Two momentous events, each occurring within 4 days of one another, have put Egyptian politicians and journalists in a febrile mood.

Ethiopia’s diversion of the Nile (conducted after giving ample advance notice to Egypt and Sudan, to whom the Nile flows from Ethiopia) as part of ongoing construction of a 6,000 MW generating mega-dam—Africa’s largest and Ethiopia’s first on the river, was followed by the 1 June submission to all 3 governments of a report by an international panel (composed of Ethiopian, Egyptian, Sudanese, and international experts) evaluating the engineering, socioeconomic and environmental impact of the dam.

EGYPT, ETHIOPIA AND THE NILE

The reactions to these recent developments go beyond opposition to Ethiopia’s Renaissance Dam and highlight the difficulties inherent to reaching a future agreement on apportionment of the Nile’s waters between all of its 10 riparian states. In particular, between Ethiopia, which previously lacked the financial wherewithal to exploit the river, 85 percent of whose waters spring form within its borders; and Egypt, which uses 75 percent of the Nile, but contributes nothing to its flow.

The effects of the acerbic and misleading commentary in the Egyptian press about the dam and the panel’s report should not be underestimated. If misconceptions become deeply rooted in the minds of the public, it will become exponentially harder for the governments involved to reach agreements which are suitable to citizens’ needs and which meet their people’s expectations.

Certain Egyptian media outlets have, for example, alleged that the postponement of the report’s finalization—twice—ostensibly occurred at Ethiopia’s behest, because Addis was unhappy with the report’s contents. Not true; the panel delayed its report of its own volition and on its own initiative, as independent committees are wont to do. What’s more, Ethiopia has accepted the findings of the report which states that the dam meets international standards, but recommends further studies in certain areas.

A perpetual favourite source of misinformation is the invocation of the looming specter of Israeli involvement in Nile-related projects. This most recent spate of reports is no exception, as Egyptian journalists have again resorted to the same scarecrow claiming that Israeli firms are involved in the dam’s construction. Again, not true. The companies involved are Italian, Chinese and Ethiopian, and the dam’s $4.8 billion price-tag is being met by Ethiopia.

These stories are deliberately designed to inflame, not inform. The climate of mistrust they help spread does not advance the cause of an amicable solution to the Nile issue.

VITRIOL OF EGYPTIAN POLITICIANS TELEVISIONED

On the domestic political front, things have not fared much better. Two days after submission of the report, President Morsi convened a meeting whose participants were drawn from a broad swath of political parties. The meeting was stunning for the jaw-dropping levels of vitriol directed towards Ethiopia and Sudan.

The prescriptions offered by those in attendance are a source of apprehension. The recommendations ranged from feigning an imminent military attack by Egyptian forces in order to reap political dividends (one wonders if aside from provoking the wrath of Ethiopians, such politicians have calculated the complications arising from the involvement of the abovementioned international companies), to colluding with insurgents opposed to Ethiopia’s federal government. Unbeknownst to the politicians, the meeting was being televised live.

The Egyptian stock market was down following the meeting and prominent opposition politician El Baradei called on Morsi to apologize to Ethiopia and Sudan for the participants’ verbal fusillades.

One can only hope that these are the mere foibles of politicians seeking to extract short-term gains
from a manufactured ‘crisis.’ After all, President Morsi, Egypt’s Irrigation Minister and a prominent Egyptian general have all categorically ruled out the military option.

A WAY FORWARD IS NECESSARY

Given where things stand, what next? A logical first step would be to douse the flames of discord. Politicians must refrain from belligerent statements and responsible media outlets should correct the irresponsible reports of their ill-informed or ill-intentioned counterparts.

The International Panel of Experts and their report must also be allowed to promote trust and dialogue among the parties, as originally intended. International committees dealing with trans boundary waters have a mixed record. A tripartite committee composed of Turkey, Syria and Iraq has had a lackluster record with regard to joint development of the Euphrates. The Indus Waters Commission, comprising India and Pakistan has instead been remarkably successful, with both countries realizing that water is too precious to quarrel over, despite having gone to war three times over Kashmir and being at loggerheads over multiple issues. In this case, the work of the International panel is most likely to have the desired effect if all parties abide by the terms agreed to during its set-up. Namely, keeping the report confidential in order to allow uninhibited discussions between the parties and exhibiting a genuine political willingness for compromise.

Finally, consultations between riparian states over the projects they are undertaking within their borders constitute a positive precedent. But discussions ought not to be the sole province of any particular country. A similar protocol ought to be followed for projects which take place in the Sudan and Egypt. For future discussions to yield the most fruit, countries must also move decisively towards treating the Nile as an integrated basin, and this requires that the other sub-Saharan riparian states (South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi and the DRC) be included in deliberations as well.

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Article-Summary:
Tensions and misinformation have arisen surrounding Ethiopia’s renaissance dam. To douse the flames of tensions an International Panel of Experts and their report must be allowed to promote trust and dialogue among the parties

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