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# Competing frames over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in the Egyptian and Ethiopian media

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The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a 6,000-megawatt project on the Blue Nile, is an epicenter of exacerbated disputes and confrontations between riparian states, garnering the attention of both local and international media. This article examines the salient frames of *Ahram Online* and the *Ethiopian Herald*, state run national newspapers in Egypt and Ethiopia, respectively. Guided by Framing Theory, the study employed an inductive qualitative frame analysis method. A total of 289 news stories, collected from the online archives of the newspapers, spanning from January 2017 to December 2022, were analyzed. Findings reveal that six dominant frames and six counter-frames emerge from *Ahram Online* and the *Ethiopian Herald*, respectively. The frames and counter-frames emerged are, 'Historic right' Vs. 'Tributary right,' 'National threat' Vs. 'National pride,' 'Power domination' Vs. 'Regional integration,' 'Necessity of binding agreement' Vs. 'Obsession with colonial treaties,' 'Unyieldingness' (for both) and 'Unilateral act' Vs. 'Right to development' frames. This study argues that such polarized and bifurcated depiction of the dam on the media has contributed to conflicting rather than cooperative relationship between the two riparian countries.

## KEYWORDS

*Ahram Online*, *The Ethiopian Herald*, Nile, GERD, framing, competing frames

## 1 Introduction

On the 2nd of April 2011, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced the commencement of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a hydroelectric venture with an anticipated 6,000-megawatt generation power on the Blue Nile River (known as *Abbay* by Ethiopians), one of the major contributors of the Nile. Ethiopia considers the commencement of this mega project as a milestone for providing electricity for millions of its citizens languishing in perpetual darkness. However, Egypt viewed the project as a threat to its survival and a serious violation of its 'historic right' claim to the Nile River. In connection to this, the current Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has even warned of "unimaginable instability" if anyone touches a drop of the 'Egyptian water' (Alemayehu, 2024; Degu Belay, 2014; El Damanhoury, 2024; Matthews and Vivoda, 2023; Pemunta et al., 2021; Taye, 2021; Veilleux, 2015).

History, research and literary works have it all that hydroelectric projects constructed on transboundary rivers lead to heightened tensions and conflicts, garnering media attention (Biswas, 1993; De Stefano et al., 2017; Dieperink, 2011; Dinar, 2014; Hossen et al., 2023). GERD is no exception. Since its inception, the project has garnered the interest of both local and international media. Of such media outlets, *Ahram Online* newspaper which is referred to as *Ahram* here afterwards, and *The Ethiopian Herald*

newspaper, which is referred to as *Herald* here afterwards, have been at the forefront of covering the issue. *Ahram* is a prominent Arabic and English newspaper in the Middle East and is considered one of the most authoritative and influential dailies for Egyptians. Its reporting spans across the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of the nation. This newspaper, which is regarded as ‘the registrar of contemporary life’ for Egyptians, is considered the de-facto voice of the central government (Badr, 2021; Issawi, 2020; Lavie, 2023). Similarly, *Herald* is a daily government-run English-language newspaper published by the Ethiopian Press Agency. It covers a wide range of political, economic, social, cultural, technological, and historical issues.

The coverage of the project by different media outlets is not presumed to be singular since the media shape stories of the same issues based on their editorial stance, national interest, and other socio-economic and political factors. The media are powerful tools that signify the interests and positions of various actors about the project at hand through their discursive mechanisms (Binderkrantz, 2020; Fairclough, 1992; Hall, 1997; Janks, 1997; Wang et al., 2024). One of the frequently accentuated and scrutinized mechanisms the media perform such a function is through media framing (Entman, 1989, 1993; Vreese, 2005).

In a review we have made, we found some studies (Degu Belay, 2014; Flaminio et al., 2021; Fouda and Al-Kassimi, 2022; Hailu et al., 2022; Taye, 2021; Wang et al., 2024), for example, that attempted to examine how projects on transboundary rivers are framed by the media. However, studies that examine the framing of GERD taking state-run news media from the two conflicting countries and a representative period of the project’s cycle is missing. For instance, Degu Belay (2014), examined the framing of GERD in *the Reporter*, a private newspaper in Ethiopia, by analyzing news stories from a one-year period (March 9, 2013, to March 15, 2014). Similarly, Hailu et al. (2022) examined how British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), Aljazeera English (AJE), and China Global Television Network (CGTN) framed GERD. On the other hand, Flaminio et al. (2021) examined how *Le Monde* framed debates on the impact of dams from 1945 to 2019. Moreover, Fouda and Al-Kassimi (2022) focused on news stories from Sky News and Alhurra, media outlets based in non-riparian states, and analyzed a one-year period of news stories (January 2020 to January 2021). We believe that this study will contribute something different to the body of knowledge by exploring how the project is framed in the respective state-run newspapers, which are used to reflect the state’s stance on important issues like GERD, while covering a significant period in the life-cycle in the project’s life-cycle.

Therefore, in this study, we examine how the two important state-run newspapers from the two conflicting riparian states framed GERD by taking a reasonably representative time period that highlights the different stages of the project. As explained in the methods section, we take a six-year period of the project’s progress. In light of that, this article, examines how *Ahram* and *Herald* textually framed GERD for their readership and how such framing has contributed to either cooperative or conflicting terms for the two riparian countries. To this end, the article addresses the following specific research questions: What are the dominant news frames that have emerged in the news stories of *Ahram* and *Herald*? What pertinent issues are these frames built on? How do the dominant

frames in the two newspapers contribute to the emergence of conflicting or cooperative terms?

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 The Nile River

The Nile, the longest river in the world with 6,700 kilometers, flows through eleven countries in northeastern Africa which include Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Egypt before reaching the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile Basin covers a vast area of 3.18 million km<sup>2</sup>, which is nearly 10% of the African continent. As of 2021, the Nile River basin is home to a total of 272 million population (54% of the total population of the eleven riparian countries) (Arsano, 2007; El-Fadel et al., 2003; Ashebir, 2009; Erlich, 2002; Kasimbazi and Bamwine, 2021; Matthews and Vivoda, 2023; Mohamed, 2016; NBI, 2021).

The Nile Basin encompasses two sub-basins: the Blue Nile (*Abbay*) sub-basin and the White Nile sub-basin. The Blue Nile sub-basin, which is one of Ethiopia’s largest basins, consists of three subsystems: the *Abbay* sub-system, the Tekeze-Atbara sub-system, and the Baro-Akobo sub-system. It has a catchment area of 324,500 km<sup>2</sup> and a water volume of 52.62 bcm. The *Abbay* sub-basin alone contributes 86 percent of the water to the Nile Basin system through its different sub-systems. The Great Equatorial Lake sub-basin is the second sub-basin of the Nile, contributing the remaining 14 percent of the total Nile basin (Arsano, 2007; El-Fadel et al., 2003; Ashebir, 2009; Erlich, 2002; Mohamed, 2016; Swain, 1997; Twigger, 2014).

Studies reveal that the *Abbay* Basin system has a tremendous potential for electricity generation. Ethiopia, with its geographical characteristics, has the most suitable locations for hydropower production in the basin. The *Abbay* sub-system alone has a potential of 78,820 Gwh/year, while the Tekeze and Baro-Akobo sub-systems have the potential of 5,980 Gwh/year and 13, 765 Gwh/year of hydropower generation capacity, respectively (Arsano, 2007; Ashebir, 2009; Kasimbazi, 2010; Kimenyi and Mbaku, 2015; Okoth-Owiro, 2004; Shih and Stuz, 2012). Despite all these immense potentials, they are yet to be harnessed for the socioeconomic development of the country.

