But this so-called middle class is not investing, just seeking rents in hotels and restaurants. We will have to continue the hard work of stopping oligarchic behaviour like corruption and laziness which threatens Ethiopia.⁴²

In bureaucratic circles, frustrations concerning an insufficient response to the developmental state's investments are extended to smallholder peasants who continue to be seen as reluctant modernizers failing to pick the fruits of government infrastructure or actively opposing change: "In this country, small is not beautiful. The larger the project, the lower the aggregate environmental cost. But the Ethiopian peasant is very conservative."⁴³ Reflecting its Leninist self-image as a vanguard implementing the arduous task that history has bestowed upon it, the EPRDF wagered that, despite soaring debts and a worsening balance of payments, infrastructure like the GERD will eventually repay itself and reward its workers and engineers-cum-soldiers for their sacrifice. Ethiopian civil servants were instructed to "voluntarily" forgo one month's worth of salary for the dam annually; the developmental state's rationale for such "short-term hardship" has remained consistent, as GERD project director Simegnew Bekele (2011–2018) underlined: "We are waging a war on poverty and the dam is our weapon."⁴⁴

For ideological and opportunistic reasons, the post-1991 ruling party thus saw its authority as contingent on the expansion of the state and an aggressive developmentalism that would materially remake Ethiopia. From an infrastructural power perspective, the more than 6,000 megawatts that the GERD should produce are vital. Its construction in an impossibly remote location (a stone's throw from Sudan, but half-a-day drive from the nearest town and separated from Addis Ababa by 500 kilometers and some of Africa's most formidable mountains) echoes that of other irrigation, electricity generation, and transportation projects in peripheral regions where the state has historically been minimally present and treated with hostility.⁴⁵ Such "hydro-agricultural state-building"⁴⁶ through power stations, sugar plantations, and transmission lines administratively expands the remit of the state, but also underlines its authority and ability to shape the lives of all its citizens and serves symbolically and physically to tie together the entirety of the territory.⁴⁷ This attempted switch from "frontier governance" of peripheral regions into a "governance frontier" crucial to the remaking of the polity is also important in the context of the external dimension of sovereignty.⁴⁸ The GERD's location means that it is inherently cheaper to export the electricity generated there to immediately adjacent (and flat) Sudan and South Sudan, as well as to states further afield, than it is to transport it over the Ethiopian highlands to the central grid. The EPRDF/TPLF leadership has long believed that antagonistic relations with its neighbors (and the global reputation of the Horn of Africa as war-torn more broadly) have held landlocked Ethiopia's growth potential back for decades. Borderland projects like the GERD prospectively offer a fundamentally different way of relating to other basin states. In the words of TPLF veteran ambassador and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Berhane Gebre-Christos (2010–2015), "Infrastructure is qualitatively changing the relations in the re-

gion – for people and for governments. It is the most decisive factor for regional integration.”⁴⁹

The GERD is thus not only meant to power the growing consumption of Ethiopia’s nascent industries and its emergent urban and rural middle classes, but to usher in the next phase of the developmental state: its integration in a growing region.⁵⁰ Meles Zenawi made protecting the developmental state from external instability and helping the region accept Ethiopia’s “benign” hegemony the cornerstone of his foreign policy doctrine, especially in the years preceding his death in 2012.⁵¹ The EPRDF leadership internalized the belief that Ethiopia’s potential can only be realized if its neighbors, with their access to the sea and thus to global markets, also see a marked improvement in their economic outlook and establish durably peaceful relations with Addis. The GERD’s massive power-generating capacity is an explicit offer to share Ethiopia’s growth and resources with the region in exchange for hard foreign currency and coupling its neighbors’ economies to it. While scholars and technocrats have, for the most part, been enthusiastic about the dam’s environmental and economic potential – it is often noted that the “GERD demonstrates the possibility of addressing the scarcity of food, water and energy in a developing region by exchanging water and energy, based on their marginal productivity across the basin states”⁵² – its most important payoff was always political in the eyes of Meles.⁵³

