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Is it one Nile? Civic engagement and hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile Basin: the case of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia

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Citation

Abazeed, A. R. Y. (2021, April 21). *Is it one Nile? Civic engagement and hydropolitics in the Eastern Nile Basin: the case of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3160751>

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Issue Date: 2021-04-21

Chapter One

Introduction

ولا يبوصل ولا يبتوه
It (he) neither reaches its (his) destination nor loses the way
ولا يبرجع ولا يبغيب
Nor comes or goes away
النيل سؤال وما زال مجاش عليه الرد
The Nile is a question without an answer yet
-Egyptian song ¹

1.1 Background

The Nile is a central natural resource for its peoples not only for their livelihood activities, but also because it is rooted in their culture. The riparian countries, on the other side, have been evolving their economic aspirations as well as their political power around the river's resources.

The Nile Basin Water Resources Atlas (2016) purports that 53 percent of the total population of people inhabiting the Nile countries live along the river basin. The Main Nile and the Blue Nile are highly congested with the population figures comparable to that of the other sub-basins². Virtually the entire Egyptian population lives along the Nile banks (85.8 million); while in Sudan and Ethiopia these figures are 37.6 and 31.4 million respectively. This consternation in the Nile Basin embeds cultural connections reflected in their religions, rituals and traditions. The Nile communities have inherited many rituals that are practised up until the present time, such as 'rainmaking rituals and prayers' and inundation festivals. All of these rituals and cultural practices posit the communities' world views about the animals and plants that share the river with them³.

¹ El-Neel (The Nile) is an Egyptian song written by Kawthar Mustafa and sung by Mohamed Mounir in 1986. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_QMQUIrnJQ

² The Nile River is hydraulically divided into ten sub-basins: Main Nile, Tekeze- Atbara, Blue Nile, White Nile, Baro-Akobo-Sobat, Bahr El Jebel, Bahr El Ghazal, (politically, these sub-basins flow in the borders of Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eretria and South Sudan), Lake Albert, Victoria Nile and Lake Victoria (they are shared by Burundi, DR Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda).

³ The Nile River seems has agency in the riparian cultures. In the Ethiopian (Amharic) and Egyptian and Sudanese (Arabic) official languages, The Nile gets a masculine pronoun (He) referring to his powerful hydraulic attribute. However, I use 'it' pronoun in this research because different actors tackle the River as an object needs to be developed.

Importantly, the features of water formulate the identity of the riparian communities. This identity differs where the community has plenty of water or where there is a scarcity (upstream or downstream). It is also reflected in their daily life practices of water usage, such as rituals performed to bring water or to conserve water resources (Østigård, 2009).

Nevertheless, urbanization is combined with this population growth. The Nile Basin Water Resources Atlas (2016) estimated that 50 percent of the total population in all Nile countries would live in urban settlements by 2050. These dynamics have contributed to an increasing need for water, particularly the fact that the Nile Basin countries are highly dependent on agriculture for the production of food and cash crops for domestic and export purposes. On the other hand, the Nile Basin countries have pursued economic development policies leading to their integration into the neoliberal global economy. The implementation of these policies has promoted foreign investment, free market and privatization. Furthermore, an increased energy consumption which necessitated the need for generating more energy to meet development plans, has also increased dramatically. Therefore, maintaining higher levels of hydropower production requires the sustenance of water levels conducive to achieve an accelerated need for energy production.

Along with these developmental policies, the Nile Basin is vulnerable to climate change which has been linked to the fluctuation of precipitation and variability of water flows. Historically, the Nile water levels have been susceptible to environmental changes such as prolonged famine due to reliance on rain for irrigation. Hence, frequent floods and droughts have a direct impact on development plans. Therefore, the dependency on the water is considered critical for up and downstream countries.

In respect to the centrality of the Nile, the produced literature on the relation among the Nile Basin countries and its geopolitics is not divergent from the lens of cooperation and conflict. The Nile Basin region is considered by academics and policymakers alike as one of Africa's potential water conflict areas (Mason, 2005; Mahamoda, 2003; Serageldin, 2009). The trajectories of cooperation and conflict have been contested due to colonial policies, the national development plans and the legitimacy of the river's treaties in addition to intergovernmental arrangements. These factors constitute the three main interwoven themes of the Nile politics literature.

