



Storage as security: Damming water in Pakistan

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“India can use the Indus Water Treaty as a weapon against us, right? It can flood us whenever it wants?” asks an eager twenty-something civil engineer in training.

I am attending a weekly seminar, which irrigation officials are mandated to attend as part of their training. A senior engineer responds, “They can’t flood us. But they can eventually cause us to be in a drought. As of now, for about five days, they can deprive us of water. *Bilkul*. Totally.”

There is silence in the large auditorium.

Then, he says, “To deal with this threat we are making the XX Link Canal. WAPDA (Water and Power Development Authority, a federal government body) is making it as I speak.”

The mostly young men, and some women among them, thump on their desks. Some clap.

In this essay, I examine concrete manifestations of populist politics and political tendencies, such as the building or reinforcing of borders, walls, and dams. I view dam construction in Pakistan as a bordering practice. By thinking with the politics of water storage in Pakistan, I show that while the manifestations, such as big dams, appear uniform, they may be motivated by the convergence of distinct political and historical lineaments in specific moments. Probing these, I suggest, is more helpful than asking if Pakistan’s current regime is populist, or how populist it is.¹ My focus on concrete manifestations is intended to accompany Kristian Karlo Saguin’s attention to “populist performances”

in the contemporary Philippines in this *Virtual Forum*.

In 2018, then-Chief Justice of Pakistan’s Supreme Court, Saqib Nisar, began a crowdfunding drive to fund the construction of the Diamer Bhasha and Mohmand dams in Pakistan’s northwest.² He expressed a hope that the “passion that was seen during the 1965 war [with India] would be visible again” for the construction of the dams.³ Soon after the creation of the dam fund, Major-General Asif Ghafoor, then-army spokesman, announced that two days’ salaries would be donated to the fund by army officers, calling it a “national cause.” The State Bank of Pakistan announced the establishment of a government bank account for fund collection, praising the Chief Justice’s “mighty initiative”⁴ for “the supreme national interest and future generations’ interest” and announcing Bank employees’ decision to donate their salaries to the cause. Around the same time, in televised addresses, Prime Minister Imran Khan urged Pakistanis, in particular overseas Pakistanis, to donate—preferably in dollars—to the fund, stressing that Pakistan had a water storage capacity of only 30 days, whereas India could store water for 190 days and Egypt for 1000 days.

Talk of an impending water crisis of scarcity, rendered frequently in terms of a decreased Falkenmark index value, has been growing in Pakistan. The index, named after hydrologist Malin Falkenmark (Falkenmark, 1989), relates water availability to population (Ahmed, 2018; Ashraf nd). To this growing perception of crisis must be added Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s statement that water belonging to India cannot be allowed to flow into Pakistan:⁵ “Blood and water cannot flow simultaneously,” he declared in November 2016.⁶ Subsequently, Indian intentions of using more river water than before were widely debated in media circles and at water events in Pakistan. These recent developments recall the longstanding and thorough imbrication of water storage infrastructure in Pakistan with the country’s political economy

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¹ Scholars of Pakistan have long discussed the utility of populist framings for understanding political developments in the country. For some insightful views, please see Jalal, (1995); Javed, (2021); Ali, (2012).

² The Diamer Bhasha project is located on the river Indus (in Gilgit), and Mohmand is located on the Swat river (in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).

³ Bhatti, H. July 4, 2018. “SC asks public to donate money for construction of Diamer-Bhasha, Mohmand dams.” *DAWN*.

⁴ State Bank of Pakistan, Finance Department. Accessed September 30, 2108 <http://www.sbp.org.pk/notifications/FD/DamFund/index.htm>.

⁵ Express Web Desk. “Water that belongs to India cannot be allowed to go to Pakistan: PM Modi in Bathinda.” *The Indian Express*, November 25, 2016. Accessed: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/water-that-belongs-to-india-cannot-be-allowed-to-go-to-pakistan-pm-modi-in-bathinda-4394371/>.

⁶ Bagchi, I and V Mohan. Blood and water can’t flow together: PM Narendra Modi gets tough on Indus treaty.” *The Times of India*, September 27, 2016. Accessed: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/54534135.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

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of insecurity and defence (Jalal, 1995; Mustafa, 2007).

