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Professional Backgrounds and Water Governance Strategies: A Case Study of Nile Basin Countries

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Abstract. Water security is a critical issue in the Nile Basin, where countries rely on the shared waters of the Nile River for various purposes including agriculture, industry, and domestic use. However, the resolution of water security issues in the region has been challenging due to competing interests and conflicts among the Nile Basin countries.

This article aims to investigate whether there is a difference in the approach to resolving water security issues in the Nile Basin depending on the professional background of the presidents leading these countries.

To conduct this research, a mixed methods approach of QCA analysis and thematic analysis are employed. The researchers analyze the approach of each president in the Nile Basin and how it affected the negotiation process or led to armed conflicts among these countries. This analysis also takes into account the use of principles and water laws to clarify the legal aspects of the water security issue.

The main finding of this research is that the military and civil background of presidents does indeed have an impact on their approach to resolving water security issues in the Nile Basin, leading to varying negotiation processes and potential conflicts among countries. On the other hand, presidents with civil backgrounds tend to prioritize diplomatic negotiations and cooperation, seeking peaceful resolutions to water security issues.

Keywords: Nile Basin, water security, water conflicts, presidents, professional backgrounds, politics, qualitative comparative analysis

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Профессиональный опыт и стратегии управления водными ресурсами: пример стран бассейна Нила

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Резюме. Цель исследования – выяснить, существует ли разница в подходах к решению вопросов водной безопасности в бассейне Нила в зависимости от профессионального опыта президентов, возглавляющих изучаемые страны.

Наша работа учитывает последствия строительства Плотины великого возрождения Эфиопии. В качестве методологии используется смешанный подход, включая инструменты качественного сравнительного анализа (QCA) и тематического анализа.

Авторы анализируют политику, проводимую президентами стран бассейна Нила, и то, как она повлияла на переговорный процесс (либо привела к вооруженным конфликтам между указанными в статье странами). Военный опыт президентов оказывает заметное влияние на их подход к решению проблем водной безопасности в бассейне Нила, что приводит к различиям в ведении переговорного процесса и потенциальным конфликтам между странами.

Ключевые слова: бассейн Нила, водная безопасность, водные конфликты, президенты, профессиональный опыт, политика, качественный сравнительный анализ

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INTRODUCTION

Water security is a pressing issue in the Nile Basin, with countries heavily relying on the shared waters of the Nile River for agricultural, industrial, and domestic purposes [1]. As the resolution of water security issues in the region continues to pose significant challenges due to conflicting interests and historical disputes among the Nile Basin countries, there is a need to understand how the backgrounds of the presidents leading these nations impact the negotiation and resolution processes [2, 3].

The history of the Nile River Basin has witnessed a diversity in the backgrounds of its country leaders, with some having military backgrounds while others come from civilian backgrounds. This diversity plays a crucial role in shaping their approach to water conflicts and the impact of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on Egypt and Sudan [4].

The military background of presidents in the Nile River Basin has had a significant impact on their approach to water conflicts. For presidents with military backgrounds, their experience and training in strategic planning and decision-making can influence their approach to resolving water conflicts. Additionally, military leaders may prioritize national security and the protection of vital resources like water, leading them to take a more assertive and defensive stance in negotiations with neighboring countries.

On the other hand, presidents with civilian backgrounds may approach water conflicts from a more diplomatic and cooperative perspective [5]. They may prioritize negotiations and compromise, seeking mutually beneficial solutions to water conflicts. This approach can help foster peaceful relations and collaboration among countries in the Nile River Basin [6]. As a result, their background in the military or civilian sector can shape their leadership style and tactics in addressing water conflicts and navigating the complexities of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

The diverse backgrounds of presidents in the Nile River Basin countries play a crucial role in shaping their approach to water conflicts, particularly in relation to Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (for more details see: [20]).

The military coups d'état that have occurred in some Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt and Syria, indicate the significant role of the military in politics and the potential for military-led decision-making in managing water conflicts [7].

This historical context highlights the potential influence of military background on the approach to water conflicts in the Nile River Basin. Presidents with civilian backgrounds have also played a significant role in the handling of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and its impact on the region. Their background in diplomacy and negotiation has allowed them to approach the issue with a more collaborative mindset, seeking peaceful solutions through dialogue and compromise. However, there may also be a possibility of corruption in such negotiations, as civilian leaders could potentially be influenced by external interests or financial incentives like in the case of Mohamed Morsi who was the corrupt president of Egypt (2012–2013) after the Arab Spring revolution.