The colonial legacy has formulated a historical foundation of the confrontation between the upstream and downstream countries. Exploiting the Nile waters had been a determinant of the British empire arrangements with the other European rivalries (France, Italy, Germany) to divide and control colonies along the Nile River (Sanderson, 1964). Under British rule in Egypt and Sudan, many irrigation projects had been planned, such as the Jonglei Canal (Collins, 1990) and large-scale irrigation schemes like the Gezira Scheme (Ertsen, 2015). In conjunction, Mehmed Ali Pasha (1805-1848) and his reigns had restructured the agriculture sector in Egypt by constructing irrigation projects (the Delta Barrage and the first Aswan dam) which had been combined with social and administrative transformations (Mikhail, 2011). These different colonial managements of the Nile flow had been for economic purposes to feed the textile industry in Britain (Tvedt, 2011) and to consolidate the political power of Mehmed Ali Pasha (Fahmy, 1997).

The second theme that prevails in the Nile literature departs from the policies of riparian countries to utilise the river's resources for their national development. Waterbury (2002) argues that the 'national determinants' delineate the prism of cooperation and the possibility of establishing a 'basin-wide regime'. The national interests of riparian countries have been deviated according to hydraulic features of the river and water availability (surface water, rainfall, abundance, scarcity); in addition to the domestic politics and the political relations with neighbouring countries and international powers. These dynamics have illuminated Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda as focal players in Nile politics. In line with the national determinants argument and the frontiers of cooperation, the concept of hydro-hegemony is widely used to explain interstate relations in the Nile Basin. The main argument is that Egypt has been a hegemonic power depending on its economic and military advantages; the riparian position as a downstream country in addition to knowledge, legal regulations and international support. Hence, Egypt has negotiating power to set out the rules of using water by the upstream countries and to control the river (Haynes and Whittington, 1981; Zeitoun and Warner, 2006; Carles, 2006; Williams, 2002; Akwei, 2015). However, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is described as a counter-hegemonic act by the Ethiopian government. Some of the studies emphasize that the Ethiopian dam has introduced new rules of Nile Basin management (Cascão, 2008; Abteu and Dessu, 2019). Other studies, on the other hand, have highlighted the challenges of the Eastern Nile

Basin cooperation due to the contestation between Egypt and Ethiopia over the GERD (Tawfik, 2015; Tayie, 2018).

The third theme of literature interrogates the legal frameworks of interstate relations in the Nile Basin, primarily the debates relying on the deliberations of the colonial policies and national interests. Distributing the Nile water has been the core of disputes between downstream and upstream countries. Egypt claims the historical rights/ acquired rights of water shares as defined in treaties, while the upstream countries question the legitimacy of treaties signed during the colonial period which did not represent the nation-states (Carroll, 1999; Rashidy, 2014; Knobelsdorf, 2005). In 2010, this contentious situation came to the forefront again when five upstream countries signed the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) in Entebbe without the consent of the downstream countries. Some studies tackle the CFA as a legal arrangement that could counter the hegemony of downstream countries despite the lack of political will to comply with it collectively on the whole Nile Basin, and not in a rivalry way between the upstream and downstream countries (Ibrahim, 2011; McKenzie, 2012; Salman, 2013).

The aforementioned three themes are intertwined in analysing the Nile as a transboundary resource. Furthermore, these themes delineate that the nation state and its institutions are central actors in Nile politics, whilst society or community has been left behind.

Nevertheless, some of the Nile studies denote the prospective role of civil society in Nile politics but without investigating how the riparian civil society organisations (CSOs) can play this role. For instance, some studies have concluded that civil society (the church, students and scholars' groups, business forums, trade unions and NGOs) would enhance Eastern Nile Basin cooperation through capitalizing on non-political relations (Arsano, 2007; Zaerpoor, 2019, Abdelwahab, 2012). Another study highlights the importance of the ecological balance of the Nile Basin, and for that reason the decision-makers should consider the communities' needs and culture when designing water policies and projects (Yohannes, 2009). By the same token, a study points out the possible role of civil society in observing the social and environmental impacts of the GERD in endorsing the global principle of environmental justice (Abdelhady et al., 2015). Regionally, a study urges for the Nile Basin Discourse (NBD) role in channelling the voice of civil society to the

policymakers in the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) with emphasis on the importance of CSOs to attain sustainable management of the river (Kameri-Mbote and Kindiki, 2009). Contrary to these few studies, Waterbury (2002) emphasises the dominance of the state actors in Nile politics and omits any role of civil society except the role of environmental NGOs that work on technical projects and are funded by donors. Commenting on the community, he stated

