On December 15, Egypt's draft constitution is due to be put to a referendum. A year ago, Egyptians were thrilled to know that finally their country's constitution would reflect their democratic hopes and aspirations. Yet the document that they will now vote on is more likely to dash those hopes and dim Egyptians' prospects for democracy.

The constitutional drafting process was rushed, without the input of liberals, non-Muslims, and women, all of whom boycotted the process, owing to the preponderance of Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood, and primarily President Mohamed Morsi, is banking on the assumption that the strength of Egypt's Islamist vote will earn him enough support among "regular Egyptians," and that the opposition will have little impact on the referendum's outcome.

One political adviser for the ruling Freedom and Justice Party – the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing – even boasted that the Brothers could easily mobilize 20 million supporters. The Brothers dismiss those who have demonstrated in the streets during the past three weeks as Mubarak sympathizers.

Morsi's decision on November 22 to grant himself absolute authority for the spurious purpose of defending the revolution is not new for Egypt. A succession of dictator-presidents ruled the country under a state of emergency for more than 40 years. While Morsi has now bowed to pressure to annul a decree granting him powers without judicial oversight, it seems only yesterday that people were prepared to put their fears aside and trust that Morsi was ready to rule in the interests of all Egyptians.

Eric Trager of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy notes that Morsi's previous role in the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Council sheds some light on the motives behind his current behavior. In the past, Morsi advocated a platform that excluded Christians from political life and granted Islamic scholars oversight authority to ensure that all legislation complied with Sharia law. He also worked to expunge young members of the Freedom and Justice Party that he deemed to hold dissenting views.

While the draft constitution does contain positive provisions, many are causing concern. For example, Article 11 authorizes the state to "safeguard ethics, public morality, and public order, and foster a high level of education and of religious and patriotic values." This leaves plenty of room for interpretation by the government. In addition, the mosque of al-Azhar is promised an

advisory role in Islamic legislation.

The Brothers' political opponents have not been silent. On December 8, the National Salvation Front announced that the draft "does not represent the Egyptian people." Moreover, ordinary Egyptians have responded viscerally and swiftly to Morsi's moves, perhaps more so than he had anticipated. Strikes were called, newspapers halted publication, and fears of widespread insurrection remain high. Hundreds have been injured in street clashes in Cairo. The president's supporters have declared that "defending Morsi is defending Islam."

Today, Morsi seems as besieged as Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. The military has barricaded the presidential palace and, until the results of the referendum are announced, they are under orders to protect Egypt's state institutions.

Outside the Middle East, the United States has scaled back its relations with Egypt since the government's weak response to the attack on the US embassy in September, which signaled a rapid deterioration in bilateral relations. America's main priority now is to ensure that the peace treaty with Israel is maintained.

The European Union cannot afford to engage in wishful thinking when it comes to Morsi's ambitions and the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda. The EU's "more for more" policy has made human rights a cornerstone of its foreign policy toward states in the Union's neighborhood. And, though Morsi's recent role in mediating discussions between Hamas and the Israeli government was invaluable in preventing a serious regional conflict, his government's actions are undermining prospects for further cooperation with Europe.

No matter how Morsi attempts to sideline his domestic opponents, Egypt is in no shape to ignore the rest of the world. It lacks a stable economy, relying heavily on tourism and imports to feed the country's more than 80 million people. Power cuts and public-service strikes are a regular feature of daily life.

Egypt's government needs to secure consistent foreign financing to keep the country afloat, providing leverage for international opposition to Morsi's efforts to impose an agenda that runs contrary to Egyptians' fundamental rights. Egypt can thrive only on the basis of honest adherence to a democratic process.

The current constitutional crisis has caused many to wonder how Egypt will face future political tests. The referendum's outcome will prove an important guide regarding the direction the country is likely to take. Will it embrace a new Islamic authoritarianism, or build the democracy that Egyptians have risked their lives to secure?