

Salafists Are the Wild Card of Egypt's Referendum

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Brief Analysis

Low Salafist turnout for this week's constitutional referendum could signal a broad base of support for growing jihadist violence against the post-Morsi government.

The January 14-15 referendum on Egypt's draft constitution is being billed as a referendum on the military's July 3 ouster of Muslim Brotherhood president Muhammad Morsi. Yet the vote is unlikely to alter the country's short-term political trajectory: no matter the results, the military-backed government will continue repressing pro-Morsi forces, who will in turn continue resisting a process they view as illegitimate. The extent to which Salafists participate in the referendum may have longer-term implications, however. High Salafist turnout would suggest an embrace of the Nour Party's decision to participate in the post-Morsi process, whereas low turnout would reflect strong feelings of disenfranchisement that could lead more Salafists to embrace jihadism.

BACKGROUND

The latest draft of the constitution, submitted to interim president Adly Mansour in early December, reflects the coalition of leftist parties and entrenched state institutions that participated in Morsi's ouster. It vastly expands the government's role in providing social services; grants unprecedented powers to the military, judiciary, and Interior Ministry; and reduces the role of Islam in public life, at least compared to the previous constitution drafted by a Brotherhood-dominated committee (see [PolicyWatch #2183](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-new-constitution-bleak-prospects), "<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-new-constitution-bleak-prospects>"). And while it technically protects a wide range of civil liberties, it often undercuts them by stating that they are to be "regulated by law."

Yet the constitution's content is somewhat immaterial: Egyptian governments have rarely honored the relatively liberal articles of previous charters, and various clauses within the new draft (e.g., the ban on religious parties; the

provisions mandating massive increases in state spending) are unlikely to be implemented. As a result, public debate on the referendum has largely ignored the constitution's text, instead depicting the plebiscite as a test of the post-Morsi transition's popular legitimacy.

TURNOUT WILL SHAPE POSTURING, NOT OUTCOMES

No referendum in Egyptian history has ever yielded a "no" vote, and this week's result is expected to follow suit.

Supporters and opponents of Morsi's ouster are thus focused on voter turnout -- specifically, whether this week's referendum will beat the 32.8 percent turnout for the 2012 constitutional referendum held under Morsi.

Those who supported his ouster are thus pushing for a high turnout, which would bolster their claim that the post-Morsi transition maintains strong popular legitimacy. During a speech on Sunday, Mansour compared voting in the referendum to participating in the mass protests against Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and Morsi in 2013, calling the constitution's passage vital "so that we can complete our revolution the way we wanted it." Similarly, the state-run media, along with many privately owned television stations and the Coptic pope, have urged Egyptians to vote "yes," and the non-Islamist parties and movements that backed Morsi's ouster are mobilizing their supporters to that effect. The military has also signaled its investment in a strong turnout. On January 10, Defense Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi issued a detailed plan for 160,000 officers and conscripts to guard 30,317 polling locations; a day later, he implied that his decision to run for president would be tied to the referendum's results. The government is so concerned about turnout that, on Sunday evening, presidential advisor Ali Awad hinted that voting might be extended to a third day.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood and other factions are calling for a boycott, believing that low turnout would bolster their argument that Egyptians broadly reject the post-Morsi transition. In this vein, Brotherhood leaders have compared voting in the referendum to "participation in bloodshed," while Doha-based Egyptian sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi -- who is ideologically close to the Brotherhood and retains a broad following in his native country -- issued a fatwa last week supporting a boycott. Pro-Morsi forces are reportedly planning major protests this week, which could ignite violent clashes with security forces.

Yet despite this emphasis on turnout, the outcome is unlikely to alter Egypt's near-term political trajectory. If turnout significantly surpasses that of the 2012 referendum, the government will declare a mandate and thus continue its crackdown on the Brotherhood -- which it views as an existential threat -- while moving ahead with presidential and parliamentary elections. And although turnout near or below the 2012 mark would greatly alarm the government, its response would be the same: continuing its crackdown in order to counter a resurgent Brotherhood, then moving ahead with elections to better consolidate its political claims. The referendum's outcome is also unlikely to change the Brotherhood's strategy, which has been to reject any post-Morsi political process as the product of an illegitimate coup.

THE SALAFIST WILD CARD

In contrast, the narrower question of Salafist turnout could have very significant implications for Egypt's long-term security and stability. While many analysts fear that the Brotherhood's political exclusion could lead its cadres to embrace organized terrorism, the literalist interpretation of Islamic law embraced by Salafists makes them far more ideologically proximate to violent jihadists. Egypt's estimated 3-6 million Salafists are therefore the most likely source of recruitment for jihadists as they continue their terrorist campaign against the government. Even high voter turnout among Salafists would hardly prevent some of them from joining the jihad, but low turnout would signal deep feelings of disenfranchisement and therefore a broad base of support for antigovernment violence.

On the eve of the referendum, either outcome seems possible. On one hand, the Salafist Nour Party, the political wing of the Alexandria-based group al-Dawa al-Salafiya, has strongly supported a "yes" vote: it has aggressively

campaigns in support of the constitution, including through public conferences featuring its most prominent sheikhs. Given the party's nationwide mobilizing capabilities and social services networks, as well as its relative freedom under the current government, Nour's advocacy could have a strong impact on Salafist turnout. By contrast, the major Salafist parties advocating a boycott lack these advantages: the Watan Party, whose chief was a Morsi advisor, formed only a year ago and does not have a strong nationwide presence, while the government has curtailed the political activities of al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization.

On the other hand, the Nour Party's backing of the referendum puts it at odds with many influential Salafist sheikhs, most notably Abu Ishaq al-Heweny, who issued a fatwa calling for a boycott. Nour's support for a government that is cracking down on other Islamists has also catalyzed a steep decline in its support, as reflected in recent polls. And in stark contrast to the rigidly hierarchical Brotherhood, Salafist parties exert no control over their rank and file; accordingly, some mid-level Nour leaders have indicated that they might not follow the party's decision to support a "yes" vote.

To be sure, measuring precise Salafist turnout will be difficult. There will be no exit polling, and the fact that the Egyptian government will permit only around 6,000 observers to monitor over 30,000 polling locations may undercut the credibility of the results. But media reports and comparisons of governorate-level turnout data between this week's referendum and the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections might provide some insight into Salafists' acceptance of the current political process, or lack thereof.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Since Morsi's ouster, the Obama administration has charted a contradictory policy toward Egypt. Despite repeatedly acknowledging its inability to shape Egypt's tumultuous domestic politics, it seemingly attempted to do just that in October, when it partially suspended military aid to Egypt "pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections."

This week's referendum gives Washington an opportunity to recalibrate its Egypt policy, emphasizing the strategic interests it can promote rather than the domestic political outcomes it cannot. More to the point, no matter how well or how poorly the military is intervening in Egypt's politics, neither country's interests are served by allowing violent extremism to grow stronger. Washington should thus resume its normal relationship with the Egyptian military in order to counter the emerging jihadist threat, which has increasingly hit targets west of the Suez Canal. In this vein, Washington should reopen discussions with Cairo over the nature of U.S. military aid, restructuring that assistance to better help Egypt bolster its counterinsurgency capabilities.

At the same time, Washington should continue signaling its displeasure with the military-backed government's undemocratic behavior. Cairo's broad assault on opponents and critics, which has targeted political actors well beyond the Muslim Brotherhood, reduces the chances of political consensus and makes further upheaval more likely. Washington should therefore pursue a balanced approach -- one that emphasizes U.S. strategic interests through resumption of military assistance, but without looking clueless about Egypt's autocratic political trajectory.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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