The possibility of simultaneously revolutionizing Ethiopia’s historically troubled neighborly relations and building a new political economy through the GERD domestically tantalized the EPRDF/TPLF. It also offered the possibility of enhancing the narrative that the party-state had launched in the wake of the 2005 election debacle to counterbalance the perception that “Woyane rule” fragmented a pan-Ethiopian identity and crystallized regional differences. In response, the EPRDF cannibalized the language of inclusive democracy, penetrated its cadres deeper into local administrative structures, and portrayed itself as the carrier of a uniquely Ethiopian form of governance and progress that all could or should take pride in.⁵⁴ The GERD became the national flagship project, not only because of its material importance to Ethiopia’s megawatt production, energy exports, and broader foreign relations but also because of its ability to unite the country behind a colossal effort that everybody, no matter one’s local politics, could or should support by virtue of being an Ethiopian.⁵⁵ No expenses were spared to mobilize the masses, and initiatives to champion the dam were designed for every constituency: Ethiopians have been encouraged to show their support through lotteries, beauty pageants (seeking “beautiful GERD ambassadors”), a football cup, SMS contests, athletic events (“run for progress and dignity”), church sermons (reminding believers that the Ghion – Blue Nile – is Ethiopian/Kushitic according to the Book of Genesis),⁵⁶ and much more. When Meles Zenawi died in 2012, his passing led to a collective outpouring of grief that turned to martyrial mobili-

zation: “Meles! Your promises will be kept; the G[E]RD will be realized through public participation!!!” became the tagline of the *Ethiopian Herald*, the country’s main Anglophone propaganda outlet. The image of the late prime minister pointing his finger prophetically in the direction of both the GERD and the Blue Nile’s onward flow into Sudan has been ubiquitous in government offices and roadside billboards.

The imagery created around the GERD was embedded in the EPRDF discourse around the celebration of the new Ethiopian millennium (2007) and was expanded over the next decade.⁵⁷ This narrative underlined that the party-state had resolved the old nationalities question and that a new Ethiopia was emerging, admired by the outside world because of its developmental state, with the GERD as its pinnacle achievement. Not coincidentally, the dam’s first name was the “Millennium Dam” and later renamed *Hidassie*, which in Amharic means to make something new out of the old, a Renaissance. In early TPLF/Woyane ideology, such a term would have been blasphemous, not only because it is Amharic (the language of the imperial-feudal “occupier”) but because it suggests that Ethiopia is not an artificial recent invention (“a prison of nations and nationalities” in the parlance of Walleligne Mekonnen and the Ethiopian student movement), but a much more ancient reality worthy of reinvention. The GERD has featured prominently on Ethiopia’s new “Nations, Nationalities and People’s Day” (celebrated since 2006) and “Flag Day” (2008), annual celebrations intended to underscore the EPRDF’s commitment to unity in diversity through ethnic federalism and the modernization agenda of the developmental state.⁵⁸ This striking ideological pirouette, which celebrates the “Renaissance/Hidassie” of a dormant heroic nation, also explains why the GERD is showcased in tourist brochures, on a par with world famous landmarks of macrohistorical importance such as Axum, the Ne-jashi mosque, the *jugol* of Harar, and the rock-hewn churches at Lalibela.

The nationalism galvanized by the dam dovetails with expanding state infrastructural power. The EPRDF long relied on output legitimacy – the belief that economic performance generates popular acquiescence in authoritarian systems⁵⁹ – and the ability of the GERD to provide infrastructural “spectacle” to impress domestic and external audiences is invaluable in this regard.⁶⁰ But the EPRDF has also insisted that the GERD provides it with input legitimacy as “participation” is a key discourse the party-state spins around the dam’s construction. This is not only visible through the myriad GERD beauty contests, tombolas, and sports competitions but through the direct participation of Ethiopians in this “100%” Ethiopian-financed project. Government employees have not only taken a collective pay-cut, but GERD bonds have been keenly pushed by the regime and are one of the only assets available to ordinary Ethiopian savers in a context of financial repression and high inflation. In the words of State Minister of Foreign Affairs Markos Tekle (2018 – 2020), “As Ethiopians, we are now personally linked to the

GERD through our payments and bonds... We have a direct stake in this working out. Imagine if it does not!"⁶¹

The stakes of the "dam-building as the new nationalism" approach are high. Meles Zenawi originally conceived of the national mobilization of capital and legitimacy as strengthening regional integration. As he said at the GERD's official commencement:

Among the concerns we factored in when we made the decision to build the Nile Dam with our own resources, was to avoid any negative consequences for our neighbours and indeed to offer positive benefits for all of them. I would dare to say that nothing can provide a better testimony of our deepest commitment to forge a lasting partnership between all the Nile Basin riparian countries than the building of the Millennium Dam.⁶²

But nationalism thrives more comfortably on zero-sum narratives of historical enmity and humiliation. In an Ethiopia preoccupied with its war against poverty and Malthusian narratives of scarcity, this has led to a framing of the Nile dispute with Egypt in deeply moralizing terms of (environmental) justice as the rationale for the dam's construction.

