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## Morsi Turns to His Islamist Backers as Egypt's Crisis Grows

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK  
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Facing the most serious crisis of his presidency, Mohamed Morsi is leaning more closely than ever on his Islamist allies in the Muslim Brotherhood, betting on their political muscle to push through a decisive victory in the referendum on Egypt's divisive draft constitution.

As tens of thousands chanted for his downfall or even imprisonment in a fourth day of protests outside the presidential palace, Mr. Morsi's advisers and Brotherhood leaders acknowledged Friday that outside his core base of Islamist supporters he feels increasingly isolated in the political arena and even within his own government. The Brotherhood "is who he can depend on," said one person close to Mr. Morsi, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Mr. Morsi appears to believe that he and the Brotherhood can deliver a strong vote for the draft constitution in next Saturday's referendum — strong enough to discredit the opposition, allow him a fresh start and restore some of his authority.

Struggling to quell protests and violence around the country, Mr. Morsi appeared to offer a new concession to his opponents Friday by opening the door to a possible delay in the referendum on the draft constitution, now scheduled for Dec. 15, and even potential revisions by the Islamist-dominated constitutional assembly.

But opposition leaders turned a deaf ear, reiterating their demands to begin an overhaul of the assembly itself. "He has to take these steps, and I hope that he listens to us," Mohamed

ElBaradei, the former United Nations diplomat and coordinator of the opposition front, said Friday in televised response.

But Mr. Morsi's advisers said he held out little hope of reaching a compromise and planned to continue rallying his Islamist base, a strategy he displayed most vividly in a televised speech to the nation Thursday night. Addressing clashes between his Islamist supporters and their opponents that had killed at least six, Mr. Morsi all but declined to play the unifier, something he could have accomplished by sympathizing equally with those injured or killed on either side.

Instead, he struck the themes with the most resonance to his Islamist supporters, arguing that his backers outside the palace had come under attack by hired thugs paid with "black money" from a conspiracy of loyalists to the ousted president, Hosni Mubarak, and foreign interests determined to thwart the revolution. And he also said that some of the culprits had "direct links" to the political opposition, calling on Egyptians "to stand up to these heinous crimes."

Mr. Morsi's turn back toward his Islamist base is a bet that the Brotherhood's political machine can easily overcome even the re-energized secular opposition. And his advisers argue that achieving even an imperfect constitution will prove his commitment to the democratic rule of law and restore his credibility. But it also contributes to the paralyzing polarization now gripping Egyptian politics. It risks tarnishing both the Constitution and Mr. Morsi as purely partisan and unable to represent all Egyptians. And it makes Mr. Morsi even more dependent on the same insular group that plucked him from anonymity and propelled him to the presidency.

The result could be a hollow victory that perpetuates the instability of the political transition. "O.K., so you will have the referendum on Dec. 15 and you will end up with a 'yes' vote," said Khaled Fahmy, a historian at the American University in Cairo. "On Dec. 16, Egypt will be infinitely more difficult to govern than it already is now."

Some senior Brotherhood leaders have acknowledged that the bruising battle may hurt their party's fortunes in the next parliamentary elections, which are set for February if the constitution passes. "I don't think we will have the same level of trust, and I think our numbers will probably be affected," one senior Brotherhood leader said Friday, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Some who know Mr. Morsi's track record as a Brotherhood political leader say his personality may also be a factor. "Morsi is a stubborn guy," said Shadi Hamid, research director of the Brookings Doha Center and a close observer of the Brotherhood. "He is not known for being very responsive to the people he disagrees with."

But his advisers say that Mr. Morsi is also singularly dependent on the Brotherhood, Egypt's best-organized political force, in part because he distrusts his own government, left largely intact after Mr. Mubarak's exit.

The military has said it will not take sides in the political battle; its generals refused to submit to his authority until three months ago and secured their continued autonomy under the draft charter.

As protesters against the new constitution prepared to march to the presidential palace on Wednesday, Mr. Morsi concluded that he also could not depend on the Interior Ministry to defend it. It had failed to protect more than a dozen Brotherhood offices around the country from attacks over the last two weeks, his advisers said, and he concluded that the ministry's leaders might step aside rather than take actions that might set off a backlash.

“He called on the Muslim Brotherhood to become a human shield and protect the presidency because he can't trust the state,” said the Brotherhood leader. “He is isolated.”

The decision led to the night of deadly street fighting between the Brotherhood and its opponents that has only hardened the political divide. The next day, he called out the tanks of the presidential guard, a special unit under his direct control. His advisers say Mr. Morsi is convinced that his opposition in the assembly negotiated in bad faith over provisions of the planned constitution, appearing to agree to compromises only to walk out at the last minute.

Now Brotherhood leaders and some analysts say no compromise would satisfy them.

“The debate is not about the article of the text,” said Essam El-Erian, a senior Brotherhood leader who was in the constituent assembly. “The real debate is, are we going to have a constitution or not? And they are afraid of democracy.”

But as tens of thousands of his opponents rallied outside the presidential palace for a fourth night on Friday, many said they too did not want a compromise because Mr. Morsi had lost all credibility. “We will return you to prison!” demonstrators cried, recalling Mr. Morsi's months in jail under Mr. Mubarak for his role as a Brotherhood leader. The most common refrain was not about the constitution; it was a call for “the fall of the regime.”