India and Pakistan are riparian neighbors. The two countries were created in 1947 as British colonial rule ended with the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the bloody deaths and movement of millions across the new border. The Indus Water Treaty (IWT) between the two countries, signed on 19 September 1960 with World Bank mediation, allocates the water of the transboundary rivers comprising the Indus. Specifically, it permits the unrestricted flow, with some exceptions, of the three “Western Rivers” (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) to Pakistan, and the unrestricted flows of the three “Eastern Rivers” (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) to India. On the day the IWT was signed, another agreement also came into effect: the Indus Basin Development Fund (IBDF). The IBDF mobilized finances to construct “replacement works” in Pakistan to compensate the government for the loss of water from the three eastern rivers flowing to India, as well as for the construction of drainage and groundwater pumping infrastructure. The “largest earthmoving task ever undertaken,” this over US\$900-million fund entailed the construction of dams, barrages and several hundred miles of canals, along with the excavation of 700,000,000 cubic yards of earth (U.S. Senate Hearings 1965, 122).⁷

Typically, the building of infrastructure such as that mandated by the IBDF is rendered in terms of newly decolonized states’ aspirations to master nature and their fidelity to grandiose development. Instead, here, I draw attention to the specificity of some of the infrastructure built as part of the IBDF. In his writings, Ayub Khan, the former military ruler of Pakistan, has described the treaty as the “only sensible thing to do,” only the “second-best” (1976: 128). This language of necessity sits apart from a purportedly uniform commitment to master nature or to develop. The IWT was “not ideal but [the] best [...] under the circumstances” (131). There was “no cause for rejoicing [but] there was certainly cause for satisfaction that a possibly very ugly situation had been averted” (132). He added, “We abandoned the chase of the ideal and accepted what was good after a careful and realistic appreciation of the overall situation [...] The basis of this agreement, therefore, as far as we are concerned, was realism and pragmatism.” (132). The aim was to be “independent of India in the matter of water supply,” upon completion of the infrastructure works stipulated in the IWT (133).

The infrastructure, then, was intended to have a bordering effect. Yet this infrastructure building can also be viewed as a bordering practice. Indeed, scholars of South Asia have recently and helpfully conceptualized shared rivers as “border infrastructures,” offering a processual understanding of borders (Thomas, 2021; Akhter, 2019; Zamindar, 2007). That such bordering processes were only ever partial at best and served to obscure the underlying question of Kashmiri sovereignty—with both India and Pakistan claiming Kashmir as theirs—is rarely discussed (see the important work of Bhan, 2014).

Ayub Khan has also described the “confrontation” he had with his technical experts and administrators during IWT negotiations, claiming that they did not “fully realize the gravity of the situation and were asking for the moon when we were in a position of weakness” (129). While Khan promised to consult them on “technical details,” the policy

⁷ See the following: Foreign Assistance and Related Agencies Appropriations for Year 1966. Hearings before the Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate, 89th Congress, Eighty-ninth Congress, First Session on H.R. 10871 (1965, 122). Accessed on August 10, 2021: https://books.googleusercontent.com/books/content?req=AKW5QaeYB_zwbwnWlUymxqWR5NloGJhaKHnpERUYQM3acB7TDooYzWVyw3XaMa22CSDvrw6qWZ876-q6S69nRSbAz3jye-o-Caqm9QqTO51rBYSiCV5shPxDg7RP7-PoeJswblfQNSQ10XVtA9XLlpmnDFpMKossEwBNaaSCChLrUkPQ3nwWi6Gqnl1xf912RFY0b4rN7MJ0QzDlVyHRIYpDaDcXzE9xhXbVntqjG15K0Lvy4mnm87OM6asJvnCADQgh7b7Ce77xv0tElkZC9YrHeszDFSdY_2TvCa dCF-gP3LwTa8iEdt0 - “Indus Water Treaty,” The World Bank. *World Affairs*, 1960, Vol. 123 (4): 99–101. - Salman and Upreti. 2001. Conflict and cooperation on South Asia’s International Rivers: A Legal Perspective. *Law Justice and Development Series*. The World Bank: Washington D.C.

was his [“is going to be mine”] (129). I note these differences to emphasize the distinct rationales at play in the construction of “the same” big infrastructure like dams.