What constitutes "environmental justice" is debated in a sprawling literature spanning the last four decades, but several key themes stand out: inequities in representation and ownership that determine who (does not) benefit(s) from production and consumption patterns; intersecting dynamics of class and identity politics that shape how people experience environmental (in)security; and the need to historicize inequality and geography, especially the role of colonialism, imperialism, and racism in structuring power and natural landscapes.⁶³ These are also the themes that infuse the Ethiopian discourse of "distributive justice" around the Nile,⁶⁴ which was launched by the party-state but has been taken over and radicalized by civil society, Diaspora activists, scholars, and ordinary people who otherwise have little interest in geopolitics. The standard narrative posits that Ethiopia was made to suffer because of the "historical injustice" of "colonial treaties" that reserved the lion's share of waters for the downstream riparians Egypt and Sudan (often described as Arab in this context) at the expense of the "starving" upstream countries (described as African); the injustice continues to this day because international financial institutions and local and global allies of Cairo have thwarted Ethiopia from getting access to finance, expertise, or legal recourse to change the unfair status quo.⁶⁵ The use of moral, racial, and historical categories echoes, unsurprisingly, tropes of classical Ethiopian historiography: the exceptional character of the Ethiopian polity owing to its physical isolation and the unrelenting struggle against climatic variability; the country's serial abandonment and betrayal during the period

of the European Scramble for Africa and the Italian invasion of 1935; and Ethiopia's self-image as the voice of Africans and the African Union standing against all forms of racism and imperialism.⁶⁶

Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tedros Adhanom (2012 – 2016) summarized the environmental (in)justice argument:

Despite contributing so much to the river, Ethiopia uses virtually none of it. . . . Egypt takes 75% of the Nile waters. . . . Essentially, the states endowed with this natural resource have never been able to use it; the lower riparian state, Egypt, has had, and essentially still does have, almost total use of the benefits of the river. One reason for this unbalanced share of the Nile waters lies in colonialism . . . [another major factor is] the refusal of the international financial institutions to provide assistance. Indeed, during the Mubarak era, Egypt worked hard to prevent Ethiopia's efforts to develop its water resources by persuading international donors to not fund projects related to the Nile River.⁶⁷

Endless op-eds, news bulletins, blogs, social media posts, and hashtags (such as #ItsMyDam) repeat the same message, but in considerably less diplomatic and more muscularly patriotic terms. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stated, "The reason why we put huge emphasis on this dam is because it is a symbol of our sovereignty and unity."⁶⁸ GERD mobilization meetings often sport the self-explanatory slogan: "There was grave injustice in the past . . . but the dam is changing history." Partly rooted in actual bitter historical experience, partly constructed as contemporary hyperbole by political Svengalis, the point here is not to concur with or dispute the validity of this framing but to highlight why the languages of environmental justice and nationalism have intersected so powerfully in the case of the GERD.

The EPRDF's casting of its flagship project as a symbol of environmental (in)justice and national pride resonated deeply with potent experiences and myths embedded in the DNA of the modern Ethiopian state. It has been a highly efficacious tool for mobilization. Ethiopians are deeply divided over just about any policy pursued by the ruling party since 1991, but the GERD appears to be the one issue around which a consensus exists. Yet the overt politicization of the dam, the environmental justice discourse, and the GERD's instrumentalization for domestic purposes as incumbents seek to shore up their legitimacy have also generated heavy blowback for the government.

The party-state's lament about unfair, historically anchored patterns of ownership and consumption of natural resources such as the Nile and the nefarious role played by outsiders in sustaining (neo)colonial political and financial asymmetries reverberated with Ethiopians. However, to many citizens, it is an analysis that should be extended to Ethiopia's internal context as well. The EPRDF state-building project has been experienced by many as deeply

disempowering. In the Oromia, Gambella, and Somali regional states, especially, it has often been seen as pursuing the same objectives of placing wealth and power in the hands of a privileged (mostly Tigrayan/highlander) minority at the expense of the rights and resources of the country's demographic majority.⁶⁹ The government's partnership with foreign investors and international donors has, in this alternative narrative of nationalism and environmental justice, led to the expropriation of huge amounts of land, forests, and water and transferred them from one ethnic group to another.⁷⁰ Such extractive patterns to buttress the control of the state apparatus and expansion of infrastructural power by some groups are reminiscent of the aggressive expansionism through which the Ethiopian empire was formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷¹ Seen from this perspective, "Woyane rule" has not been the historical rupture the TPLF imagined, but a continuation of processes of subjugating, excluding, and "punishing the periphery" through internal colonialism of those who have long seen the Ethiopian state as their principal enemy.⁷²