'No domestic, civilian constituencies have yet developed sufficient weight or definition of interests to influence national policy. It will be very difficult for them to do so under any circumstances because transboundary water is seen as a matter of national security and strategic interests. National policy will not willingly permit open debate of these issues in the domestic political arena.'
(Waterbury, 2002:25)

Between the aspired recommendations and the negation of the role of civil society, the Nile politics in fact involves varieties of civic activism. The Nile Basin Discourse (NBD) is the regional CSO that has represented the riparian civil society since 2003. Concomitantly, different civic engagement initiatives have emerged on national and local scales with transnational purposes, such as Nile Basin Capacity Building Network (NBCBN) and the Ethiopian diaspora groups that have claimed divergent positions regarding the GERD. On the other side, the NBI, an intergovernmental organisation, has established a mechanism to interact with civil society as a stakeholder in designed water development projects.

Accordingly, this research attempts to avert this negation and to explicate the prospective role of civil society in the Nile cooperation and conflict debates by investigating the different existing civic activism efforts in Eastern Nile politics.

1.2 Problem statement

The Nile literature confines the relations to the state as one cohesive dominant entity. On the other side, there are water studies where hydropolitics debates are shaped and where the role of civil society actors is highlighted. However, several analyses refer to micro-cases at local and national levels. On the other hand, the engagement of civil society in transboundary rivers is bounded by

the examining the role in the river basin organisations or by documenting the activism of anti-dam movements.

Community-based natural resource management, water governance and rights-based claims are the prevailing trends that enunciate the dynamics between civil society and decision-makers at local and national levels.

Both community-based natural resource management and water governance militate for civic involvement to attain development. According to the former approach, water is considered a root source of other natural resources such as crops, wildlife parks and forestation on which national economies depend. Therefore, maximizing economic gains and profits from natural resources has been the engine of approaching the community and involving it in management. The assumption of this cause is that community engagement would sustain revenues from natural resources because they would conserve their resources (Fabriciusr, 2004; Leach, Mearns, and Scoones, 1999).

The water governance lens anticipates civil society as a third sector besides the state and market whose participation is valuable in the management process. Under the scarcity condition of water resources, it is crucial to increase water productivity and deliver water services effectively. Accordingly, it has become a global principle to involve civil society or local communities in the process of managing water resources (Rahaman and Varis, 2005; Camkin and Neto, 2016; Tyagi, 2019).

However, the procedural vision of civil society participation in the water management process has been challenged in practice. Water policy, similar to other public policies, is a sphere of power dynamics where the interests of the three sectors are contested. However, civil society and community concerns are retrained by the state authority and private sector capabilities.

To address this power inequality, some water studies discuss the communities' right to access water services in an equal manner and the right to be presented in formulating water policies (Narayanan et al., 2018). Some studies argue for the integration of norms of environmental justice

and indigenous people's rights while governing water resources (Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014). Additionally, some scholars in agrarian studies have emphasised peasants' rights in the sphere of contestation with state neoliberal policies with investors over different irrigation projects (Bush, 2010).

Despite the wide array of studies addressing the dynamics of civil society engagement, this water literature has drawn mostly on case studies from rural, urban or pastoral contexts, while there is a gap in exploring civic engagement in transboundary rivers. Approaching transnational activism is configured in terms of the normative role of civil society in global governance or a stakeholder in the transboundary river basin organisation; in addition to the practices of the anti-dam movements and resettlement politics.

Regarding the normative role, civil society plays the role of a conductor of norms and interests between the local and global levels. International organisations such as UN agencies and international water platforms have endorsed the engagement of civil society. The driving assumption is that civil society is a channel to voice grassroots needs and to negotiate their interests against the private sector and state interests and priorities. Additionally, civil society supposedly can monitor the implementation of global principles on national and local levels (Global High-Level Panel on Water and Peace, 2017; Maganda, 2010).

The presence of CSOs in the river basin organisations is under the frame of stakeholder participation alongside the government and private sectors. The mechanism of governing the river basin organisation is more important to analyse its relations with civil society because the 'governance mechanisms' is the translation of principles, norms and rules that were settled by founder governments. Therefore, it identifies the level of public participation in the policymaking process and whether the public voice is a determinant in decision making or contained in the level of information sharing (Schmeier, 2015:62-63). Furthermore, the domestic politics of the relation between civil society and governments, as well as the capacity of CSOs to evaluate water policies and projects, defines their role in transboundary river management (Nicol et al., 2000).