The Nile River is one of the longest rivers in the world. From its major source, Lake Victoria in East Africa, the White Nile flows generally north through Uganda and into Sudan where it meets the Blue Nile at Khartoum, which rises in the Ethiopian highlands. From the confluence of the White and Blue Nile, the river continues to flow northwards into Egypt and on to the Mediterranean Sea (See Fig. 1 and 2). From Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea, the length of the Nile is 5584 km. From its remotest headstream, the Ruvyironza River in Burundi, the river is 6671 km long. The river basin has an area of more than 3,349,000 sq km.

There are 11 countries which make up the Nile River Basin. Some of the countries have only a small part of their area within the basin, whilst others are virtually entirely within the basin. All the countries contribute differently to the basin and have different needs for the water and other resources of the basin. The 10 Nile

Basin countries are Burundi, DR Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. South Sudan is the 11th riparian state.

There are more than 100 islands in the archipelago, with Egypt hosting 22 of them. Despite its length, the river is considered slow in comparison to other large rivers. The water flow from Lake Victoria in the south to the Mediterranean Sea in the north is expected to take up to 3 months.

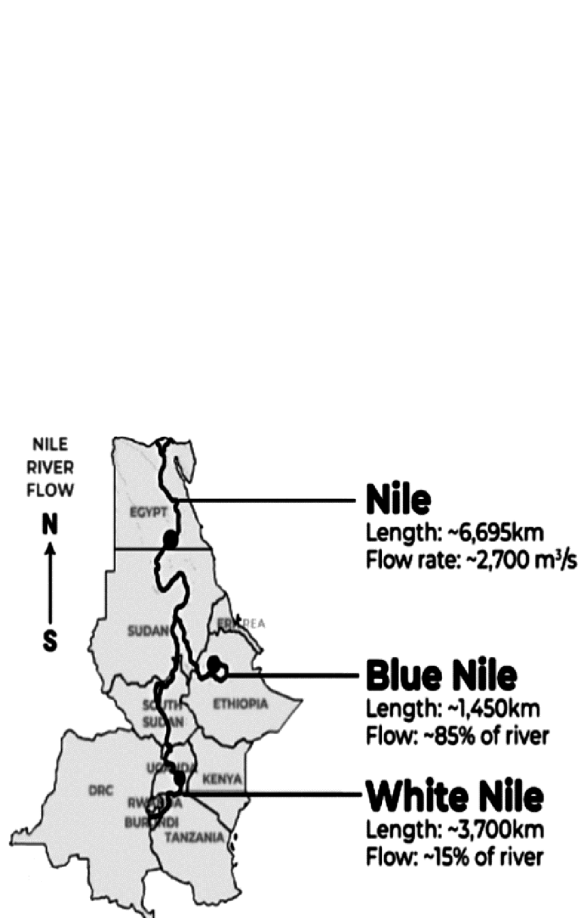


Figure 1. Nile river.

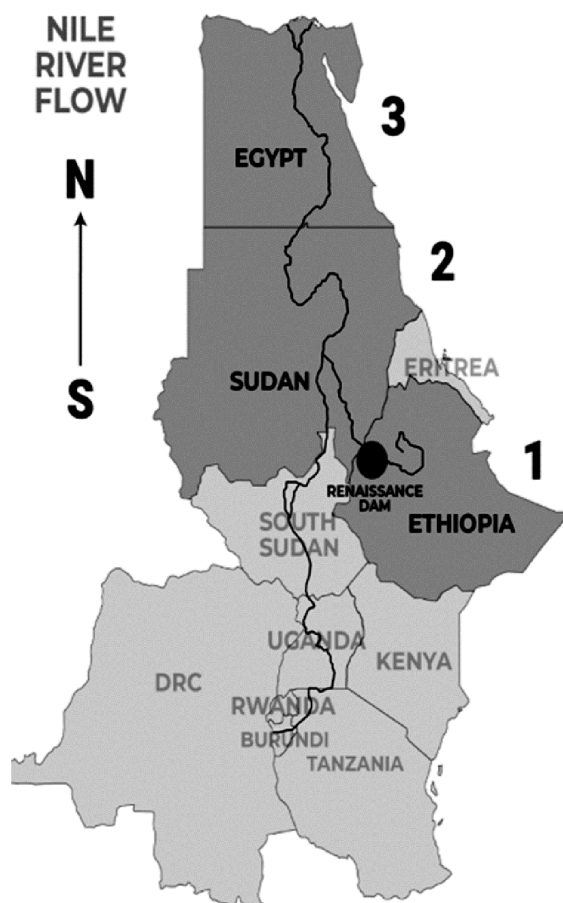


Figure 2. Nile river countries.

