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Following Egypt's Constitutional Referendum: Polarization and Collapse Egyptian Discourse on the Social Networks, January 2013

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In the two rounds of voting in the referendum on Egypt's constitution (December 15 and December 22, 2012), only 17 million Egyptians – 32 percent of the 52 million Egyptians eligible to vote – cast ballots. Of these, 10 million, i.e., 64 percent of those voting, voted in favor of the constitution, and 7 million, 36 percent, voted against. For every 100 Egyptians, 20 voted in favor, 12 voted against, and 68 did not bother to vote.

The dialogue in the Egyptian social media paints a dismal picture: “forgery, fraud, fear, despair, anger, depression, polarization, and rage” are words that appear frequently in connection with current events in Egypt. The constitution was intended to be a cornerstone of Egypt post-revolution: a reflection of Egyptian society, revolutionary demands, and a national consensus on Egyptian values. Instead, however, the constitution is deepening religious and social rifts in Egypt – between Islamists and secularists, extremists and liberals, rural and urban, and rich and poor, and between those who claim to speak in the name of God and those who speak in the name of liberalism and freedom.

Since President Morsi pushed his constitution through, a sense of social chaos – due to incompetent governance, lack of personal safety, and impending economic collapse – has been expressed on the social networks. This has led Egyptian citizens to arm themselves for self-protection, buy up US dollars, and hunker down against the approaching storm. In other words, there is a sense that it is only a matter of time before Egypt's socioeconomic pyramid collapses. What follows is a breakdown of the main trends now being discussed on Egypt's social networks.

The Shrinking Base of the Muslim Brotherhood

Public opinion leaders on the networks emphasize that only 10 million Egyptians voted in favor of the constitution that affects 90 million citizens, while 7 million voted against. The fact that 68 percent of those eligible to vote boycotted the referendum is a reflection of the lack of confidence in the system.



Cairo: In the capital city, 57 percent of voters rejected the constitution. A statistical analysis shows that the Islamic camp has lost the support of the social and intellectual elite, the middle class, and in some urban neighborhoods, even the poor.

Alexandria: Alexandria has long been known as the primary support base of the Salafist parties in Egypt. In the parliamentary elections, 66 percent of the city's voters cast their ballots for the Freedom and Justice Party or the al-Nour Party. In the referendum, only 56 percent voted in favor of the constitution. The explanation given in the social media is that the tools for mobilization traditionally employed by the Islamists – namely, religious ceremonies and Friday sermons in the mosque – have lost their efficacy.

Lower Egypt (north): In Monufia, Sharqia, Kafr el-Sheikh, and Dakahlia, poor regions with high illiteracy rates, 60 percent of voters approved the constitution, significantly less than the 84 percent who voted for the Islamist parties in the parliamentary elections in 2011. Many on the social networks believe that vote rigging flourishes in impoverished areas, where the votes of the poor are easily bought with handouts of bread, sugar, and fuel. The results of the referendum, however, reveal that even in the poor governorates, such traditional methods are becoming less effective.

Upper Egypt (South): Although the south is also poor with high illiteracy rates, 81 percent voted in favor of the constitution, which the social networks attribute to hatred of and prejudice against the large Coptic population. Islamist imams played the ethnic card, preaching in their Friday sermons: “You have to choose: the Christians or us. Decide whom you want: Muhammad or George.” The majority of the Copts boycotted the elections. In the sentiment voiced on the Egyptian social networks, Egypt “is truly a country where the dead can vote, but the Copts can't.”

Chaos: Lawlessness and Poor Governance

The regime's incompetence in running the country, its failure to deal with the economic crisis, and the weakening of law and order are popular topics of discussion in the social media. Although the Muslim Brotherhood is successful in mobilizing support in elections, it is unable to govern effectively. Five months after President Morsi was elected, he is still unable to pass laws without being forced to suspend or rescind them shortly afterwards. Between early October and December, Morsi enacted four laws: a “constitutional declaration” that granted him absolute power, a ban on pornography, a curfew on shops and cafes, and tax hikes on soft drinks, alcohol, and cigarettes. All were suspended or rescinded because of widespread outrage on the social networks. In December, after the decision was announced that the referendum would proceed as scheduled even in the absence of a national consensus, many senior officials announced their resignation: Egyptian Central Bank Governor Farouq el-Oqda, Egyptian Vice



President and former Judge Mahmoud Mekki, the new public prosecutor Talaat Ibrahim, Minister of Communications Hany Mahmoud, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Mohamed Mahsoub, and several presidential advisors. Attempting to preserve a facade of stability, President Morsi announced that he did not accept their resignations, forcing the officials to withdraw them.

Weakening of Internal Security

Descriptions abound of entire neighborhoods that have armed themselves to protect their residents from theft, violence, and other criminal activity. In December, 30 party headquarters and offices of the Muslim Brotherhood were vandalized, and some even torched. The main office of the al-Wafd party, the offices of the independent media, and several Cairo police stations were attacked, and two Salafi preachers in Alexandria were forced to take refuge in mosques after being chased by angry mobs. Meanwhile, the Sinai Peninsula has become fertile ground for terrorism and organized crime, including weapons and drug smuggling, which has created a flourishing black market in gas and basic foodstuffs.

The Collapse of the Socioeconomic Pyramid

One of the goals of the Egyptian revolution was to replace the traditional socioeconomic and political structure with a more democratic and liberal alternative. The first year of the revolution witnessed the collapse of the top tier of the pyramid, including the removal of President Mubarak, senior officials in his administration, and later, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces. The second year of the revolution featured the victory of political Islam and its clash with the secular liberal camp. However, the battle between these two middle class forces over Egypt's future identity is becoming increasingly burdensome on the lower class. In the third year of the revolution, two groups from the bottom of the pyramid are expected to make their own breakthrough: the poor and the radical Salafis. These groups were among the 68 percent who did not vote in the referendum, either because of a lack of interest and frustration, or because the only law they recognize is "God's law." Any economic reform that results in price hikes of food, fuel, and cigarettes could easily ignite this highly volatile situation.

Future Challenges: Polarization and Collapse

Taken together, incompetent governance, weak internal security, economic deterioration, the stagnant tourism industry, and the ongoing civil revolt in Egypt are driving the country towards a severe crisis. Despite the success of the Islamist camp in every election thus far, the secular liberal camp is gaining momentum and their political and organizational power is growing stronger. Although the leaderships of both camps want to avoid complete economic collapse, fear and rejection of the other distracts them from



the nation's needs. Locked in this zero-sum struggle over the rule of *sharia* or liberal freedoms, it is clear to both sides that whoever blinks first will lose. The social networks note that until now, “*Sharia* has yet to feed even a single empty stomach,” and that freedom and human rights will therefore prove triumphant.

The balance of power between the Islamist and secular liberal camps will inevitably affect the character and identity of Egypt. The current socioeconomic structure is unstable given the imbalance between government, the economy, civil society, religion, and internal security. According to the assessment of public opinion leaders on the social networks, despite domestic and foreign interests in Egypt's stability, socioeconomic collapse is inevitable unless the two camps reach a consensus.