Resisting big dams has revealed how transnational civil society has developed a movement against the construction of big dams. The civic (or indigenous) groups became capable of hindering or reframing big dam projects domestically; hence, transnational oppositions emerged to resist the support of international donors such as the World Bank in financing big dams that affected people. As a result of resistance, the World Dam Commission was established in 1998 after consultation with the World Bank to evaluate the environmental and social impacts of dams that had been financed by the international finance institutions (Khagram, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2002). Similarly, in the African context, the national civil society collaborated with international civil organisations to mobilise the global opinion against the dam projects (Wirkus and Böge, 2006; Abdelkareem, 2018). In the main Asian transboundary rivers, 'river activists' from the riparian countries protested against dam projects. They mobilised grassroots by highlighting the destructive impacts of dams; on the other hand, they interacted with the governments and the river basin organisations to reconsider the hydropower policies (Yeophantong, 2017).

Comparable to other water studies on local and national levels, the arguments in these studies have been driven by hydraulic projects such as dam construction or by global events (international water conferences) or through the lens of institutionalization of water management (river basin organisation). As a result, such studies provide a sporadic and thematic analysis of transboundary civic engagement, omitting the constant relations that have evolved among riparian communities due to the sharing of watercourses.

Yet, despite the centrality of the Nile River across historical periods and for the development of its riparian countries, civil society involvement in its governance as a transboundary resource is not represented either in water studies nor in the Nile scholarship. Therefore, to fill this two-fold gap, the central question of this research is what determines civic engagement in transboundary hydropolitics and why has it been muted in the Eastern Nile Basin? Answering this question draws on the two strands of scholarly debates in water studies and international relations.

1.2.1 Research questions

This research approaches the Eastern Nile politics from the relational perspective of international relations that refutes the dualist analysis of cooperation or conflict to describe interstate behaviour. The relational perspective allows us to consider the engagement of different actors and the political dynamics among the riparian countries. Eastern Nile politics involves the state, river basin organisations and civil society actors. Moreover, the behaviour of riparian countries entails cooperation and contestation where both national interest and values are manifested in their interactions. Importantly, the centrality of the Nile for its people's cultures and livelihoods as well as for state developments has endorsed civil society engagement through several transnational actions by CSOs, academic groups or social movements.

In other words, the relational perspective assumes that the international system encompasses different interacting actors and it is no longer a static system. This research underpins this assumption to analyse civic engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin politics. The network approach is a compatible analytical framework with the relational perspective because it allows scrutinizing the interactions between different types of actors that can have multilayered connections. Additionally, through the network scope, several actions either evolved around issues or institutions or incidents can be included in the analysis.

Based on the assumptions of the relational international politics and network approach, the main research question is split into four sub-questions. These are as follows:

- What are the geopolitical circumstances which empowered and contributed to the rise of national and regional civic activism in Eastern Nile politics?
- What are the magnitudes and patterns of civic engagement in Eastern Nile politics?
- How has Eastern Nile national civil society engagement developed into relations immersed in transnational civic engagement?

- What are the parameters of civic engagement in Eastern Nile politics?

From the network perspective, these questions attempt to answer the main question by applying social network analysis (SNA). To understand the divergent positions of civil society in relation to the conventional actors (the state and donors), it is important to elucidate the political and development context in the Eastern Nile Basin. The second and third sub-questions address the components of the network, including the capabilities of actors and the strength of their interactions. Lastly, it looks at the power dynamics that affect the structure of relations in the network.

1.2.2 Academic significance

Departing from the Nile scholarship and water studies, this PhD research aims at three interconnected conceptual and empirical objectives.

The first one is to be a full-fledged study of the increasing engagement of country and cross-country civil society and social movements in the Nile Basin. Theoretically, the research blends the strands of thought and concepts in international relations and gauges critical civic activism focusing on transboundary hydro-politics.

The second objective is to contribute to water studies where civic engagement in the Nile Basin is still at a nascent state. Through the research's findings, it explores the convergence and divergence between the Nile experience and what has been addressed regarding the prospective role of civil society in governing transboundary river basins.

