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## EGYPT | Prayer Called for as Egyptians Vote in Referendum

As Egyptians began two days of voting in a referendum on a new constitution, the General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK issued a call for three days of prayer for peace and safety.

In a statement released on Jan. 14, His Grace Bishop Angaelos said, “With Egyptians venturing out to proactively live this new spirit of ownership and citizenship, we pray they are safe in doing so and that they see Egypt move to the next stage of this constitutional and democratic process.”

The Bishop’s call to prayer comes amidst continuing security concerns across Egypt, with masked gunmen shooting at a church in Fayoum, Cairo early Jan. 14, and reports of several killed or injured in clashes with security forces.

With Egyptians abroad having already voted overwhelmingly in favor of the constitution on Jan. 12, the referendum is widely expected to result in its acceptance. Egypt’s army chief General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi has hinted he may run for the presidency in the event of a strong “yes” vote.

Groups and individuals from across the political and religious spectrum have called for participation in the referendum, including the Grand Imam of al-Azhar University, Ahmed al-Tayyeb, the spokesman of the Salafi al-Nour Party, and representatives of the church, including Coptic Pope Tawadros II, Coptic Catholic Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak, and Vice-President of the Protestant Community of Egypt, Andrea Zaki. However, some have boycotted the referendum, including the Muslim Brotherhood-led Anti-Coup Alliance and the Strong Egypt Party. In a continuation of the Muslim Brotherhood’s demonization of the Coptic community as being responsible for the removal of former President Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood website is focusing on the high turnout of Coptic voters.

The period leading up to the referendum has been marred by the arrests of prominent activists, “no” campaigners, and journalists.

While the new constitution removes several controversial articles which would have paved the way for a restrictive interpretation of Shari’a law, the provisions for freedom of religion or belief remain applicable to Muslims, Christians, and Jews only. However, direct references to international human rights statutes would appear to illustrate a commitment to uphold this and other rights.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christianity Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, “As the people of Egypt continue to vote, we join in prayers for a peaceful process. We welcome the

positive signs of religious inclusivity shown by the interim leaders of Egypt, as illustrated by the unprecedented visit of the Interim President, Adly Mansour, to Coptic Pope Tawadros II on 5 January. There is consensus around the need to establish a stable society based on the rule of law, justice and tolerance for dissenting views. CSW encourages the Egyptian authorities to continue with the timely implementation of the rest of the transitional roadmap, and to facilitate the emergence of an inclusive and just society."