Source: <https://www.ethiovisit.com/ethiopia---the-nile-and-the-renaissance-dam/95/> (accessed 10.09.2024)

HIGHLIGHTING WATER SCARCITY

Water scarcity could leave a big percentage of population facing hunger. Impacts will mostly be on low income and farmers, a very politically volatile segment of the Egyptian economy. More than 93% of the country is dessert and the green strip is the only habitable place for the people of Egypt, it is very clear that there are habitants on both sides of the Nile River, so we are talking about more than 110 million habitants only on this green strip that you can see on the map. Egypt was declared the driest country in the world [9].

The 1997 UN report assessing the freshwater resources of the world concludes that “water use has been growing at more than twice the rate of the population increases during this century and already a number of regions are chronically water short. About one-third of the world’s population lives in countries that are experiencing moderate to high water stress, resulting in part from increasing demands fueled by population growth and human activity. By 2025, as much as two-thirds of the world population would be under stress conditions”¹.

¹ Comprehensive assessment of the freshwater resources of the world. UN Economic and Social Council. 1997. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/231336?ln=en&v=pdf> (accessed 13.04.2024)

According to the United Nations water infographic that was published in May 2013, the definition of water security is as follows: “The capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability.” UN-Water has suggested this concept as a starting point for discussion within the UN framework².

Currently, having available fresh water resources in most countries is among the greatest challenges that will be increased in the future [9]. The major global concerns like the increase of population in relation to water supply, climate change, food security, human health, economic development and regional conflicts are connected to fresh water availability. As the river Nile’s sources are located outside the Egyptian border, the river’s land is highly vulnerable to changing climate conditions and it has affected both inside and outside its borders. For the longest time, Egypt and Sudan have been facing physical water scarcity with the increase of population growth, this issue became more and more prevalent with the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia [10].

After the construction of the dam, it was very likely that the Blue Nile, which accounts for the majority of the Nile’s flow after converging with the White Nile in Sudan, could lose a quarter or more of its water when flowing on Egyptian land [11]. The Nile regularly runs dry before it reaches the ocean. One of the upstream countries, Ethiopia, has already built the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Seasonal rains are starting to fill its reservoir. This Dam set to become Africa’s largest hydroelectric power plant on the Blue Nile River. Egypt sees this as an existential threat to its precious water supply bearing in mind that Egypt depends on the Nile River for 97% of its water needs, not to mention the negligible amounts of rain yearly. This is the latest incarnation of a dispute along the Nile that goes back centuries.

Also, as a result of rapid population growth, growing temperatures, and increased water consumption in Egypt and other Nile Basin countries, water stress is expected to worsen in the future. Rising water shortage would place severe strains on Egypt’s economy and make the country more vulnerable to renewed internal strife, if it is not properly addressed [12].

The greatest threat for Egypt may be connected with the fact when Ethiopia fills the massive reservoir behind its dam. Even afterwards, however, the creation of the dam will mean that Egypt no longer has direct control over its primary water source, a troubling prospect for a country that receives negligible rainfall and is considered the world’s largest oasis.

Hani Raslan, who heads the Nile Basin studies department at Cairo’s al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, said it is no coincidence that Ethiopia announced plans to massively expand the dam and forge ahead with its construction just weeks after Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was ousted in early 2011 [13]. There will be major loss of hydropower and irrigation flow on average at much less gains from GERD [12]. There is poor society-wide understanding of the greatly reduced role the Nile plays in Egypt’s economy. The incredible role it plays in national identity, psyche, and pride not to mention that ruling elites may shore up political support by exaggerating or exploiting unresolved water conflicts with neighboring riparians, whereas undertaking cooperative initiatives may give the appearance of betraying national interests.