The third one is a broad objective; this research looks to contribute to studies of global civil society and social movement by providing an empirical case from the South. It would show the possibilities and impediments of South-South collaboration in the issue of water resources.

1.3 Research scope

The research is situated in the field of international relations; however, national and local politics are not isolated from regional and global dynamics. Particularly the Nile is a central natural resource for its eleven riparian countries and therefore, what occurs in the national (upstream) domain certainly affects the other countries (downstream). Furthermore, civil society engagement is practically generated from local/national concerns that can transcend national borders and be enacted regionally or globally.

Nevertheless, the scope of this research is confined by a time framework between the years of 2003 and 2020, the reasons for this time frame are presented below. And geographically, it focuses on the Eastern Nile Basin which includes Egypt and Sudan as downstream countries and Ethiopia as the upstream country.

1.3.1 The time frame

Regarding the time frame, the establishment of the Nile Basin Discourse (NBD) in 2003 was a highly important development in the Nile cooperation. It was the first basin-wide civil society organisation that represents CSOs from all riparian countries.

The formulation of the NBD was purposefully coincided with the founding of the NBI, the most recent cooperative institutional framework which includes all of the Nile Basin countries. Notably, unlike the previous Nile Basin intergovernmental arrangements, the NBI has widened the scope of cooperation to cover non-water technical issues. Moreover, it has acknowledged the role of civil society as a stakeholder in governing the development of the Nile Basin.

On the other side, in the decade of the 2000s, the global platforms on water, environment and sustainability have been increased, such as the World Water Forums. Civil society participation in these global platforms has been endorsed by international organisations and donor agencies. Since

then it has become common international practice to invite representatives of civil society to discuss hydraulic issues with decision makers and technical bureaucrats.

Nonetheless, the data collection phase of this research was terminated by February 2020 for the sake of analysis. At this time, the stalling of ongoing negotiations over the GERD between the three countries has re-provoked transboundary civic activism, mainly as regards the Ethiopian civil society, and this research includes some examples of this activism. However, civil society involvement in the Nile Basin affairs is incessant, especially with globalization facilities of communication and the centrality of the Nile River to its peoples.

1.3.2 The geographical sub-basin

Geographically, the research investigates civic engagement in the Eastern Nile Basin including Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. Despite the hydraulic features that aggregate the three countries, politically, South Sudan is part of the institutional arrangement of the Eastern Nile Basin, but it is not involved in the analysis. Concomitantly, the three countries of the Eastern Nile Basin have experienced revolutionary waves and popular uprisings that have bolstered civic activism both nationally and transnationally. The following paragraphs explain the changes and the rationale for excluding South Sudan.

1.3.2.1 Egypt

The revolution of 2011 that toppled Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) reflected continuous activism by loosely structured groups and citizen-based protests that had been initiated to challenge the authoritarian political regime and impoverished economic policies. With the beginning of the 2000s, the moments of protesting intensified as a result of global and national causes, as explained by Abdelrahman (2013). The Palestinian intifada in 2002 was a compelling cause for solidarity activism, while the financial global crisis in 2008 contributed to economic hardship due to the decline in the Egyptian remittances and national income in general. Nationally, the impenetrable privatization of state-owned enterprises and layoffs in addition to severe consequences of

liberating agriculture policies on farmers' conditions had fuelled civic dissatisfaction. The economic causes of protests have been continued and political opposition to the regime sometimes drove public protests such as the demonstration against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood; their rule ended in 2013 with military intervention.

The Nile politics were characterised by part of this activism, and some of the youth-led initiatives were established induced by the momentum of the revolution such as the Nile Project. In addition, there was also the formation of the public diplomacy delegation by Egyptian activists and politicians who attempted to negotiate with the Ugandan and Ethiopian heads of state to halt the ratification of CFA and the construction of GERD, as discussed in chapter five.