Although Ethiopia contributes 86 percent of the Nile water, its utilization of the Nile has been minimal. According to Erlich (2002, p. 22), “At the very beginning of the twenty-first century, Ethiopia uses less than 1 percent of the Nile basin waters, while Egypt uses 80 percent.” However, Ethiopia has always considered the *Abbay* River as its key resource for multifaceted development endeavors throughout its history. One of the projects aimed at realizing Ethiopia’s long-awaited dream of harnessing the hydroelectric generation potential of the *Abbay* River is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

GERD, one of the flagship hydroelectric projects on the *Abbay* River, was officially launched in April 2011 in a place called *Guba* of the *Beneshangul Gumuz* Regional State near the Ethio-Sudan border. The project has been financed through local resources, including public contributions, private donations, state bonds, and government expenditure. Ethiopia views the commencement of this massive project as a significant milestone in providing millions of its citizens with access to electricity, ending their prolonged period of darkness. However, Egypt perceives the project as a threat to their survival and

their ‘historic right’ claim to the river. They have even threatened military action to destroy the dam if the two sides fail to reach an agreement (Degu Belay et al., 2021; El Damanhoury, 2024; Hailu et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2023).

## 2.2 Hydropolitical dynamics and negotiations on GERD

The Nile, which connects eleven countries and holds the title of the longest river basin, has a complex history of conflict and attempts of cooperation among the riparian nations. Throughout much of its history, Egypt has held hydro-hegemonic power over the Nile River. This power has been derived from their material, bargaining, and ideational advantages, despite their geographic disadvantages. Various treaties, agreements, negotiations, and regional water institutions, particularly during the colonial period, have allowed Egypt to maintain its hydro-hegemonic control over the Nile (Cascão and Zeitoun, 2010; Beyene et al., 2018; Cascão, 2009; Darwisheh, 2021). However, tensions and heated debates have persisted whenever a project, treaty, agreement, or any other form of action is proposed by any of the riparian nations. These tensions and mistrusts have often resulted in the riparian states getting stuck in patterns of *mutual threats* and a *cold conflicts* stalemate. The conflicts and tensions have been particularly noticeable in the Eastern Nile Basin, where Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan are located (Abdullah et al., 2020; Ghoreishi et al., 2022; Mekonnen, 2010; Mekuria, 2011).

The situation has even worsened following the commencement of the 6,000-megawatt giant dam on the Blue Nile, especially between Ethiopia and Egypt. GERD has always been the center of debates and disputes between the two countries despite various efforts to reach a cooperative agreement. These include the 2012 International Panel of Experts (IPoE), the 2014 Tripartite National Council (TNC), the 2015 Declaration of Principles (DoP), the 2018 National Independent Research Scientific Group (NIRSG), the 2019 U.S.-brokered negotiations, and the 2020 African Union-led negotiations. However, none of these attempts resulted in an agreement among the three riparian states (Attia and Saleh, 2021; Mokaddem and El Mquirmi, 2020; Salman, 2018).

Different researchers have provided various explanations for the deadlock in the negotiations and the failure to achieve a desirable agreement and cooperation (Attia and Saleh, 2021; Jiregna, 2020; Tekuya, 2021). In this regard, Attia and Saleh (2021), for instance, identified three key factors contributing to the current deadlock. According to them, the first factor is attributed to the fact that the three nations entered the negotiation process with different needs and objectives, which are deeply rooted in their historical and traditional approaches to Nile Basin management. The second factor is connected to the geopolitical significance of the project’s location. This region is a hotbed of geopolitical competition, with external forces vying for its natural resources. Multiple overlapping conflicts and alliances have made it increasingly difficult to disentangle, and the area is now hosting armed forces from numerous countries. The third factor, according to the researchers, is linked to the respective countries’ interests in generating political advantages for their domestic political climate. The riparian nations are using the GERD argument as a means to mitigate internal political tensions and maintain control over local power dynamics.

On the other hand, Tekuya (2021) argues that the negotiation deadlock and current tensions are linked to Egypt’s interest in maintaining the enforcement of colonial treaties. Egypt’s proposed wordings for Article 14b of CFA, which read as, “not to adversely affect the water security and current uses and rights of any other Nile Basin State” (NBI, 2024, p. 70) and the 2019 proposal submitted by Egypt during the US-brokered negotiation, serves as an ideal example of Egypt’s commitment to upholding these treaties and demonstrates how these interests continue to hinder the GERD negotiations.

Despite facing numerous challenges, GERD is currently in its 13th year of construction. Over the past four summers, four rounds of reservoir filling have taken place. Additionally, two out of the sixteen turbines have successfully undergone trial electric generation within the past 3 years. According to the Office of the National Council for the Coordination of Public Participation on the Construction of GERD, as of March 2024, the civil construction of the project reached 99% while the electromechanical work reached 80%.

## 2.3 Media and dams on transboundary rivers

Media as agenda setters as well as channels of disclosure of identities and interests of actors (Entman, 1993), play crucial roles in enabling us understand the overall dynamics pertinent to dam constructions (Degu Belay et al., 2021). The media direct attention to and from public issues, which, in turn, determines which side of the event should be tackled or ignored. News media reflect and shape public opinion by defining and limiting public discourse around key events. When certain issues gain publicity through the media, they have the potential to capture people’s attention and make them think. The media offer narratives, hydrodiscourses, frames, and representations about dams, which help us understand how the media influence both state actors and the general public, and vice versa. In other words, the media play an unprecedented role in shaping the overall perception of a dam and in reflecting the diverse perspectives of different actors (Deka et al., 2023; Entman, 1989; Fürsich, 2010; Reese, 2007; Wang et al., 2024).

News articles dedicated to dams constructed on transboundary rivers, especially those from local media outlets are even crucial as they provide “insights into events reported on by the media that are representative of each country/sector they are published within” (Wei et al., 2021, p. 1603). Said differently, “the local news media is the first-hand material that reflects attitude/perception riparian countries held for their shared water and the involved stakeholders when discussing the water events in the transboundary river basin” (Guo et al., 2022, p. 4). While local media outlets’ news stories play a vital role in revealing the attitudes or perceptions of key parties in riparian countries, international media also play a pivotal role in shedding light on the viewpoints of the international audience, non-riparian citizens, and other interested parties.

Moreover, due to its central role in the dynamics and continuous contact with the general public, the media is regarded as “an alternative approach to help understand the social and environmental complexities of a project” (Wu et al., 2018, p. 2). Media’s influence and its service as platform for public opinion, is believed to have a tremendous impact on the perception of the outcome of dams constructed on transboundary rivers. However, according to Wu et al.

(2018), it is essential to assess the portrayal of the project in the media by taking at least representative periods in the project's life cycle. This helps to uncover potential variations in portrayal at different turning points. Therefore, studies aiming to uncover the representation of a dam in news media should consider how it has been covered during its different life cycles (Delang, 2019; Wei et al., 2021).

The media can have a significant influence on the perception of the construction of a dam, either by promoting cooperation or causing conflicts. Media outlets may choose to portray the dam construction in an optimistic light, emphasizing its unifying and cooperative potential. On the other hand, they may also depict it as a symbol of danger, suggesting that it could hinder the well-being of other riparian citizens and ultimately lead to conflicts. These portrayals by the media play a crucial role in shaping the attitudes of riparian states and other parties involved in the dam project (Deka et al., 2023; Delang, 2019; Wang et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2021).