The contestation of the EPRDF's remaking of national identities and the political economy has been continuous since May 1991 and included both peaceful disobedience and violent revolt. It peaked with the disastrous 2005 elections and then escalated to a whole different level between 2014 and 2018. The controversy around the Addis Ababa Master Plan – which became a symbol for the transfer of resources from the Oromo countryside to the Woyane elite in the cities, without meaningful consultation or compensation – lit a fuse as hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets, attacked government forces, and burned foreign investments.⁷³ The EPRDF responded by declaring a state of emergency and highlighting the extraordinary macroeconomic growth and spectacular improvements in aggregate incomes and public service delivery during its tenure. As the protesters refused to back down, the party admitted that the developmental state needed to improve its performance but it rejected the activists' framing that its political-economic model was systemically violent and a paradigmatic case of environmental injustice.⁷⁴

EPRDF state-building also came under fire from unexpected corners, as the flames were fanned from within the party-state. Ambitious local and regional party bosses, squeezed between the leadership's democratic centralism and the grievances of young Ethiopians in their communities, simultaneously helped organize the unrest while seeking to blackmail the still TPLF-dominated federal alliance into giving them more resources and authority to nip the protests in the bud. This new generation of politicians, especially in Oromia, did not hesitate to play the role of both pyromaniac and fire brigade and ultimately used the muscle of the street to take over key party organs, culminating in the rise of the hitherto barely known Abiy Ahmed to EPRDF Chairman and Prime Minister of Ethiopia in early 2018. Abiy and his allies, such as head of the Oromia regional executive Lemma

Megersa, wasted no time in renaming the EPRDF the “Prosperity Party” and settling scores with the old Woyane, blaming its corruption for bringing Ethiopia to the edge of the abyss and echoing the language of the protesters about the exploitation of Oromo resources and bodies.⁷⁵

The confrontation between the TPLF, which retreated to its Tigray garrison, and Abiy escalated further when the prime minister began questioning Ethiopia’s grandest ever development project (and Meles’s *enfant chéri*), the GERD, and its role in EPRDF state-building. Not only did the new leader display considerable disinterest in the dam early on and seemed to downplay the very idea of a developmental state and the role of infrastructure, but he also launched a frontal attack on the GERD’s main builders. The Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), a military-industrial conglomerate run by TPLF officers, had been tasked with installing the turbines for the dam, one of many assignments the party-state had entrusted METEC with as it attempted to emulate the Asian example of fostering national champions that work hand in glove with political decision-makers in building a developmental state.⁷⁶ Yet while Abiy’s mediatized humiliation of corrupt METEC executives (who were blamed for overpromising and underdelivering) successfully aroused public anger against the TPLF and Tigrayans more broadly, the prime minister played a risky game. This became obvious when GERD project director Simegnaw Bekele was found dead under suspicious circumstances in Addis Ababa morning traffic and Abiy, with whose inner-circle Simegnaw entertained increasingly tense relations, refused to cut short his trip to the United States. Owing to EPRDF propaganda, Simegnaw had become a national hero to many Ethiopians who had been astonished to hear the prime minister, mere days before the engineer’s unexplained death, second-guessing the very dam for which they had sacrificed so much. One cabinet minister captured the disbelief within the party-state and quietly concurred with protesters who denounced Abiy during Simegnaw’s funeral:

METEC is a money laundering machine and those Woyane used it for themselves, not for the country. But all politicians, including Abiy’s allies, sat on the board of its projects. More than anything, the PM was crazy to denounce the dam, Ethiopians can’t understand that. It is not just Meles’ project, it is so much more than that, maybe the only thing we can all agree on! And he decides to play politics with that one we all paid so much for? Just imagine the consequences – the reputation of our country, the anger of the people. . . . And the Sudanese will feel betrayed of course.⁷⁷

