The neoliberal war of movement of the 1990s and 2000s forcefully reconfigured the economic structure and class alliances of the post populist bloc along even stronger authoritarian lines. In the next chapter I discuss the gradual emergence of a new left, the resurgence of street politics, and the complex relation between leftists and Muslim Brothers.

Crisis of the ‘Legal Left’

The fall of the Soviet Union and the associated discrediting of socialist thought in general encouraged the Tagammu leadership to translate their tactical ‘secular-democratic’ turn and alliance with the régime into a new ideological framework. For the elections of 1995 the traditional Tagammu slogan of ‘Freedom, Socialism, and Unity’ was replaced by ‘Justice, Progress, and Democracy’. The 1998 party congress stated that socialism was no longer on the agenda, and that Egypt should strive toward ‘democracy’ and ‘independent development’ (Down to Earth 2000). How ‘independent development’ differed from ‘normal’ capitalist accumulation was not clear, as the party no longer resisted privatization in principle (Seeking a New Style 1995). Rifaat al-Said cynically asked how one could defend socialism in an age of liberalization:

Of course, we have changed – there is no party that can remain the same. For example, our first platform spoke of the consolidation and support of the public sector, then reality changed and we had to adapt, so we changed that to ‘protection of the public sector’. Then we called for the ‘defence’ of the public sector and now that the public sector has been practically sold, we call for ‘the preservation of organizations and institutions of national importance’.

State repression and the demobilization of the masses after the uprising of 1977 made Tagammu leaders look for shortcuts toward successful leftist politics. The détente during the first years of the Mubarak régime created illusions in the potential and autonomy of democratic politics on the national level. In order to operate within the boundaries of the restricted political community, the ‘legal left’ cut its relations with its traditional social base of workers,
peasants, and students – thereby further weakening its position vis-à-vis the régime. Communist leader Salah Adli explained that:

At the end of the eighties a number of Marxists claimed that the direction of Tagammu, which opposed the government and took the side of the poor people and workers, led to a loss of support from the middle class and the industrial productive capitalists. They claimed that Tagammu had to diminish its class policies and represent a more moderate policy, and to diminish its opposition toward the régime, so that it can use the media in a better way. But the results were devastating for Tagammu. Tagammu lost MPs, members, and support in civil society.¹

The rise of the Islamist movements and a reluctance to ‘go back to the streets’, drove the leaders of Tagammu and the ECP even more into the arms of the régime. After the repression of the 1977 insurrection the prospect of mass mobilization had been greeted with cynicism from party leaders. In the 1990s and 2000s, with Islamism on the rise, it was anticipated with dread: Rifaat al-Said claimed that the Brotherhood was the only organization capable of ‘controlling’ a mass movement (in Farag 2007) – which revealed a lot about al-Said’s paternalist pedagogy toward the masses. In 1999, for the first time, Tagammu MPs did not vote against another term for president Mubarak (Down to Earth 2000). By the year 2000, the legal left, and especially Tagammu, was but the historical remnant of the failed Prince of the second half of the 1970s. Once it had been a party of some 200,000 members, but the integration of its leaders and politics in the Mubarak post populist and neoliberal bloc had reduced its active cadre to a few hundreds. In 2003 an internal report admitted that the party had lost its traditional influence in the universities, professionals syndicates, and trade unions (Tagammu Gets Tougher 2003). When, in 2009, I spoke with Husayn Abd al-Razek, a leader of the old guard in Tagammu, he admitted that: “[…] for years, Tagammu took no initiatives whatsoever, people only sat in the party’s headquarters and in the offices of the newspaper, discussing, not taking any action to the streets.”²

A New Left

In a 2007 article for MERIP Egyptian blogger and leftist activist Hossam al-Hamalawy distinguished between an ‘old’ and a ‘new’ left. Egypt’s new left

¹ Interview with Salah Adli, Cairo, 13 November 2010.
² Interview with Husayn Abd al-Razik, Cairo, 12 April 2009.