## 2.4 Theoretical framework

This article employed the Framing Theory. Framing, as defined by Entman (1993), is a process that involves discarding certain elements of an existing reality and constructing a new narrative that highlights the connections among them, thereby promoting a specific interpretation. To Entman (1993, p. 52), "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." As defined by Vreese (2005, p. 150), a frame is "an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic." According to Vreese (2005, p. 150), a frame can be defined as "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world."

Two important actions in the process of media framing are selection and salience. Media framing refers to the deliberate selection and emphasis of certain issues by the media. Frames introduce or highlight the importance or apparent essence of specific ideas, activating mental frameworks that prompt target audiences to think, perceive, connect, feel, and make decisions in a specific manner. Within media organizations, frames help to determine which aspects of a story are more significant, and, that is achieved by making them more visible and appealing compared to other elements. Media framing is a method of organizing and presenting a set of ideas to the readership in order to emphasize a particular perspective (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Entman, 2007; Scheufele, 2004).

Researchers use either inductive or deductive approaches to do frame analysis in their studies. The deductive approach involves deriving frames theoretically from the literature and coding them using standard content analysis. One of the most frequently used generic frames was developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who postulate five generic frames: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and responsibility (Matthes and Kohring, 2008; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; Vreese, 2005). However, this approach does not allow researchers to incorporate important frames that may not fit into the existing set. For example, Matthes and Kohring (2008), indicate that different researchers have ended up with varying numbers of frames despite using Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000 five generic frames deductively.

The inductive approach, on the contrary, avoids categorizing news stories with priori predefined news frames for analysis. Instead, this approach attempts to identify frames by providing an interpretative account of media texts. According to this approach, frames emerge during the analysis of news stories. This approach allows researchers relative freedom to develop frames based on the nature of stories. However, the inductive approach requires clear justification and transparency to ensure the reliability and validity of the study (Matthes and Kohring, 2008; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; Vreese, 2005).

Furthermore, when using the inductive approach, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) as quoted in Vreese (2005, p. 54) propose four criteria that a frame must meet: "First, a news frame must have identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics. Second, it should be commonly observed in journalistic practice. Third, it must be possible to reliably distinguish the frame from others. Fourth, a frame must have representational validity, meaning it is recognized by others and not merely a product of the researcher's imagination."

Framing Theory is highly relevant for analyzing the most significant frames that influence and shape readers' reception, as media frames influence not only the issue but also interpretations (Reese, 2007), which makes it ideal to find out the salient frames the selected media outlets used in their news stories about GERD. In terms of the approach, this study adopted the inductive approach. The inductive approach to frame analysis focuses on the quality of news text discourse and helps identify certain discourse elements that are said to be part of a frame.

## 3 Materials and methods

This study employed an inductive qualitative frame analysis method. Qualitative frame analysis, as defined by Connolly-Ahern & Broadway (2008, p. 369), "involves repeated and extensive engagement with a text and looks holistically at the material to identify frames." Qualitative frame analysis is analytic and interpretive method which attempts to examine phenomena in a holistic manner (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2008; Linström and Marais, 2012) Therefore, the inductive frame analysis method was employed to analyze frames and counter-frames. Counter-frames, as conceptualized by Goethals et al. (2022) and Atanasova and Kotevko (2017) are frames that challenge the dominant understanding, offering a new perspective on an issue. In this study, counter-frames emerged from *Herald* as a counter to *Ahram's* dominant frames.

The news stories collected for analysis spanned from January 2017 to December 2022 and were retrieved from the online archives of *Ahram* (<https://english.ahram.org.eg>) and *Herald* (<https://press.et/herald>). These dates were purposively selected because they represented the period when we witnessed serious events, such as the open declaration of El-Sisi that Nile water is a matter of life or death, regime change in Ethiopia, the establishment of National Independent Research Scientific Group (NIRSG) to explore win-win mechanisms and options for filling and operations of GERD and its failure to deliver as planned, the failure of US-brokered talks to bring the three states to reach an agreement and President Trump's remark that Egypt could destroy GERD, GERD case being taken to the Arab League and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the announcement of Ethiopia to start filling GERD's reservoir, the four consecutive reservoir fillings, return of GERD case from UNSC to AU-led



negotiations with the motto of ‘African solutions for African problems’, the start of trial electricity generation from two turbines and countless negotiations brokered by different organs between the three riparian states, to name a few.

A total of 1,153 news stories were retrieved, with 783 from *Ahram* and 370 from *Herald*. However, due to this big number of news stories, a total of 289 (196 *Ahram*, 93, *Ethiopian Herald*) were selected for the final analysis using *Purposeful Random Sampling*. Purposeful Random Sampling is a technique that locates primary data on a topic and then randomly selects a subset for in-depth discussion (Suri, 2011). This technique enabled to effectively manage the data by reducing it to a manageable size for analysis. According to Patton (2015, p. 241), purposeful random sampling aims to “reduce suspicion about why certain cases were selected for a study, but such a sample still does not permit statistical generalization.”

Frame analysts must be cautious of the possibility of interference of their mental constructs with the identification of a frame (Goethals et al., 2022; Linström and Marais, 2012; Van Gorp and Vercruyse, 2012). Therefore, analysts should use a systematic approach that involves multiple phases to continuously scan and compare research material. In a similar vein Goethals et al. (2022, p. 753) reiterate that, “Framing analysis requires starting from a simple structure, evaluating it, and continuing to improve on it.” They suggest repeating this process until a logical and coherent whole is created and no new frames are detected. To Goethals et al. (2022), another way of monitoring the interference of researchers’ mental constructs is carrying out an iterative process on the inter-researcher level, thereby evaluating, comparing, changing, and refining individual researcher accounts to recreate and regroup frame patterns. In this study, after data selection, careful and thorough readings were done to extract meaning from the data and also to identify potential frame patterns. The emerged initial frames underwent a careful refinement through detailed readings and systematic structuring. Furthermore, the researchers evaluated, compared, and refine these initial frames. Eventually, salient frames that emerged from the news stories were identified and analyzed.

## 4 Analysis and discussion

This section presents an examination of the dominant frames and counter-frames that arise from the selected news stories of *Ahram* and *Herald*. As discussed in the theoretical framework and methods sections, this research is guided by Framing Theory and employed an inductive qualitative frame analysis approach as an analytical strategy. Framing research focuses on, “understanding human communication in broad terms of structure and agency” (D’Angelo et al., 2019, p. 14). Moreover, the inductive qualitative frame analysis approach examines news stories to, “examine phenomena in a holistic manner” (Linström and Marais, 2012, p. 26), and identify frames by providing an interpretative account of media texts. In this analytical approach, frames emerge from the news stories during the course of data organization and analysis (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2008). Consequently, Framing Theory and the inductive qualitative frame analysis approach allows us to explore the dominant frames and structure these frames holistically.