Furthermore, the political transformation from the Muslim Brotherhood to military intervention has influenced the structure and contents of Nile politics, namely, the negotiations with Ethiopia over the GERD. Under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, the former president Mohamed Morsi (2012-2013) invited the political parties and some public figures to a public discussion - which was live-streamed - to evaluate the situation with Ethiopia and to suggest actions to manage the GERD dilemma (Newscentereg, 2013). In spite of the hostile tone of discussion toward the Ethiopian Government and people to stop the dam's construction, this meeting was an indicator to bring the Nile issue into the public sphere and not to keep it within closed high-level political assessment. Yet, the expressed position of the Egyptian political frictions in this meeting escalated the contestation with the Ethiopian Government. Furthermore, nationally, the undesirable result of this meeting was added to the persuasive causes of ousting the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

On the contrary, Al-Sisi's regime (since 2014) has been attempting to boost a collaborative manner in negotiations with the Ethiopian and Sudanese governments, and consequently the Declaration of Principles (DoP) was initiated by the Egyptian Government and later signed in 2015. The DoP puts in place certain guiding rules for negotiations about the GERD with the pursuit of preventing potential harm to Egypt (Tawfik, 2016). This collaborative, statist behaviour induced disagreement by a group of Egyptian scientists, as will be discussed in chapter five.

Despite the orientation of the political regime in Egypt, there has always been activism by different societal segments that can be counted as part of Nile politics.

1.3.2.2 Ethiopia

The country has been witnessing a political struggle for a long time. The regimes shifted from the empire that was dissolved in 1975 by the military socialist regime led by the Derg (1974 – 1987); then to federalism that has been represented by a coalition of parties under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) since 1994 and recently, in 2019, it became renamed to the Prosperity Party. However, EPRDF has a prolonged internal contestation among its constituting political parties. Besides, ethnic federalism has been the catalyst to the Oromo vast uprising in November 2015 which later accompanied Amhara ethnicity-based action and ended by reshuffling political power within EPRDF (Tessema, 2018).

The implication of ethnic federalism has not secured the ethnic nations' rights to govern their lands. The trigger of the uprising in 2015 was due to the Addis Ababa Master Plan that incorporated lands in the Oromia region and was designed to enable investors to utilise the lands for modernizing the capital city without a consensus from Oromo inhabitants as the constitution alleges. Additionally, internal political contestations among the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) occupied the top of the political coalition although the numbers of the Tigray population represent less than Oromo and Amhara, whose political parties did not have equal power in the coalition. This divergence determined the decision making which in turn caused the TPLF to gain leverage and dominate (Tessema, 2018). So, in Ethiopia, the ethnic and party sub-system led to the uprisings and the concurrent social unrest.

The Nile issue has been present in these political dynamics. The foremost indicator is the GERD that was announced by the former prime minister, Meles Zenawi (1995-2012). The construction of the dam on the Blue Nile has been a stake to mobilise people and reaffirm the Ethiopian nation against ideas of the nation's fragmentation. Therefore, the GERD has been branded as a national project that different ethnicities together with the government would collectively help transform

the nation from poverty and starvation to prosperity; moreover, constructing a giant project would be evidence of the nation's great capability (Belay, 2014).

To mobilise the nation, the Office of the National Council for the Coordination of Popular Participation on the Construction of GERD was established, in addition to the noteworthy engagement of scientists and researchers in the diaspora to support the project. Chapter five of this dissertation discusses the activism that resulted from the GERD national project. Contrary to Zenawi's vision, the Oromo massive demonstration in 2015 raised the GERD issue to depict irrational TPLEF projects; furthermore, it was utilised to get support from the Egyptian Government for Oromo uprisings, as discussed in chapter seven on the role of the Ethiopian diaspora.

In principle, the openness of the public sphere due to massive uprisings induced activists to raise awareness and mobilise the public for a different cause and that is what some of the Amhara activists did to protect Lake Tana in the framework of the 2017 campaign.

1.3.2.3 Sudan

The Sudanese revolution that erupted in December 2018 toppled Omar Al-Bashir's regime that seized power in 1989. This revolution has been a result of civic grievances against the authoritarian Al-Bashir regime.

The political contestation that ended with the military Islamist regime (Ingaz) rebased the political system on clientelism to secure its power. Therefore, it depended heavily on military and security arrangements to defend the ruling regime. However, this high securitization and penetrating of armed groups in the different areas of the state's apparatus fuelled the civil war and conflicts in East Sudan as well as in West Sudan, even after the secession of South Sudan (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019).

Although Sudan has diverse natural resources, this richness of resources fed the clientelism of the regime. However, after the secession of South Sudan, the country lost its important source of national income (oil) and accordingly, the regime faced difficulties to cover patronage relations and support Al-Bashir's junta. Later on, the inflation and cutting of wheat subsidies in particular caused the riots that turned into a nation-wide wave of uprisings in 2013, but the regime suppressed it violently. Then, in 2016, the wide civil disobedience was a counter-technique by the people to oppose the regime's outrage and avoid its brutality (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019).