The observation about a sense of betrayal among Ethiopia’s regional partners highlights the ways in which the escalating nationalist rhetoric around the GERD and the growing weaponization of the dam in Ethiopia’s domestic politics have come at a heavy international price, too: whereas Meles hoped that national mobilization of capital and political support around the theme of environmental jus-

tice would facilitate the forging of a regional integration regime, the opposite has happened. In the early years of the project, Egypt was largely isolated and reeling from instability following the Arab Spring while Ethiopia's ascendancy seemed unstoppable as it created facts on the ground month after month, a trend symbolized by Sudan (Egypt's historical ally in the Nile Basin) unequivocally endorsing the GERD in 2012–2013. Yet as nationalist fervor around the GERD swelled, so did ethnopolitics and the contestation of the “new” political economy inside Ethiopia. While squabbling party bosses did not hesitate to use the dam in their struggles over power (including questioning its design, production capacity, and safety features), Sudan watched with incredulity and indignation from upstream. One of Sudan's top water bureaucrats of the last twenty-five years expressed bitter disappointment:

When I heard the new Ethiopian leader tell his young people that the dam probably would not be safe or not work for another ten years, I became so speechless. It took me years to persuade people in Khartoum that the dam has more advantages for us than even for the Ethiopians themselves. And then their new leader questioned everything. ... It's so terrible, how can we make regional cooperation work like that?⁷⁸

Many in the region, including in Sudan,⁷⁹ had come to accept the arguments put forward by Meles and Ethiopian officials about the GERD as a regional integration project *par excellence*. As Abiy Ahmed quickly grasped the dam's popularity in Ethiopia in 2019–2020, he further upped the nationalist rhetoric; the breakdown in regional trust is unmistakable and forms the background to the dangerous spike in bellicose rhetoric between Egypt and Ethiopia (and, in late 2020/early 2021, between Ethiopia and Sudan). Negotiations around the dam remain gridlocked and international sympathies have shifted back toward Cairo, which has flipped Ethiopia's rhetoric by stressing the environmental injustice of depending on one source (the Nile) for 97 percent of freshwater consumption and being at the mercy of upstream Ethiopian dam-builders. In view of this changed regional outlook, Ethiopian planners at the time of writing this essay (summer/autumn of 2020) no longer envisage the GERD at the center of regional integration and basin-wide energy markets but rather as the biggest source of domestic power generation and symbol of fragile unity amidst mounting internal fragmentation.

As global warming intensifies and underscores the highly unequal capacity of societies to respond to greater climatic variability, this essay has echoed other scholars in emphasizing the inadequacy and possibly counterproductive effects of infrastructure-led technocratic responses to water insecurity and poverty reduction.⁸⁰ Flows of water are flows of power, as geographer Erik Swyngedouw reminds us,⁸¹ and the often vacuous use of the language of resilience risks depoliticizing the rights and privileges enjoyed by some in (but not neces-

sarily from) Africa and the debts and duties burdening others.⁸² A widening body of knowledge, much of it in political anthropology, demonstrates the socioeconomic,⁸³ epidemiological,⁸⁴ and ethnic/racial⁸⁵ consequences of the deliberate manipulation of water supply systems; such insights help anchor debates about water security in the broader environmental justice literature.⁸⁶ This essay has sought to complement such perspectives on studying political authority from below with an in-depth case study of the role of water in state-building designs in Ethiopia, analyzing how and why environmental justice narratives, the expansion of state infrastructural power, and the rekindling of national identities intersect as climate change intensifies.

Ethiopia, Africa's second-most populous country and perhaps the closest partner China (another ferociously enthusiastic dam-builder and funder)⁸⁷ had on the continent until about 2018–2019, is an intriguing polity to be investigating these connections. Ethiopia's transition from empire to nation-state remains incomplete and the legitimacy of the state and its infrastructural power remain fiercely contested.⁸⁸ As I have shown, hydro-infrastructure – spearheaded by Africa's most gargantuan dam – was identified by the EPRDF as central to the next chapter of its revolutionary project. The party-state believed it would both finally solve the nationalities question and end the environmental injustice of Ethiopia's poverty and international marginalization. The material sinews of infrastructural power woven through the GERD and the discursive framing and societal mobilization around the megaproject underline the party-state's sweeping domestic and regional ambitions, belying assumptions that Africans are passive victims of global warming and do not engage in ideologically driven state-building. As climate change has been hitting Africa's water tower particularly hard, the GERD was intended to nonetheless produce a stronger Ethiopia and a transformed region, both more integrated and, as such, better positioned to deal with rainfall variability and rising temperatures. The evidence presented here suggests that the dam is indeed significantly reshaping the way Ethiopians see themselves, their region, and their environment, but often in (painfully) familiar ways. Whether that makes them more or less resilient in confronting ecological upheaval remains a source of deep division, among Ethiopia's neighbors and at home.

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