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The water conflict on the Nile

between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia
as a reflection of the resilient power-
political Leviathan

Abstract

This paper is about the escalating crisis on the Nile. Ethiopia, which is itself in the throes of civil war, has built a dam on the Nile without the consent of its neighbors Egypt and Sudan, which have recently undergone profound political turmoil themselves with the overthrow of military rule and at the same time launched a reactionary countermovement.

Above all, however, Egypt depends on the Nile for its agriculture. This was true even in the time of the pharaohs, who cemented their power with good crop yields, and it is just as true today under the regime of General Sisi.

The dam, however, threatens both Egypt's and Sudan's stability, so that the question now arises whether this conflict over resources will lead to a military conflict on the Nile in the near future?

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Introduction

The Ethiopian-Egyptian conflict over the dam project of the Ethiopian despot, who also holds the Nobel Peace Prize, shows once again how stable authoritarian systems are in Africa and especially North Africa. The Egyptian president, who is also the military chief, made it clear on 28 April 2021 that he would not simply accept this Ethiopian project, but that Ethiopia would have to reckon with the Egyptian armed forces being used against it.¹ This is not only a clear warning to the Ethiopian despot, but it also shows that Egyptian General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is prepared to use military and police power both internally and externally. In an interview with the news programme "Die Welt", Sisi clearly stated that he was not interested in promoting Egypt's development potential on a democratic basis, especially since, according to the general, Europe has historically taken a long time for democratic transformations and he therefore rejects any instruction (interview of 28.04.21).² This is also shown by the numerous arrests since the fall of the then elected President Mursi, who had not understood how to integrate the Egyptian intelligence and military forces, but instead stuck purely to religious slogans of perseverance despite the economic depression at the time, which the military around Sisi cleverly knew how to exploit.

The military as an active post of social resilience

This study aims to show why developing countries in particular are very resistant to democratic and economic changes. Even in developing countries, the military is the driver of transformation, both socially and politically. This is especially true for the Nile riparian states, and not only in the present, but at least since the Suez War in 1956.³ Here it became clear that the economic development of Egypt in particular was directly related to military issues and Jamel Abdel Nasser made this more than clear in one of his infamous speeches of 1956, when he announced to the masses that the independence of the Suez Canal was tantamount to the Arab unification of all Arab states under one flag, i.e. the foundation of the pan-Arab ideology.⁴ The military thus has a progressive mechanism in developing states in particular, in which it invokes "national democratic revolutions", as General Sisi indirectly made clear in his interview with "der Welt".⁵ This also applies to Sudan and Ethiopia. These developing societies are cultivated, as it were, by being subject to a nationalist ideology imbued with religious or ethnic parameters. It is from this that the stability of the military regimes on the Nile develops. The political determination of the military and the secret services as well as the security police in these states thus results from the emancipation from the national structure of the states, as was already the

¹ Jeune Afrique- online: 28.04.20: Série: Égypte-Éthiopie: la guerre du Nil Bleu aura-t-elle lieu? By Olivier Caslin.

² Welt.de: Interview by Daniel-Dylan Böhmer, Dagmar Rosenfeld, at 28.04.21.

³ Bassam Tibi, *Militär und Sozialismus in der Dritten Welt*, p. 53, Frankfurt am Main 1973.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Welt.de: Interview by Daniel-Dylan Böhmer, Dagmar Rosenfeld, at 28.04.21.