Parallel to the consolidation of patron relationships, the Al-Bashir regime had intimidated collective action by dissolving trade unions and syndicates and by arresting activists. Despite these fierce policies, activists organised different 'shadow' unions and syndicates to counter Al-Bashir's elite penetration in different state and societal bodies. They then formed the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) that played a leading role in mobilizing people, which gradually expanded to include various civic groups from different regions (conflict, rural and urban areas). This collective activism was structured in the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) that led the December 2018 revolution and subsequent negotiations with the military apparatus to establish a civilian government in August 2019 (Hassan and Kodouda, 2019).

Relevant to the Nile issue, the Al-Bashir regime espoused a 'hydro-agricultural mission' to be a mainspring of his salvation ideology. The abundance of water and land fertility were the main pillars of this mission. To exploit these recourses, the regime constructed dams for irrigation and power generation which in turn would attract investment in the agriculture sector (mainly wheat and cotton yields). This envisioned mission would secure income to feed patrons and ensure the stability of the regime (Verhoeven, 2015a). However, the 'hydro-agricultural mission' was challenged by the frequent protests of farmers' unions, particularly in the Gezira Scheme that Al-Bashir promoted for foreign investments while suppressing farmers' voices. Furthermore, anti-Dam movements contested the state policy of displacement and succeeded in halting construction. Movements such as these, e.g. the anti-Kajbar dam movement, will be discussed in chapter five.

1.3.2.4 Excluding South Sudan

After the secession of South Sudan in 2011, it joined the NBI and its two Subsidiary Action Programs (SAPs): The Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action Program (NELSAP) and the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office (ENTRO). Although South Sudan hydraulically is the home of the White Nile, the second major tributary of the Nile waters, it is part of the Eastern Nile Basin politically. Because the White Nile waters are trapped in one of the largest wetlands in the world and have not been optimally utilised, the downstream countries have a surge of interests to construct water projects there. On the other hand, due to the political contestations in the newly independent country in the Nile Basin, civil society engagement in Nile politics is not explicit in the flames of political conflict.

Hydraulically, the source of the White Nile flows from the equatorial lakes (Victoria and Albert) and from there many small tributaries (including Baher el Arab, Lol, Kura, Pongo, Suo, Tonj, Baher el Jebel and Pibor) merge with the Sobat river that comes from Ethiopia, with all of these rivers creating the White Nile tributary. This subsystem of the Nile Basin, the White Nile, covers 98 percent of the South Sudan territory and feeds the main Nile by 10-15 percent of its flow (Nile Basin Initiative [NBI], 2012; NBI, 2016).

Despite these multiple streams and small rivers in South Sudan, the Sudd swamps are a critical hydraulic challenge where water is clogged and around 50 percent of it evaporates. This water loss has induced the downstream countries, mainly Egypt, to devise a way to minimise the loss.

The Jonglei Canal has been the preeminent hydraulic project to utilise water in this area. The canal project is designed to channel water from Baher el Jebel to the Sobat river (360 kilometres long) instead of it being blocked in swamps and evaporating⁴. The initial proposal of this project was in 1904, by the British engineer William Garstin, who was in charge of the water sector in Egypt. Since that time, however, the canal construction has been suspended several times. In the beginning, the interruption was due to the outbreak of the world wars and then the independence

⁴ Ahmad (2008) stated the canal is 280 kilometres long

of the equatorial lakes' countries (Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya) who feed these swamps, whose approval was a requirement (de Mabior, 1981).

Despite these disruptions, the Egyptian water strategies continued to be constituted mainly in the canal project. Therefore, it had been revived again in 1978 with a plan to be completed by 1985. The prospective main result of the project was to add around 2 billion cubic metres for both Egypt and Sudan to share⁵. This increase in water flow would be invested in expanding irrigation projects in Sudan and Egypt. For South Sudanese people it would develop their life through modernizing the area by establishing roads so that they could be able to connect with the other cities. A further advantage in the drying up of swamps is that it would contribute to decreasing wetlands-related diseases (Ahmad, 2008).