International negotiations relate to the national potential each negotiating partner can come to; during the negotiations symmetry or asymmetry is transformed into a process variable depending on the adequate means employed and adds the final stage where the terms refer to the outcomes as comparative utility. States are profoundly unequal with regards to power they wield and their influence in world affairs, but they are equal before the law and in terms of their rights and obligations.

The hydro-hegemony framework, which is defined by a basin scale hegemony or control over transboundary waters, is established by one actor. This framework is for analysis of trans-boundary water conflicts [11]. And the term “water conflicts”, apart from the military interpretation of the term, more generally means some form of disagreement over ideas, principles or sovereignty in which the opposing forces struggle for victory [11]. They also referred to Frey when he stated that conflict exists “when one actor attempts to exert power over another to overcome that actor’s perceived blockage of the first actor’s goal and faces significant resistance” [14].

² What is Water Security? Infographic. UN-Water. 2013. <https://www.unwater.org/publications/water-security-infographic/> (accessed 24.02.2024)

There is evidence in each case of power asymmetries influencing an inequitable outcome at the expense of lingering, low-intensity conflicts [11]. It is proposed that the framework provides an analytical paradigm useful for examining the options of such powerful or hegemonized riparian and how they might move away from domination towards cooperation.

The whole idea of who gets how much of the water and why is a very important question to be answered. The authors of this theory also argued that the control over water resources is not achieved through water wars but through power related tactics [15]. This exactly what happened in the Nile Basin, in which Ethiopia saw a right moment of weakness of Egypt and started with its dam. It is also stated that the power relations between riparian countries are the prime determinants of the degree of control over water resources that each riparian attains.

THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUITABLE AND REASONABLE USE AND THE NO-HARM RULE

These two principles have been mentioned in the last agreement between the three countries (Egypt – Sudan – Ethiopia). These principles are within the framework of the international law of rivers [16]. The no-harm rule covers the whole range of neighborly relations, including issues pertaining to the protection of the environment. It is relevant, in particular, for two aspects of the law of international waterways; the allocation of the utilizations of such watercourses and the protection of their environment. Contrary to the no-harm rule, the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization is specifically intended for, and limited to activities on international water courses other than navigation [17].

Its emergence was prompted by the limitations of the no-harm rule: the latter did not allow for the settlement of controversies over allocation issues on fully-used or over-used international water courses, or would have done so in an equitable way, that is, by giving complete priority to existing activities and by prohibiting the development of new or the extension of existing uses [17]. Moreover, since the main users of international water courses have usually been lower riparian's, such a solution, if it were retained, would heavily advantage those countries and heavily disadvantage the upstream states.

The situation on the lower Nile perfectly illustrates the situation. The no-harm rule, if it were the only one to apply, would fully protect the status quo, i.e., the existing rights of the lower riparian Egypt and, to a lesser degree Sudan, and deny the upper riparian, first and foremost Ethiopia any possibility of developing or expanding activities. In other words, the economic and social growth of any newcomer, in particular upstream countries, would be stunted [17]. But in this case, there is a big difference between the physical water scarcity that Egypt is facing and the economic water scarcity that Ethiopia is facing and also here we are talking about the survival of one country in relation to the development of another, and in the case of Ethiopia and its need of energy production (Egypt was already more than willing to export electricity) in order to save its population and the whole country from drought.

ANALYSIS OF WATER GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES

The mixed-methods approach was used to fully grasp the answer to the research question mentioned above. The specific tool used in this article is qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), which allows for generalization while maintaining the specificity of particular cases. QCA is often employed when dealing with complex, multifaceted research questions where traditional quantitative methods may not be suitable. QCA proponents have developed algorithms to analyze quantitative data in a bid to uncover necessary and sufficient conditions where causal relationships are complex, conditional, or asymmetric [19]. Tosmana QCA analysis was used to analyze and find out if the backgrounds of presidents have any effect or impact on the resolution of these water conflicts or the way they handle them, and we differentiate between the backgrounds on the basis of civil and military backgrounds [20].

Several components were selected to analyze water governance strategies taking into account professional backgrounds of presidents. The explanation of these components is the following:

- **Presidents:** Lists the names of the presidents or political leaders being analyzed.
- **Political Background:** Indicates whether a president has a political background or not. This factor helps to understand if a leader's previous experience in politics influences their water security policies. Military presidents' prior experience provides them with the strategic and tactical skills necessary to address complex water security issues.