case in the Suez crisis of the year 1956.⁶ Thus, the armies on the Nile and in large parts of Africa and the Near East are mostly separate social entities that interact independently in their content and thus also permeate society. It should not be ignored that the former colonial system in this region had an immense share in the military systems because the colonial rulers, especially Great Britain, built up a military system in East Africa, which was also interspersed with members who themselves came from the states.⁷ This was especially true for Egypt, as well as for the other Nile states. Since these military contingents were mostly used for punitive expeditions, both at home and abroad, the identification factor from the beginning of the independence of the states on the Nile was not the modernisation of the respective sovereign states, but the experiences that had arisen from the colonial period, and this was nationalism as part of an ideology of modernisation, but not in the form of development towards a modern state structure.⁸ These armies were and are therefore trained in police actions and are still largely used in this way today. They have the technical skills, see the actions of the Sudanese armed forces against the insurgency in Sudan in 2019, but these states lack professionalism militarily. Thus, the post-colonial armies are a type of structure that has not completely detached itself from the colonial structures, but nevertheless represented a new military system and still does today.⁹ The armies on the Nile did not have a clear political guideline after decolonisation so that the states after their sovereignty lavished back and forth between coups and counter-coups until the present without really developing. The military structures in the Nile states are very similar because they do not influence society as a reaction to communal changes but are part of the leviathan because they determine its technical development.¹⁰ It is precisely the armed forces that reflect the state of development of technification. It is not humanitarianism that is the driving force of transformation in these states but military technology, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, that increases the productivity of archaic societies and equalises the apparatuses of violence.¹¹ The disparity, which ultimately leads to the stagnation of social development, lies in the totality of the army to the agrarian aristocracy, which one finds especially in Mubarak's and Sisi's Egypt. This is mostly about the technocratised ideology that is not aligned with any real political direction.¹² This form of technocracy must be seen as a leviathan of power, which, however, is not given any specific political legitimacy. It must therefore be stated that these military structures are, on the one hand, a part of society that drives technical development, and on the other hand, these structures are a national component of underdeveloped societies that are, however, at the same time embedded in the global security system,

⁶ See here: Reihe des Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamtes, book volume: 46, Internationales Krisenjahr 1956, Potsdam 1999.

⁷ Bassam Tibi, *Militär und Sozialismus in der Dritten Welt*, p. 56 con., Frankfurt am Main 1973.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Laurent Touchard, *Défense. Le temps des stratèges*, in: *Jeune Afrique*, Number: 39, p. 42/43.

¹² Bassam Tibi, *Militär und Sozialismus in der Dritten Welt*, p. 65 con., Frankfurt am Main 1973.

which was ultimately also made clear by the recent blockade of the Suez Canal by a container ship.¹³ This is where the reflection on the social structures and their developments becomes apparent.

Strategic stability in domestic and foreign policy as part of militarisation

Symptomatic for the technocratisation of underdeveloped states is the increasing militarisation of African states with simultaneous economic and social-cultural stagnation. Here, internal security plays just as great a role as external security, which can be seen very clearly in the Egyptian-Ethiopian conflict. Both security circles intertwine. Both states are in a domestic political as well as foreign policy crisis, which is still inherent in the economic stagnation.

The best armies of the continent	
For an asymmetric war	For a conventional war
Algeria	Morocco
South Africa	Egypt
Ethiopia	Algeria
Uganda	South Africa
Tanzania	Sudan
Kenya	Angola
Chad	Ethiopia
Niger	Nigeria
Rwanda	Eretria
Angola	Uganda

(Laurent Touchard, *Défense. Le temps des stratèges*, in: *Jeune Afrique*, Number: 39, p. 43.)

Algeria, Morocco and Egypt alone rank in the 40s on the defence spending scale.¹⁴ This is primarily a matter of strategic defence issues in which domestic factors also play an essential role and this is also reflected in the military build-up and equipment of the states on the Nile. In principle, it is about strategic stability within the states as well as for their interests externally or to conceal internal political distortions through external crises. The table illustrates the extent of this domestic and security policy concentration showing that Egypt and Ethiopia have equipped themselves for both asymmetric and conventional warfare, whereby Egypt is already involved in various military operations, namely in Yemen and in the asymmetric fight against various groups in Libya and on the Sinai Peninsula. Meanwhile, Ethiopia is engaged in a bloody asymmetric civil war.

This is not only about the modernity of the armed forces in the Nile, but it is about maintaining domestic stability by all means in order not to let it come to popular uprisings again. It is precisely this

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Laurent Touchard, *Défense. Le temps des stratèges*, in: *Jeune Afrique*, Number: 39, p. 42/43.

internal strategic stability that determines the defence budget of the North-East African states, because the armament and constant mechanisation of the apparatus of violence is conducted under the pseudonym of defence against terrorism, which the table also underlines.¹⁵ In the Nile countries, too, it is a matter of conveying a policy that is based on national sovereignty whereby mismanagement is not to come to light here. The military apparatus thus appears as a national service for the security of the nation and its elite.¹⁶

Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi

If we now compare the two parties to the conflict, we can see that since Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power in Egypt in 2013, the democratic experiment that began in 2011 has come to a complete standstill.¹⁷ Most opposition forces have been arrested on suspicion of terrorism and the remaining part of the opposition no longer dares to be politically active.¹⁸ Most of the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood are in prison. Others have gone underground, which further strengthens the military system in Egypt, because General Sisi can always point to the danger of instability, which he has already done on 28 April 2021, both domestically and vis-à-vis Ethiopia. Egypt is in an austerity crisis that is not only economic but especially social.¹⁹ Only through subsidies did the Egyptian military junta manage to cap the energy crisis to some extent so that now the Egyptian state has to cope with a national debt of 12.2% of GDP, and Egypt can only do this because the Gulf states are supporting Egypt financially due to its participation in the military intervention in Yemen. Unemployment is between 13.4 and 13.9 per cent for a population of 82.1 million people, and inflation, fuelled by the Gulf states' financial cap, is now between 10.1 and 13.5 per cent.²⁰ Sisi's Suez expansion project was an international image boost, but it also exposed massive foreign exchange problems.²¹

Ethiopia between ethnic civil war and hydroelectric leading power in the region

Ethiopia, for its part, is a dirigiste state complex. The attempt to modernise agriculture, which accounts for 46% of GDP and employs 80% of the 94.1 million population, makes it clear why Ethiopia is sticking to its dam project.²² In doing so, Ethiopia is aligning itself with China and strengthening its hydroelectricity.²³ It makes full use of its natural resources, which is also made clear by the number of

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jeune Afrique, Number: 39, p. 127.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 165.

²³ Ibid.

megawatts, namely 45,000 megawatts, that Ethiopia can generate from its natural reserves, which also explains the persistence of the dam project. Thus, the underdeveloped country may, in the near future, be able to export electricity in its vicinity. However, the Ethiopian state is heavily dependent on investors such as China, Saudi Arabia and Israel.²⁴ Especially in telecommunications and finance, the foreign regional powers are involved with 8.5% of GDP in 2014 alone and currently with just under 8.5%. Inflation, however, is many times higher than in Egypt, namely 39.2%.²⁵ Moreover, Ethiopia had to ask the World Bank for help with social changes. In addition, there is massive repression in the country, just as in Egypt, especially against the Oromo ethnic group, which is persecuted with military and paramilitary force, and freedom of the press is also severely restricted.²⁶ The opposition exists, but the political climate has been poisoned since 2014.

Sudan the state between two regional powers

Sudan must be considered the third power involved in the water conflict on the Nile. Here, too, the Sudanese people tried to bring about a political transformation in 2019, but it got stuck again because the military secured itself, as it did in Egypt and Algeria. The years-long Darfur conflict in particular has manoeuvred the Muslim-dominated North Sudan into a severe financial crisis, so that the country is only able to survive with the help of China.²⁷ Communist China has co-financed an infrastructure project in the crisis region of Darfur to the tune of 60%.²⁸ It lives off its oil revenues, with the returns flowing directly into the security apparatus. Meanwhile, the inflation generated by this and driving poverty even further has reached approx. 38.02% and this with an illiteracy rate of approx. 30% in a population of 38 million, where the majority is employed in the security apparatus or in the energy industry and agriculture.²⁹ In 2014, border conflicts with Egypt and Ethiopia arose because of the water problem, and the country is already stockpiling water reserves as a precautionary measure in case of an emergency.

Conclusion

The Ultimatum of Egypt and Sudan to Ethiopia at the end of April this year shows how serious the situation on the Nile is with regard to water and access to water, which also aggravates the domestic political situations in the respective states. On the one hand, it makes it clear that Ethiopia will not allow itself to be talked into its sovereign rights, because it wants to become the leading hydroelectric power in the region. On the other hand, it also makes it clear that Ethiopia's unilateral

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 170.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

behaviour directly affects the legitimacy of the Egyptian and Sudanese military states and, in essence, not only the structure of these two countries but also the independence of the agrarian aristocracy, which will turn against the supporting regimes if they no longer achieve sufficient returns. Ethiopia, for its part, wants to emerge economically from the crisis and is not abandoning the dam project. If the imaginary conflict between the states on the Nile is not resolved internationally, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has already made it clear that the last option for Egypt, but also for Sudan, will be a military operation against Ethiopia in order to regain control of the Nile and also to maintain domestic political resilience.

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