However, the construction of the project instigated demonstrations and uprisings in Juba which ended with casualties. The Jonglei people received 'rumours' that Egypt would deploy farmers to cultivate the lands that would be regulated after constructing the canal and that the benefit of the water flow would be for the downstream countries and not for South Sudanese people. Furthermore, contrary to the modernized perspective of the Egyptian and Sudanese governments, the canal construction would distract the mobility routes of herds; the main economic activity of the area's inhabitants. Besides, removing the swamps would facilitate the connection of militia which in turn increases the possibility of conflict. All of these perceived contradictory narratives contributed to sparking the second civil war in 1983 (de Mabior, 1981; Kenyi, 2011; Ahmad, 2008). Since that time the project has been suspended, but Sudd water is considered a critical input for the Egyptian water policies.

On the other side and beyond the direct Nile relations, the Egyptian governments maintain active and vibrant cooperation with the Government of South Sudan in various fields, including educational grants, military cooperation and sponsoring negotiations between the groups in the political frictions (El Taweel, 2017).

⁵ According to the treaty of 1959 between Egypt and Sudan (de Mabior, 1981).

Apparently, South Sudan with its water resources is significant for the downstream countries, mainly Egypt. As a result, it joined the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office (ENTRO) although hydraulically it is part of the Equatorial Sub basin system that is organised in the Nile Equatorial Lakes Subsidiary Action Program (NELSAP).

Salman (2011a) explains that despite it being part of the Eastern Nile Basin group, South Sudan occupies a peripheral position in the Nile politics. This position is framed by the politics of secession as the process has not been straightforward and in view of it having challenged the African Union, namely the value of maintaining the political unity of the African countries. Therefore, the negotiating actor (the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, SPLM/A) had not been willing to take part in the unfinished negotiations of CFA or to confront the Nile riparian countries in general, which could result in obstructing the ultimate goal of the secession. On the other hand, at the time of independence, South Sudan had not had irrigation projects under construction and the strategic plan of irrigation and agriculture projects had not yet been settled, including the Jonglei canal project, and so the SPLM/A did not prioritize the Nile issue.

Accordingly, the national government became the only entity by law to govern Nile water. Salman (2011a) quoted from the Power Sharing Agreement and the Interim Constitution to explain the comprehensive authority of the newly independent state over the Nile:

'(...) the national government exclusive jurisdiction over "Nile Water Commission, the management of the Nile Waters, transboundary waters and disputes arising from the management of interstate waters between northern states and any dispute between northern and southern states"' (Salman, 2011:160).

Therefore, South Sudan was not included in the analysis and the data collection was drawn from civic activism in the three countries described above (Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia).

1.4 Structure of the study

The study is organised into eight chapters, including this introduction.

The second chapter elaborates on the research methodology and unfolds the research rationale by discussing the scope of civil society in the African context and international cooperation. It then proceeds to explain data collection and processing, as well as the social network analysis (SNA) to explain civil society activities in the Eastern Nile Basin network. The chapter concludes with a reflection of positionality in the fieldwork.

Chapter three introduces the theoretical framework which informs the structure and content of this thesis by demonstrating how the classical international relations theories interpret cooperation in their assumptions. It then goes on to illustrate the relational perspective in international relations and the differences from conventional theories, and continues to explain the network approach and how it articulates power dynamics.

Starting from chapter four, the study investigates civic engagement in Nile politics. The context of the Nile hydropolitics in the Eastern basin is critical to understand civil society activism. The chapter covers how the Nile has been a central natural resource for the development of the riparian countries and then explains the impact of water scarcity in shaping Eastern Nile politics.

Chapter five offers a mapping of the social network analysis that shows the structure of the Eastern Nile Basin network, after which it explains the capabilities and drivers behind civil society actors' involvement across national, regional and international levels.

Chapter six explores civil society interactions with the other actors in the Eastern Nile Basin network by elucidating the components of linkages and strength of engagement in Eastern Nile geopolitics.

Chapter seven offers a deeper analysis of four cases of civic engagement (Egyptian Nile Discourse Forum [Eg-NDF], The Sudanese Youth Parliament for Water [SYPW], The GERD and Ethiopian diaspora engagement and the Nile Basin Capacity Building Network [NBCBN]). It delineates how they configure their relations with the state and the external actors, directly or indirectly.

Chapter eight provides a synthesis of civic engagement in Eastern Nile geopolitics in light of water and Nile studies. This is followed by the conclusions that highlight the main findings and the last section addresses future research agenda for promoting civic engagement studies in the Nile.