The data analysis reveals that *Ahram* produces six dominant frames, while *Herald* generates an equal number of counter-frames. It

is worth noting that the six dominant frames of *Herald* were found to be counter-frames for the preceding six frames of *Ahram*. Building on the argument put forth by Wu et al. (2018), it is important to cover a substantial portion of time that captures the various life cycles of a dam in order to uncover potential differences in representation. In line with this, our study focuses on a purposefully selected six-year period that signifies key turning points in the life cycle of GERD. Findings reveal that the frames and counter-frames emerge on sequential issues about the construction of GERD, namely *sense of ownership of the Nile*, *symbolization of GERD*, *depiction of the regional implication of GERD*, *demands to reach an agreement*, *blaming counter states for the failure of negotiations* and *progresses of the project without reaching an agreement*. The frames and counter-frames that emerged on these sequential issues were, respectively Historic right Vs. Tributary right, National threat Vs. National pride, Power domination Vs. Regional integration, Necessity of binding agreement Vs. Obsession of colonial treaties, Unyieldingness (for both), and Unilateral act Vs. Right to development frames.

### 4.1 Nile ownership: historic right Vs. tributary right frames

The analysis of *Ahram* and *Herald*’s news stories on GERD indicates that frames on the ownership of the Nile constituted the first building block in the overall portrayal of GERD. While both newspapers present their respective countries’ ownership rights, they differ in how they frame it. *Ahram* focuses on Egypt’s historic ownership of the Nile, while *Herald* emphasizes Ethiopia’s right based on its 86% contribution of Nile water as a tributary.

*Ahram* predominantly employs the historic right frame in their news stories. They cite the 1929 and 1959 colonial treaties, as well as mythical claims attributed to ancient philosophers, to support this frame. For instance, an excerpt from *Ahram* (27 June 2017) highlights Egypt’s historical ownership claim and its frustration that the NBI did not consider it. “Cairo argues that Egypt has historical rights to use the Nile water that were not taken into consideration by the CFA.” It can be inferred that Egypt’s rejection of the CFA initiated by the NBI stems from its concern over securing its historic right to the Nile. To this end, the NBI (2024, p. 70) CFA document annexed the following attachment, which is corroborative to this news story.

[Article 14b]: Attachment

At the end of the negotiations, no consensus was reached on Article 14(b) which reads as follows: “not to significantly affect the water security of any other Nile Basin States”.

All countries [Burundi, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda] agreed to this proposal except Egypt and Sudan. To this effect, Egypt proposed that Article 14(b) should be replaced by the following wording: “not to adversely affect the water security and current uses and rights of any other Nile Basin State.”

As could be seen, the alternative wordings recommended by Egypt, “not to adversely affect ... current uses and rights,” clearly indicate the rights offered to Egypt by the 1929 and 1959 colonial

treaties. In this regard, Kotb from *Ahram* wrote the following: “Egypt’s current and historic share of the Nile’s water is 55.5 billion cubic meters annually, according to a 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan” (*Ahram*, 1 February 2018). The historic right frame goes even further referring to a mythology that claims ‘the Nile is the gift of God; Egypt is the gift of the Nile.’ The following segment from *Ahram* (4 September 2022) cemented the undisputed ownership of Egypt on the Nile stating that, “the Nile River’s water is a gift from God, which should not be disputed.”

Apart from making the historic ownership of Egypt over the Nile salient, *Ahram* also underlined that preserving Egypt’s historic right should be the approach each negotiation should adhere to: “Prioritizing a radical solution to GERD crisis aims to preserve the historic rights of the Egyptian people ... this is the right approach that all parties have to stick to” (*Ahram*, 10 Jul 2021). Otherwise, *Ahram* warned, “no one can take a drop of water from Egypt ... and if it happens, there will be inconceivable instability in the region that no one could imagine” (10 April 2021).

Overall, the historic right frame reinforces Egypt’s undisputable right over the Nile, and respecting the historic share of Egypt is the right approach to reach an agreement. It also makes it clear that any attempt to touch even a single drop of water from Egypt’s historic share would result in inconceivable instability. Furthermore, it reiterates that previous agreements reached by Egypt and Sudan as well as other historical claims should be taken as justifications for Egypt’s historic ownership over the Nile water.

Counter to the historic right frame advocated by *Ahram*, Tributary right frame emerged from *Herald*. The Tributary right frame highlights Ethiopia’s natural right to utilize the Nile, primarily referring to the tributary shares that the country contributes to the Nile water and the historical victimhood it has experienced due to its inability to utilize the Nile in proportion to its share of water contribution. *Herald* points out that “Though Ethiopia is the source of 86 percent of the Nile waters, it uses only 1 % whereas Egypt takes the lion’s share” (*Herald*, 27 May 2020). In a similar news story, underscoring the tributary right of Ethiopia to harness the Nile, *Herald* (24 July 2020) wrote: “Ethiopia is the major contributor and source to the river Nile, but for almost two centuries it had been an observer. It was the downstream country-Egypt-that benefit out of it. While Ethiopians were suffering from hunger and poverty, Abbay had been prospering Cairo.” This news story echoes the real or perceived injustice Ethiopia-the major contributor to the Nile-suffered while Egypt-which has technically zero contribution-prospered by harnessing the Nile. *Herald*, proposing solutions or treatment recommendations, as Entman (1993) put it, reminds that it is high time for Ethiopia to utilize the Nile in proportion to its share of contribution to the Nile: “We have several social and economic problems related to shortage of power. These all things will allow us to use at least the half share of the Nile waters that originates from our nation” (*Herald*, 24 July 2020).

The news articles emphasize that Ethiopia’s major contribution should be taken into consideration in relation to the use of the Nile. In this regard, Yohannes from *Herald* (23 June 2020) wrote: “We have the full right to get benefit from Abbay/Nile River since we are the source of the bulk of the water and have various economic and social problems. Obviously, Ethiopia is the major source of Nile but unable to use the river to which it contributes significant portion of the water so far.” The following excerpt from Tewodros, too underscores Ethiopia’s right to use the Nile based on its contribution: “... we want

to ensure fair and equitable use of Nile waters based on our contribution and international law of transboundary rivers” (*Herald*, 3 April 2021).

From the analysis, it becomes clear that the Tributary right frame presented by *Herald* aims to establish that Ethiopia’s 86% contribution to the Nile should entitle it to harness the river. Considering that Ethiopia has only utilized less than 1 % of the water, despite its substantial contribution, the frame indicates that it is now appropriate for Ethiopia to claim its ownership rights over the Nile and utilize it to provide access to electricity for its citizens and alleviate poverty. *Herald* also urges Egyptian politicians to have the courage to accept Ethiopia’s ownership rights and make it clear to their citizens that all riparian states have legitimate rights to the Nile’s water.

The tributary right frame which emerges in *Herald* also seems to be the dominant frame often seen articulated by the private media in Ethiopia. In this regard, Degu Belay (2014, p. 192) documents similar findings in his analysis of news stories from *the Reporter*, a private newspaper in Ethiopia: “Ethiopia’s contribution to the Nile River which accounts for 85 % of the Blue Nile, Atbara, and Sobat tributaries has given attention for reinforcing the country’s legitimate territorial right to utilize the Nile to achieve the development goals it has formulated.”

## 4.2 GERD symbolization: national threat Vs. national pride frames

Once the newspapers framed the ownership of the Nile, the focus shifts to the symbolization of GERD. The findings of the analysis of *Ahram* and *Herald*’s news stories about the symbolization of GERD also showed frames and counter-frames where the former symbolizes the dam as a national threat [to Egypt] while the latter framed it as a national pride [to Ethiopia].

*Ahram* portrays the construction of the dam as a threat to the survival, national security, and the lives of every single Egyptian. Moreover, *Ahram* frames the construction of the dam as a threat to the entire Arab world. By comparing the pursuit of Nile water by Ethiopia and Egypt, the newspaper emphasizes that while the Nile water is a question of development for Ethiopians, it is a matter of life or death for the Egyptians.