- **Dams:** Indicates whether the president's policies involved dam projects or not. The involvement in dam projects or the lack thereof shows a tangible commitment to large-scale infrastructure solutions.
- **Treaties:** Indicates whether the president was involved in treaty negotiations or agreements or not. The participation in treaty negotiations or not reflects a president's diplomatic engagement in multilateral water security efforts. Military presidents can maintain stability and progress in water security initiatives even amidst socio-political instability, often through strong, authoritative rhetoric.
- **Socio-political institutions:** Indicates whether there were strong socio-political institutions during their term or not. The presence of socio-political instability or its absence indicates the broader governance context of instability within which water policies are implemented.
- **Rhetoric:** Indicates the presence or absence of strong rhetorical elements in their policies or speeches. The presence or absence of strong rhetoric reflects the use of communication and persuasion in policy advocacy. The military presidents' use of strong rhetoric helps rally public and political support, ensuring the successful implementation of water security policies.
- **Outcomes:** Indicates whether the policy outcomes were successful or not.

The results obtained through QCA procedure showed that two combinations of factors are most relevant for different groups of cases. Below we provide a description of those combinations of factors, the influence of which, according to our analysis, turned out to be the most significant.

Military Background and Policy Aggressiveness

Dams and Treaties: Presidents with a military background are more likely to engage in ambitious infrastructure projects, such as dams, and to participate actively in treaty negotiations. This combination appears to be effective in addressing water security issues.

– The presence of presidents such as Hosni Mubarak, Omar al-Bashir, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in this category suggests a tendency towards assertive and infrastructure-focused approaches, often coupled with diplomatic engagements through treaties.

– Military presidents are more likely to engage in and successfully execute large-scale infrastructure projects, such as dam constructions, which are crucial for water management and security. They also actively participate in and often lead treaty negotiations to ensure cooperative water resource management.

Leaders like Hosni Mubarak, Omar al-Bashir, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi exemplify how military backgrounds contribute to decisive and effective water security policies. Their ability to combine infrastructural development with diplomatic efforts results in more robust and sustainable solutions to water crises.

Effective Management in Socio-political Instability

– **Socio-political instability and rhetoric:** Presidents operating within contexts of socio-political instability, who effectively utilize strong rhetoric, tend to focus on persuasive communication to address water security issues. This approach emphasizes managing instability through strategic messaging and rallying public support.

– Leaders like Meles Zenawi, Hailemariam Desalegn, and Sahle-Work Zewde, who appear under this configuration, demonstrate the effectiveness of strong rhetoric in navigating socio-political instability while dealing with water security challenges.

Military presidents tend to manage socio-political instability more effectively by leveraging strong rhetoric and authoritative communication. This enables them to maintain control and push forward critical water security initiatives even in turbulent times.

Such leaders as Hosni Mubarak and Omar al-Bashir have shown that a military background equips them with the skills to navigate instability and still achieve significant progress in water management.

CONCLUSION

The paper underscores the critical role of the background of political leaders in shaping their strategies for resolving water security issues in the Nile Basin. Both military and civil backgrounds bring unique strengths that, when combined with appropriate policies and rhetorical strategies to manage instability, can lead to

successful outcomes in managing water resources. However, presidents with military backgrounds demonstrate superior effectiveness in resolving water security issues in the Nile Basin, primarily through their strategic approach to infrastructure projects and treaty negotiations. Military presidents in the Nile Basin exhibit a distinctive and effective approach to resolving water security issues. Their strategic focus on infrastructure projects, combined with robust treaty negotiations and authoritative management of socio-political instability, positions them as highly capable leaders in addressing and resolving water crises.

To sum up, we may conclude that countries in the Nile Basin could benefit from leadership with a military background, given their demonstrated effectiveness in handling water security issues through strategic infrastructure projects and treaty negotiations. Investing in both infrastructure (such as dams) and strategic communication could hold managing instability can create a balanced and effective approach to managing water resources. For countries in the Nile Basin, promoting leaders who have either a strong military background with diplomatic capabilities or those who can effectively manage socio-political instability with strong rhetoric may enhance water security strategies.

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