Another play of differences becomes apparent in Pakistan’s advocacy for Mangla and Tarbela dams, both of which were part of the IBDF. Mangla was completed in 1965, and Tarbela, the world’s largest earth-filled dam, in 1976. While the Mangla dam was built under the treaty for “replacement,” Tarbela was added later to “not only cater for replacement requirements but also provide water for development” (129)—that is, development would happen *after* replacement. The demand for more money for Tarbela would, Khan thought, make “Eugene [Black, World Bank President] hit the roof [...]”⁸ But Khan writes, he told him, “I have been around these areas which are going to be affected by the withdrawal of waters by India. People have told me very plainly that if they have to die through thirst and hunger they would prefer to die in battle [...] Our *jawans* (army ranks) and the rest of the people feel the same way. So this country is on the point of blowing up if you don’t lend a helping hand. This is a human problem of a grave nature and cannot be blinked away. What we are being called upon to do is to barter away naturally-flowing waters into our canals, for storage water, and the history of storage is that it begins to silt the moment it is completed. Besides, we are going to be put back by about ten years or so by building these storages and link-canals. All this effort could have been put to more constructive effort. So we are making great sacrifices [...] unless we get our additional needs of water, apart from replacements, there is going to be chaos in this country. So a dam at Tarbela is a must.”⁹

There is of course much to be said about an ex-military ruler’s account of his own rule. But without getting into questions of archives and interpretation here, and by relying on historical records on treaty negotiation as well as recent scholarship (Akhter, 2015), I wish to foreground the connected yet distinct logics behind these two dams. This specificity also matters because given that Tarbela is among the world’s largest dams, and the IBDF among the world’s largest earth-moving efforts, any comprehensive understanding of anthropogenic ecology-making must reckon with the Indus basin and its continual refashioning post-1960. Further, Mangla and Tarbela illuminate how varied calculi and logics may materialize in similar physical infrastructure. Physically, large dams appear to be more uniform than distinct, which can in part explain the largely uniform scholarly approach to them, emphasizing both their grandiosity and the fantasy of conquering nature and developing the nation. Yet the politics undergirding such projects is far from uniform. Attending to their specificities can help to complicate understanding of national aspirations for development and security, not just in the nascent postcolonial conjuncture, but also today.

In interviews and informal conversations, government officials and retired engineers inevitably recall how India stopped the flow of water into Pakistan’s canals in 1953. This event triggered international negotiations, which culminated in the IWT, amidst U.S. Cold War-era fears. Thus, the young engineering student’s question at the opening of this commentary is not surprising. Contemporary dam construction, then, recalls a prior moment—at once national, regional and international—in ecological refashioning. If, in the 1960s, the political narrative was one of securing sovereignty by becoming independent of a hostile riparian neighbor, more than sixty years later, the country is building similar infrastructure citing an impending water scarcity crisis, entangled with a security imperative vis-à-vis India. WAPDA’s current slogan is “One dam every decade.”

⁸ Foreign Office. No. 371, Kew Archives, London.

⁹ As Majed Akhter writes, Said Hasan, who led Pakistan’s delegation at a meeting with representatives of the World Bank and donor states, stressed the need for Tarbela Dam: the “promise of development” which was specifically associated with Tarbela Dam was “the transcendental persuasion” that made the compromise acceptable at all (2015: 862).

As inspiration, Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD), which is being built with lottery draws, bond sales and other public fundraising activities (as well as international funding), comes up frequently. While we can, and should, debate the de/merits of these proposed dams, what is hard to deny is that these crowdfunding initiatives have made water storage infrastructure and its financing less exclusive "high policy" domains (Menga, 2021). After the Supreme Court's announcement of the dam fund, Pakistan's newspapers, news channels, and social media platforms were abuzz, with the proliferation of hashtags such as #damnfools, #rejectdamfundfools, #damsforPakistan, and #donatefordams. Similarly, a quick Twitter search for GERD reveals the popularity of the #itsmydam hashtag. While the Ethiopian Minister of Irrigation, Water, and Energy, called the dam a "people's project,"¹⁰ neighboring Egypt's ambassador to the U.S. wrote in *Foreign Policy* that Ethiopia was "pushing the misleading populist narrative" that opposition to the GERD is "rooted in colonialism" (Zahran 2021).¹¹

Thinking from such thoroughly anthropogenic ecologies (Whittington, 2019) enables us to ask: What are the contextual and contingent factors anchoring the translation of number of days of stored water to metrics of national security, and against what? Does water storage infrastructure help resolve postcolonial sovereign anxieties, recharged by contemporary imaginaries of environmental stress? Or does such infrastructure represent the materialization of such anxieties? What are the concrete effects when "populist performances" are multiple, and if they collide? (Saguin, this issue). And, ultimately, which and whose "political geographies of the future" (Robbins, 2020) will triumph?

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

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¹⁰ At a UNSC meeting in 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqfPMFVZ4bk>.

¹¹ Motaz Zahran, April 29, 2021. "Only Washington Can Save the Renaissance Dam Negotiations Now," *Foreign Policy*. Accessed on January 15, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/29/gerd-renaissance-dam-negotiations-biden-ethiopia-egypt/>.