The news stories of *Ahram* portray the construction of the dam as tantamount to a threat to life for the Egyptians. According to Kandil, “while the Nile River is a source of development for Ethiopians, it is a source of life, not just development, for Egyptians” (4 September 2022). In a similar vein, Ezzat, attributing to Shoukry’s speech to UN Security Council wrote:

... Egypt will have to ‘uphold and protect its inherent right to life’ if no legal agreement is reached on GERD. ‘Egypt – a nation of over one hundred million souls – is facing an existential threat.’ ... ‘A grand structure of mammoth proportions has been constructed across the artery that bequeaths life to the people of Egypt,’ ... (Ahram, 9 July 2021)

This excerpt, filled with loaded words, portrays GERD as a colossal creature that threatens the lives of every Egyptian.

*Ahram*’s news stories also framed GERD as a threat to Egypt’s water security. El-Bey, for example, wrote the following: “Cairo

highlighted the urgency of ending its struggle to secure its water resources and resolve the existential threat of reduced water supplies from the Nile because of GERD” (*Ahram*, 25 December 2022). Likewise, the following piece highlighted the potential risk to Egypt’s water security posed by GERD: “Since 2011, Egypt has been in talks with Ethiopia and Sudan over GERD, which Cairo sees as a threat to its water security in the absence of a legally binding deal regulating its filling and operation” (30 November 2021). Framing projects initiated by other riparian countries on the Nile as security concerns has been found to be the main discourse in the Egyptian narration in the realm of the Nile (Elshaikh-Hayaty et al., 2021; Elsofy and Ibrahim, 2023; Matthews and Vivoda, 2023; Otinov, 2023; Pemunta et al., 2021). To this end, Otinov (2023:2) reiterates: “Accordingly, in the Egyptian discourse, there was a so-called ‘securitization’ of water resources, the reason for which was the desire to minimize the risk of reduced runoff and, consequently, negative impact on the economy. This securitization is a consequence of the hegemony of Egypt, which seeks to maintain the status quo in the East Nile Basin.”

The framing of GERD as a national threat was even expanded to include the Arab world. In one of its editions, *Ahram* (25 December 2022) wrote the following: “Underlining the fact that GERD represents a threat to Arab security, as a threat to Egypt is a threat to all the Arabs, ... the water security issue caused by the dam impacts on several Arab countries and will bring serious consequences for water supplies if concerns continue to be ignored.” A similar excerpt from *Ahram* (26 August 2021) read: “... GERD issue should not be an issue just for one or two Arab countries — Egypt and Sudan — but rather an issue for the entire Arab nation, ... it is connected to Arab national security.”

To sum up, *Ahram* framed GERD as a ‘threat to the Egyptians’, a ‘threat to their survival’, an ‘existential threat’, and a ‘threat to national security’. It also tried to connect the issue with the entire Arab world by projecting that a threat to Egypt is a threat to the entire Arab world with the intention of soliciting solidarity from the Arab world to stand against GERD.

Counter to the National threat frame of *Ahram*, National pride frame emerged as a dominant frame in the news narratives of *Herald*. In its news stories, *Herald* symbolizes GERD as a ‘national pride’, a ‘seal of national unity’, a ‘national symbol’, and a ‘flagship project against poverty’.

*Herald* (30 October 2019) portrays GERD as a symbol of unity in the following words: “All Ethiopians are ambassadors of the Dam as it is one of the manifestations of unity. ... GERD is the symbol of unity and the determination of all Ethiopians to fight poverty.” The news story echoes the fact that GERD goes beyond being a development project which proves the unity of all Ethiopians against poverty. In a similar vein, Dargie writes, “For us Ethiopians, GERD is more than a development project as it is the symbol of endurance and strong commitment to a cause. The flagship project is a demonstration that Ethiopians would accomplish the seemingly impossible when they join hands” (*Herald*, 18 April 2020).

What is more, *Herald* (12 October 2021) positions GERD as a source of national pride that unites people from all walks of life as noted in the following statement: “GERD serves as a patriotic aspiration and national pride, drawing all walks of life together for its completion.” The dam is even compared to the victory of Adwa as noted here: “Like the Victory of Adwa, GERD is also an icon, inspiration and hope for Ethiopia and Africans too. ... the current generation has his/her ancestor’s blood who fought Italy and who

sacrificed themselves as martyrs. Still the generation is also fighting against poverty” (*Herald*, 2 February 2020). Another news narrative of *Herald* (5 March 2020) stresses the connection between Adwa and GERD in the following words: “It is common to hear officials speaking about Adwa nexus to GERD. They usually refer to the mystery behind Adwa victory as unity among Ethiopians despite a multitude of domestic problems ... They often tend to relate the victory of Adwa to the current fight against poverty. And at the forefront is GERD.”

The juxtaposition of GERD with Adwa does not seem to be limited to state-owned media outlets, but it has also been embraced by the private media as the study by Degu Belay et al. (2021) confirms. According to Degu Belay et al. (2021), the private media narrated the commencement of GERD as a replica of the victory of Adwa, labeling it as, ‘Rewriting Adwa in Guba.’

In *Herald*’s news narratives, the dam is also presented as a symbol of, “freedom, sovereignty, fairness and it is also an inspirational factor to overcome the undue pressure of some interest groups on Ethiopia” (*Herald*, 25 February 2022). Overall, *Herald* framed GERD as a source of national pride for Ethiopians and symbolizes their unity, togetherness, and dedication to a common cause. *Herald* also portrays GERD as a flagship project set in motion against poverty and a project funded by contributions from every citizenry. What is more, it is depicted as reminiscent of the victory of Adwa with respect to the bravery, unity, and solidarity witnessed during the construction of the dam.

#### 4.3 Regional implication: power domination Vs. regional integration frames

The analysis of the data reveals that the two newspapers framed the regional implications of GERD differently. *Ahram* framed the construction of the dam as Ethiopia’s ambitious plan of becoming a power hegemon in the region while *Herald* framed the project as a tool for regional integration.

According to *Ahram*’s news narratives, the construction of GERD is a strategic tool to realize the hidden goal of Ethiopia to become a dominant power in the region. In this regard, Dina Ezzat (*Ahram*, 7 December 2021) writes the following: “Ethiopia plans to take control of the River Nile as part of an attempt to take control of water resources in the east of the African continent. ... What Ethiopia is really up to is to have GERD as a water bank as part of plans to become the dominant regional power that sells water to the countries of the region.” Another news story also presents the following: “Ethiopia’s posture and position during these negotiations evinces its intent to exercise hydro-hegemony and to anoint itself as the unchallenged and sole beneficiary over the Nile” (*Ahram*, 7 March 2020).

*Ahram* argues that Ethiopia does not need such a huge dam, unless it has a hidden goal of becoming a dominant power in the region. According to *Ahram* (4 August, 2022), “Filling the energy shortage [in Ethiopia] does not require such a huge dam, which indicates that there is another hidden goal that may harm the Sudanese people.” It went on to state that “Unfortunately, Ethiopia utilized the dam as tool to dominate Sudan and negatively impact its interest.” Along the same line, Dina Ezzat noted that, “GERD is not just about hydropower. The real objective, the hidden intention, is to create a water bank and eventually force downstream countries, and maybe invite other regional states, to buy water from Ethiopia” (*Ahram* 26 January 2022).



