

# The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam:

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.<sup>2</sup>

To Ethiopia's political leadership and its bureaucratic-scientific apparatus, the

as a case in point.<sup>9</sup>

as a speech-act:<sup>15</sup> 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”<sup>16</sup> 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.

**T**o 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

The TPLF's roots forced its leadership to balance its Leninist vanguardism with

Second, Ethiopia's new leadership instituted (revolutionary) democ-

ic growth would, the leadership believed, save both the country and the party;<sup>34</sup> 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).<sup>35</sup> 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."<sup>36</sup> Long-serving Minister of Information Bereket Simon concurred, "Poverty and backwardness are the number one enemy. We need full mobilization, war footing."<sup>37</sup> The "securitisation of development"<sup>38</sup> 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."<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> 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)<sup>41</sup> 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. Sebat 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.<sup>42</sup>

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."<sup>43</sup> 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."<sup>44</sup>

**F**or 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.<sup>45</sup> Such "hydro-agricultural state-building"<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.”<sup>49</sup>

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

zation: “Meles! Your promises will be kept; the G[E]RD will be realized through public participation!!!” became the tagline of the ገጠና ለገጠና, 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.<sup>57</sup> 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 ህዝብ ለህዝብ, 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.<sup>58</sup> 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 ገብገብ 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 systems<sup>59</sup>—and the ability of the GERD to provide infrastructural “spectacle” to impress domestic and external audiences is invaluable in this regard.<sup>60</sup> 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!"<sup>61</sup>

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.<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup>

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."<sup>68</sup> 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.

**T**he 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.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

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.<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup>

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

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sarily from) Africa and the debts and duties burdening others.<sup>82</sup> A widening body of knowledge, much of it in political anthropology, demonstrates the socioeconomic,<sup>83</sup> epidemiological,<sup>84</sup> and ethnic/racial<sup>85</sup> consequences of the deliberate manipulation of water supply systems; such insights help anchor debates about water security in the broader environmental justice literature.<sup>86</sup> 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)<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> 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.

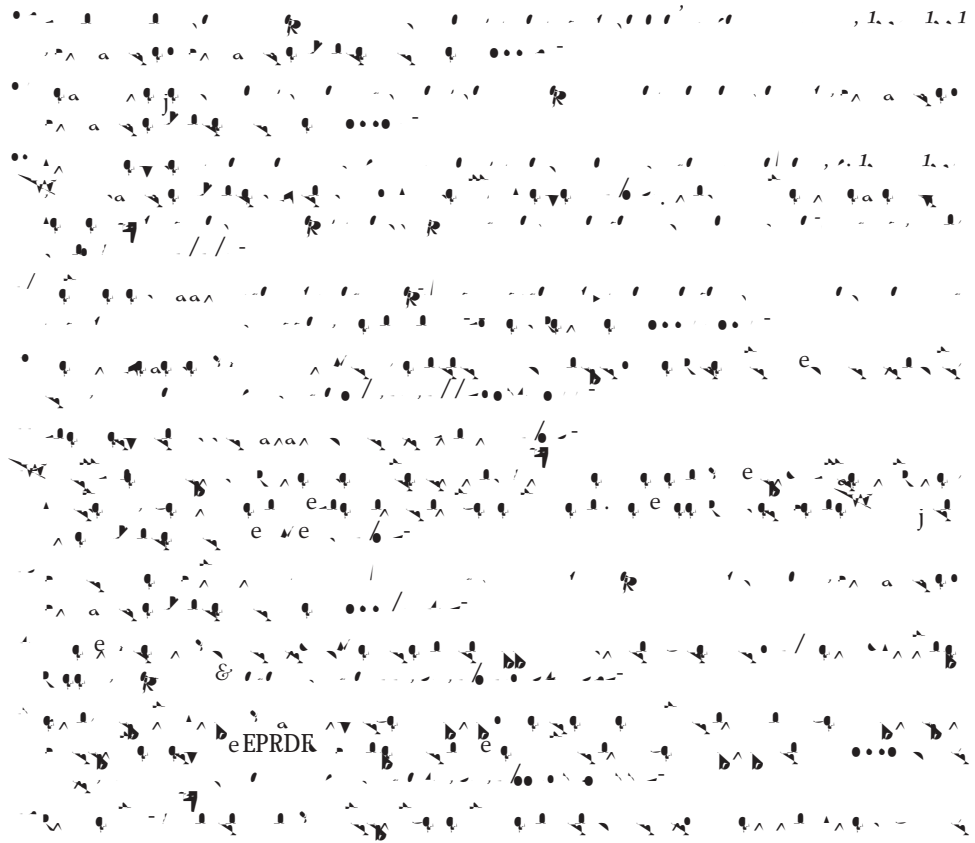
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Harry Verhoeven



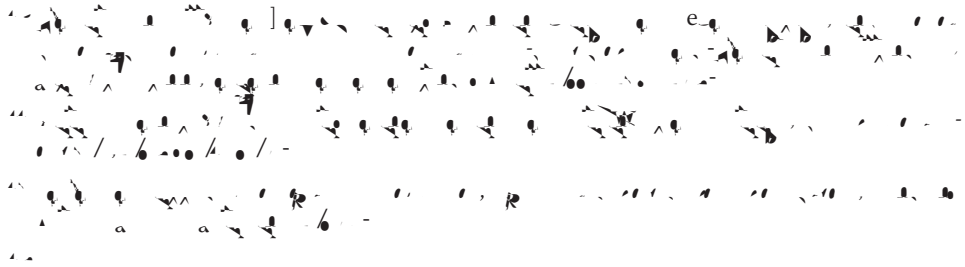
The image shows a page of musical notation, likely a score for a piece by Harry Verhoeven. The notation is dense and complex, featuring multiple staves of music. The notation includes various symbols, such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are several instances of the letter 'e' scattered throughout the score, which may represent specific notes or articulation marks. The notation is arranged in a vertical column, with staves separated by small gaps. The overall appearance is that of a handwritten or printed musical manuscript.

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$\frac{1}{2}$   $\int_0^1 x^2 dx$   $=$   $\frac{1}{2} \cdot \frac{x^3}{3} \Big|_0^1 = \frac{1}{2} \cdot \frac{1}{3} = \frac{1}{6}$

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