

Egypt: what's left of the left?

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Amira Howeidy listens in as the Egyptian left attempts to salvage a role

As media pundits and politicians continue to ponder the future of political Islam in Egypt following the Muslim Brotherhood's election successes the left has all but disappeared over the horizon from where, presumably, it has been ruminating on its losses — a process, one might suppose, not without a certain bitterness.

In a follow-up seminar to last month's discussions of "the crisis of the Egyptian left" the Socialist Studies Centre on Sunday invited a number of leading left-wing figures, including veteran lawyer Nabil El-Hilali and the Tagammu's Abdel-Ghafar Shukr, to address the future of the left.

The results of the parliamentary elections, said Shukr, clearly showed that the left hardly qualified as "a political pole" in today's Egypt. In approaching the reasons why this is the case the speakers were initially cautious, though the discussion soon turned into a scathing self-criticism of the past failures.

Khaled Hamza, a communist and member of the left-wing Al-Tagammu, reminded the audience that the left once had a presence on the streets and in society. This, he continued, is obviously no longer the case. "The left's first major withdrawal was when it abandoned the people... Some then sided with the regime while others simply stayed at home."

The behaviour of Al-Tagammu, believes Hamza, singling out recent headlines in the party's mouthpiece Al-Ahali which appear to highlight the links between the government and a supposedly opposition party, has impacted negatively across the entire left.

"Al-Ahali," said Hamza, actually urged Mubarak to interfere and stop his party's thugs [from attacking candidates and voters] during the elections. "He listed other reasons why the left was no longer a presence on the political scene. It is too scattered and divided, and on too many occasions the various factions have squandered whatever political capital they possessed on squabbling among themselves." "We need to unite, we need a party," he continued, "an Egyptian communist party that can Egyptianise Marxism... An elected, democratic party... we communists have never experienced democracy [from within]. We know only centralisation." Veteran left-wing lawyer Nabil El-Hilali was more sceptical about the left's future. "We need to admit that the left is indeed absent. And if it cannot make its presence felt today it will have no future tomorrow." "If its presence is to be felt, though, a number of challenges must be faced. For one thing, argued El-Hilali, the definition of the Egyptian left needs to be revised: it now consists of a wide array of factions," communists, Nasserists, the Karama Party, Arab nationalists and in the future, perhaps, a religious left which could very well impact the future of political Islam in Egypt".

Without self-criticism and an honest acceptance of past mistakes the left "won't have any credibility with the people".

In the past, he continued, "the communist Egyptian left indulged in theoretical debates about

Marxism. It learned Marxist texts by heart, adopted the experiences of others without devising mechanisms to fit our Arab reality. It approached Marxism as if it was sacred, ignoring the fact that it is not a monotheistic religion but a methodology.”

On a practical level this has led to the left’s failure to organise, certainly when compared to what El-Hilali describes as the “committed and iron-like organisation” of the Muslim Brotherhood. Even more disastrously, the left “divorced itself from its social base of workers and labourers and has been ineffective with students”.

“The left has been completely absent from [recent] national struggles, contenting itself with watching from the comfort of closed rooms while others were working.”

But all is not yet lost. There is still hope, El-Hilali suggests, if leftists find a way to work together, though “not in the form of yet another political party”. What is needed, he says, is a broad non-ideological coalition, “including as many factions as possible and able to steer away from the typical ghettoising of Trotskyites, Nasserists and the like”.

Because leftists cannot hope to achieve political change alone, El-Hilali echoed the calls made by less radical leftist factions on the importance of working with Islamists, urging “hysterical and frantic critics” of such a move to “stop”.

“There are fundamental differences but we are agreed on our opposition to the regime and to imperialism... There is no justification in refraining from engaging in joint work.”

Tamer Wageeh, of the Socialist Studies Centre, pointed to the “ill-defined” masses of activists who have taken to the streets in the last six years, citing Intifada solidarity demonstrations, anti-war protests and the more recent demonstrations demanding change in Egypt. But instead of swelling the ranks of left-wing factions these young and politicised activists are rejecting the left label.

“They don’t define themselves as yassar (left) though they subscribe to its principles — anti-privatisation, anti- imperialism, women’s rights, Coptic rights and so on — because the reputation of the Egyptian left has put them off. The challenge is to integrate these people into the movement.”

It is equally important, he added, for the left-leaning anti- Mubarak group Kifaya to not just maintain its activities but expand them to include socio-economic issues.

If the left doesn’t work on enhancing its appeal, he said, the results are easy to foresee. “There will be a great void and people will simply turn to the right.”

P.S.

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