In pondering on the perceived intention of Ethiopia behind the construction of GERD, *Ahram* (15 July 2021) laments, “The fact is that Ethiopia has already politicized GERD. The government there has capitalized on it for domestic gains, and it has set its sights on regional gains, inspired by the unrealistic dream of weaponizing water to impose its political hegemony over other Nile Basin countries. International stakeholders in East Africa need to see Addis Ababa’s designs for what they are and act quickly to promote a roadmap to resolve this crisis.” In clear language, *Ahram* is claiming that the dam is a weapon to impose political hegemony over other riparian states.

Overall, the power domination frame attempts to draw attention to the fact that Ethiopia constructs GERD to realize its unrealistic dream of becoming a power hegemon. It asserts that Ethiopia’s ultimate goal is to hoard the Nile water and force downstream countries to buy water in the long run. It tries to downplay Ethiopia’s dire need for power supply by stating that unless for its hidden interest, Ethiopia does not need such a large dam to meet its electricity demands.

On the other hand, *Ahram*’s regional domination frame in relation to the regional implication of the dam was countered by *Herald*, which framed it as a means of regional integration, and as a tool that fosters regional integration that would ensure mutual benefit and cooperation among riparian states.

In lauding the construction of the dam as a tool for regional integration among the eleven riparian states, *Herald* (2 October, 2019) had the following to say:

We are waiting for the completion of the Dam and when it is finalized and becomes fully operational it would have substantial benefits to all 11 countries and their citizens ... In this manner, Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia should use GERD as an opportunity to cement their economic cooperation in the interest of Africa’s greater quest of achieving regional integration and economic development.

*Herald* (23 July 2021) goes on to argue that “GERD serves not only Ethiopia but also all riparian countries including both Sudan and Egypt in regional cooperation and economic integration.” In this story, the newspaper framed GERD as an opportunity to build, “peace, cooperation, mutual co-existence and development of all our people without harming one another. Nile in general and GERD project in particular are opportune for such a higher purpose.”

*Herald* also takes pain to stress the role of GERD in maintaining the historic relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt in the following words: “Ethiopia sees the Nile Waters as a source of cooperation with Egypt and would not allow any dispute to harm the strength of the age-old ties ... it is the interest of Ethiopia to exploit the agreement in the fair utilization of Nile Waters to transform its relations with Egypt to cooperation and partnership instead of hesitation and confrontation” (*Herald*, 16 April 2019). Underlining the fact that citizens of the two nations are, “people who drink from the same river which are bound together by Nile River” (14 September 2019), *Herald* emphasized the need to “work toward further strengthening the ties between Ethiopia and Egypt with due emphasis to priority interest areas.”

Furthermore, *Herald* projected the dam as a bond that cements African brothers and sisters as noted in the following statement: “The dam is not only power generating infrastructure, but it is the bond to further cement African brothers and sisters in a bid to live in harmony and enjoy equitable and just water share” (*Herald*, 22 July 2020). It

added that as, “A symbol of Ethiopia’s and Africa’s progress, we remain committed to fair and equitable usage of Nile waters for the shared economic benefits of Ethiopia and downstream riparian countries” (*Herald*, 12 May 2020).

In summary, *Herald*’s regional integration frame reiterates the pivotal role of the dam in fostering regional integration among riparian states and strengthening the ties between the people of Egypt and Ethiopia who drink water from the Nile for centuries. It tried to reassure that GERD is an ideal tool to accommodate the high purpose of building peace, cooperation, mutual co-existence, and development of all people in the region without causing harm to one another.

#### 4.4 Agreements: necessity of binding agreement Vs. obsession of colonial treaties frames

The other pertinent issue on which the two newspapers base their frames’ is related to the demands of the two countries to reach an agreement. In this regard, the analysis reveals that the two newspapers have different perspectives on the demands of the riparian states to reach an agreement on the operation of the dam. *Ahram* primed the need for a binding agreement before starting to fill the dam while *Herald* criticizes this demand as an obsession with colonial treaties that Ethiopia has unanimously rejected. *Herald* characterizes *Ahram*’s call for a binding agreement as an attempt to maintain colonial treaties this day.

Once the construction of the dam became fait accompli, a significant number of *Ahram*’s news stories focused on calling for the need to have a binding agreement, and hence, the *necessity of a binding agreement* emerged as an important frame. This frame emphasizes the critical need to sign a binding agreement on the operation and filling of GERD before commencing the filling of the dam. For example, Doaa El-Bey’s article has the following to say: “Throughout 2022, Egypt has continued to assert its firm stance regarding the necessity of reaching a legally binding agreement on the filling and operation of GERD ...” (*Ahram*, 25 Dec 2022). By attributing it to El-Sisi and Al-Burhan, a similar news story by *Ahram* (9 December 2022) called for the necessity of reaching a binding agreement noted the following: “Egypt’s President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi and head of Sudan’s Transitional Sovereignty Council Abdel-Fattah Al-Burhan reiterated on Friday the need to reach a legally binding agreement on the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).”

The newspaper also underlines that negotiation to reach a binding agreement, which took place over 10 years, could not be materialized as Ethiopia demands nothing more than mere guidelines. “The two downstream countries have been negotiating with Ethiopia for ten years to reach a comprehensive and legally binding agreement on the filling and operation of GERD, but to no avail as the upstream country [Ethiopia] seeks mere guidelines that can be modified any time at its discretion” (*Ahram*, 4 September 2021).

The news stories justified the necessity of inking a binding agreement as water security to downstream people; not as an opposition to the development of Ethiopia: “Egypt and Sudan have reiterated that they do not oppose development in Ethiopia but want the upperstream country to sign a legally-binding deal on the filling and operation of the dam to secure their water and people’s interests, a demand that Ethiopia rejects” (*Ahram*, 4 August, 2022). *Ahram* urges Ethiopia to translate its promise of not harming downstream countries into a legally binding



agreement, stating that “Ethiopians’ confirmation of not attempting to affect water flow to Egypt through GERD should translate into a legally binding agreement with Egypt and Sudan.” What is more, *Ahram* considers signing a legally binding agreement as a key to bringing prosperity, security, and peace, “El-Sisi reiterated Egypt’s demand for signing a legally binding agreement on the filling and operation of GERD, saying: ‘let us make a legally binding agreement that will bring prosperity, security, and peace to all of us’” (*Ahram*, 24 July, 2021).

In general, *Ahram*’s necessity of binding agreement frame holds dear the importance of inking a binding agreement among the three riparian states in order to meet the interests of all parties and to ensure the water security of the downstream population. From *Ahram*’s perspective, getting a binding agreement sealed is also seen as a tool to bring prosperity, security, and peace to all riparian citizens. *Ahram* attributes Ethiopia’s insistence on guidelines instead of a binding agreement to the failure of securing the highly promoted binding agreement.

On the other hand, *Ahram*’s necessity of a binding agreement frame was countered by *Herald* which in turn framed it as an obsession with colonial treaties; in other words, *Herald* framed Egypt’s demand for binding agreement as an interest to maintain the outdated colonial treaties.

In this regard, Yohannes stated the following: “Egypt is forcing Ethiopia to sign a binding agreement before filling the dam which is also part of the colonial era mentality” (*Herald*, 1 July 2020). Similarly, Addisalem’s news article described what is meant by a binding agreement in the following words: “The so-called binding agreement that Egypt and Sudan want to reach on the filling and operation of GERD is meant to perpetuate and extend the previous unilateral colonial treaties that give the countries monopoly over the Nile Rivers.”

The news stories also counseled that Ethiopia should not enter into such a binding agreement as it could hamper it from utilizing its own resources. Here is what *Herald* (11 May 2021) wrote about it: “Sudanese and Egyptians have been engaging in trilateral agreement hopping that Ethiopia would sign a binding agreement that could prevent it from utilizing the water resource. Ethiopia would never enter into such an agreement as it is a sovereign country possessing the right to utilize its natural resource without causing significant harm to the neighboring countries.”

Different news stories saw the repeated call for reaching a binding agreement by Egypt and Sudan as, “sustaining colonial era agreement and control over the waters of Abbay” (9 May 2020), “defending an unfair monopoly on the so-called water share on the Nile” (29 May 2020), “maintaining the mentality to owe 90% of the Nile ignoring the rest 10 riparian states including Ethiopia” (21 July 2020), “using the Dam as a cover to grab a long-standing issue of water allocation to their advantage” (1 May 2020) and “resuscitating the colonial era Nile river treaties” (22 May 2020).

#### 4.5 Blaming the other: unyieldingness frame

This frame emerges as a dominant frame in both newspapers where one blames the other (*Ahram* pointing finger at Ethiopia, while *Herald* does the same to Egypt) for lacking goodwill during negotiations. *Ahram* blames Ethiopia’s *intransigence* for the failure to

reach an agreement during negotiations while *Herald* emphasizes on Egypt’s *unwillingness* for the failure to tie an agreement.

Abdel-Mohsen Salma’s article (*Ahram*, 22 Jun, 2020) throws the blame for the failure of reaching an agreement on Ethiopia as follows:

It [Ethiopia] entered all the rounds of negotiations with the aim of wasting time and procrastinating in an attempt to impose a fait accompli situation on downstream countries Egypt and Sudan ... This is the Ethiopian stance that has been repeated time and again throughout the last nine years. It pretends to be searching for a solution and announces its desire to reach consensus and a new round of negotiations begins extending for years and stops at the same point where it started ... However, Ethiopia shows every time its bad intentions and that it doesn’t want peace or good for the peoples of the Nile Valley.

A similar news story by Gamal Essam (*Ahram*, 24 January 2021) also blames Ethiopia for failing to reach an agreement after four meetings brokered by the African Union. The excerpt read: “Four meetings have so far been held under the supervision of the African Union, not to mention that the Ministers of Irrigation and Foreign Affairs in the three countries have also met five times, trying to reach an agreement ... Ethiopia’s intransigence led all of these meetings to fail.” The news stories blame not only Ethiopia’s intransigence but also its failure to bring alternatives. A news story of *Ahram* (10 March 2020), in this regard, articulated the following: “The Ethiopian side does not want an agreement and has not offered an alternative ... Every time we inch closer to a deal, we then go ten steps back.”

The news narratives emphasized that Ethiopia’s intransigence during negotiations is intentionally done due to “Ethiopia’s bad faith and its attempt to impose a fait accompli in defiance of the collective will of the international community” (7 April 2021), “its keenness to disrupt technical and legal agreements that had been reached so far” (24 January 2021), “betting on buying time not to engage in genuine talks leading to a permanent compromise on GERD” (1 March 2022) and “its aim of wasting time and procrastinating in an attempt to impose a fait accompli situation on downstream countries Egypt and Sudan” (22 June 2020).

The following article by Mohammed Hegazy, not only blames Ethiopia’s intransigence but also describes it as short-sighted and self-serving behavior of Ethiopia for the failure to reach a binding agreement. “The intransigent, short-sighted, and self-serving behavior of the Ethiopian government has caused negotiations over its GERD project to fail for over two years running” (*Ahram*, 29 October 2021).

On the other hand, countering *Ahram*’s blame of Ethiopia for the failure to reach an agreement, *Herald* blames Egypt for the failure to tie an agreement. The news narratives attributed Egypt’s presence in negotiations halfheartedly to the failure of discussions to yield tangible results. In this regard, Desta Gebrehiwot’s news story has the following to say: “No agreement would be produced unless Egypt comes to the negotiating table wholeheartedly. It is due to Cairo’s negative role that negotiations have not produced any tangible results so far” (*Herald*, 29 May 2020).

Another news story by Desta blamed Egypt as a country largely lambasted for the failure of the trilateral talks. The excerpt reiterates:

With Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt poised to return to GERD negotiating table, experts cast doubts if Cairo is ready for genuine

and meaningful talks claiming the country's previous habit of deflecting technical issues to sway the deals in its favor ... Egypt, a country largely lambasted for the failure of the trilateral talks, sometimes finds itself in undermining diplomatic cooperation and resorting to militaristic relationships ... Egypt's acts have rather derailed talks to uncharted territory and have hindered the attainment of any productive agreement other escalating tension among countries (Herald, 5 June, 2020).

*Herald* also claims that Egypt tends to blame Ethiopia for the failure of negotiations while it is the one that caused it as noted in the following excerpt (*Herald*, 23 June 2020): "As we clearly see in the negotiations, Egyptian negotiators set a precondition and even predicted that the future discussion would not be successful. Then, they have misinformed and deceived the international community that the negotiation has not showed progress due to Ethiopia's stubbornness while the opposite is true."

In sum, *Herald* blames Egypt for the failure of tying the knot for the protracted tripartite negotiation on the operation of the Nile. It also underscores that getting the agreement done is unlikely as far as Egypt joins negotiations aiming to secure its claim of 'historic right,' which Ethiopia has unconditionally rejected. It also accuses Egypt of misleading the international community by blaming Ethiopia as intransigent during negotiations while the opposite is true.

#### 4.6 GERD's progresses: unilateral act Vs. right to development frames

Amidst the failure of riparian states to reach a binding agreement and the progression of the dam as planned, the Ethiopian government announced four rounds of filling of the dam and the beginning of trial electric generation from two turbines. The unilateral act frame, which emerged as a dominant frame by *Ahram* following the announcement of the first round of containment of water for GERD, labeled progresses on GERD as unilateral acts.

In this regard, *Ahram* (20 Feb 2022), for example, writes the following: "Addis Ababa unilaterally completed the dam's first filling in 2020 and the second filling in 2021 in the absence of a legally binding deal with Cairo and Khartoum." In another news story about this issue, *Ahram* (9 March 2022) writes that Egypt and Sudan condemn Ethiopia for its unilateral act as: "Egypt and Sudan have also condemned Ethiopia's unilateral step of implementing the first two phases of filling the dam's reservoir over the past two years without the consent of the two downstream countries."

*Ahram* also calls upon "The international community to persuade Ethiopia to stop its unilateral acts on GERD, the last of which is its ongoing third filling of the dam's reservoir" (*Ahram*, 4 Aug 2022). *Ahram* laments that Ethiopia's unilateral act came against repeated warnings of riparian states. Along this line, Amir Kandil (*Ahram*, 20 June 2022), writes: "Egypt and Sudan have repeatedly warned against the impact of unilateral acts on GERD on their water rights and people's interests unless a legally binding deal on the filling and operation of the dam is reached." The news story goes on to argue that Ethiopia "unilaterally implemented the first two phases of filling GERD over the past two years, started the first phase in the production of energy from GERD in February, and plans to implement the third phase of the dam filling in August and September" against the backdrop of their warning.

*Ahram's* unilateral act frame on the progression of the project without reaching an agreement has also been countered by *Herald*. To this end, *right to development* frame emerges as a dominant frame by *Herald* as a counter frame to the unilateral act frame, and lauds the right of Ethiopia to harness its own natural resources and ensure its citizens' right to development.

A news article by Leulseged asserts that Ethiopia does not need the approval of Egypt to harness its own resource for the sake of its economic development. The excerpt reads:

Does Ethiopia need Egypt's 'Go ahead' approval to fill the dam? No, by all means Ethiopia has all legal rights to utilize its natural resource for the sake of its economic development ... No matter how hard the sneaky moves of Egypt, Ethiopia has all legal right for the utilization of river Nile. Ethiopia does not need Egyptian approval to use the Nile and fill the water ... As Nile is the gift of Egypt, it is also the gift of Ethiopia. As Aswan is feeding millions of Egyptians, GERD is Ethiopians hope to feed its citizens. As Egyptian students are enjoying the free access to electricity, Ethiopians also have both legal and moral rights to use GERD to get electricity (Herald, 29 March 2020).

Similarly, *Herald* (4 May 2021) explains that Ethiopia has every right to make use of its own resources: "Filling the dam and generating power is entirely within our right to fair use of our own water. We continue using our own resources for irrigation, drinking water and electrification." The news stories echoed the fact that Ethiopia has every sovereign, inalienable right to: "use its Nile waters to supply electricity to 70 percent of the population (or 80.5 million) now living without electricity" (18 June 2020), "rule over its natural resource so long as it is in line with the international law" (30 March 2021) and "make use of its natural resource to lift [its citizens] out of poverty" (11 September 2011).

*Herald* also underscores that Ethiopia's right to harness the Nile for development is compatible with international laws and the nation's firm commitment to not harm others. In this regard, Tsegaye writes: "Our interest is reducing poverty by properly utilizing our natural resources without harming the interests of downstream countries" (5 March 2020), while Mengistab refers to international agreements and how exercising one's right is consistent with such agreements by stating that "We have the right to utilize our rivers based on international agreements. Ethiopia has always been open for fair negotiation" (30 October 2019).

The right to development frame of *Herald* has also been found as a salient frame in *Degu Belay* (2014, p. 190) study of the framing of the project by the *Reporter*-a private Ethiopian newspaper-According to this study, the *Reporter* gives "more salience to Ethiopia's legitimate right to use the River." Here, we can see how the right to development has been echoed by the Ethiopian media regardless of ownership.

Generally, the right to development frame stresses the fact that embarking on the dam project is the decision and commitment of all Ethiopians aimed at harnessing their own resources to alleviate poverty and ensure access to electricity to their citizens. *Herald* takes the pain to make it clear to its readers that as a sovereign nation Ethiopia does not need the approval of Egypt or any other nations to fill the dam and generate electricity from its mega dam in as long as it respects international agreements and minimizes harm in the downstream countries.

## 5 Conclusion

This article examines the salient frames *Ahram* and *Herald* newspapers constructed in their news discourse on GERD as well as underlying issues these frames were built on. To this end, a total of 1,153 news stories (783 from *Ahram*, 370 from *Herald*) published between January 2017 and December 2022 were retrieved from their online archives. Out of these, about 289 news stories were selected and subjected to analysis. The analysis identifies six dominant frames from *Ahram* and six counter-frames from *Herald*. The identified frames and counter-frames are 'Historic right' Vs. 'Tributary right,' 'National threat' Vs. 'National pride,' 'Power domination' Vs. 'Regional integration,' 'Necessity of binding agreement' Vs. 'Obsession of colonial treaties,' 'Unyieldingness' (for both), and 'Unilateral' act Vs. 'Right to development' frames. These salient frames were constructed on the following issues, respectively: sense of ownership of the Nile, symbolization of GERD, depiction of the regional implication of GERD, national demands to reach an agreement, blaming the other for the failure of negotiations, and progresses of the project without reaching an agreement.

The presence of these competing salient frames in the two newspapers signify how GERD was portrayed in a polarized and bifurcated manner in the two newspapers. Our analysis reveals that there was no shared frame in the two newspapers. The lack of a shared frame between the two newspapers indicates the level of polarization and divergence between the two newspapers in their perspective on GERD issue. What is more, the two newspapers seem to have systematically overlooked cross-cutting issues such as environmental concerns, biodiversity concerns, the resettlement of indigenous inhabitants, and experiences learned from transboundary river management in other contexts.

The frame and counter-frame tussle between the two newspapers could be attributable to various reasons. One possible reason is that the governments deliberately manipulated the issue of GERD to rally their citizens behind them and divert attention from pressing domestic challenges. In doing so, the local media of both countries aligned themselves with their respective governments' policy priorities and framed the project accordingly. Studies have shown that local media in authoritarian states often serve as echo chambers for the state's interests and rarely challenge the dominant narratives put forth by the ruling elites, especially in matters of foreign policy. For example, when it comes to the behavior of Ethiopian media regarding GERD, [Degu Belay et al. \(2021\)](#) noted the nonexistence of any critical opinions and narratives about the dam in the Ethiopian media and public spaces. Similarly, [Degu Belay \(2014, p. 201\)](#) pointed out how the Ethiopian private press gave, "much more depth and salience attention to favorable framing of GERD to explicate Ethiopian government interpretation of Nile politics."

The two newspapers under scrutiny seem to have been preoccupied with reproducing the views of their respective governments on GERD. This is reflected in how dependent they have been on their respective government sources for the construction of their news narratives. For instance, in its news stories, *Ahram* attributed government officials 117 times from the total 263 attributed sources in its 196 news stories analyzed. Similarly, in *Herald's* stories, government officials were attributed 42 times from the total of 113 attributed sources in its 93 news stories. To see it in comparison, the second most highly attributed source for *Ahram* is foreign diplomats (92 times) while scholars/experts (34 times) come as the second most attributed source for *Herald*.

Based on the findings, it is safe to argue that the newspapers under scrutiny were instrumentalized by their respective

governments to uncritically advance the interests of their respective nations as well as the governments' penchant to use the GERD issue for domestic political interests. In other words, the media frames and counter-frames in relation to GERD were used in a manner that favored the political interests of their respective governments. Thus, it could be argued that the polarized and bifurcated frames constructed in the news narratives of the media outlets were aimed at systematically reproducing the stance of their respective governments over the Nile hydropolitics.

The portrayal of a dam on a transboundary river by the news media contributes to either cooperative or conflicting terms. When the media emphasize the shared benefits and realities of a dam, it contributes to cooperation; on the contrary, when the media emphasizes negative impacts and ignores the positive aspects, it contributes to conflicting terms and disagreement among the parties involved ([Deka et al., 2023](#); [Delang, 2019](#); [Dieperink, 2011](#); [Wei et al., 2021](#)). To this end, taking the experience from the Brahmaputra basin, which is shared by China, India, Bhutan and Bangladesh, [Deka et al. \(2023, p. 832\)](#) found that, "most articles are focused on the conflicts, especially on the themes of hydropower development, disasters and geopolitical disputes in the basin." In light of this, it could also be argued that the polarized and bifurcated framing trend of the news media over GERD might have contributed to the two parties' failure to reach an agreement despite the high-stake negotiations on the issue conducted for over a decade. What is more, such polarized discursive stands of the two media outlets could have contributed to exacerbating the widening differences during negotiations instead of contributing to the narrowing of differences, which could have helped to come to cooperative terms. In that sense, it could be said that the news narratives advanced by the two media outlets might have contributed to conflicting stances rather than encouraging cooperation between the two riparian countries.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

DA: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AZ: Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



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