

In Conversation with **Dr Mostafa El Feki**

Asseel Darwish

Dr Mostafa El Feki is Director of the New Library of Alexandria. He has been a Professor of Political Science at the American University in Cairo, and has held numerous posts in the Egyptian government, including Ambassador to Austria.

I spoke to Dr El Feki about the importance of Egypt's global artistic and cultural contributions, the infamous 2011 Egyptian Revolution, and Egypt's outlook on, and role in, the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict.

Dr Mostafa El Feki has witnessed five Egyptian presidencies and been prominent in the political sphere for the last four and a half decades. He is well placed to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each Egyptian President to have served over the last 50 years. He outlines in detail how each President has helped or hindered Egypt's status as a major Middle Eastern state, in addition to how the Egyptian populace have felt about each President.

I have to be honest and say that if I answered this question based on my own personal emotions, I would favour President Nasser's legacy above all else. However, objectively speaking, with regard to stratagem and policy-making, I am compelled to highlight President El Sadat's policies for their success. At first glance, this may feel like a contradiction. However, I don't feel it is so. To offer you just a snapshot of my thought process regarding your question, President Nasser's charisma and leadership were extremely attractive to my generation. For us, and many after us, he was a national hero. However, President El Sadat's wisdom and political initiatives were also well received by the majority of the Egyptian people, especially in relation to the breakthrough he accomplished towards securing peace between Egypt and Israel in 1978, an accomplishment for which he was rightfully recognised by virtue of his ascertainment of a Nobel Peace Prize.

Having 'worked most closely with [Hosni Mubarak] during [his] time as Political Secretary' (July 1985–October 1992), Dr El Feki speaks candidly of this highly controversial President, whose 30-year reign incited the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Acknowledging that 'Mubarak was a highly nationalistic leader and had a great career in the military service within the Egyptian Air Force', Dr El Feki also expresses his reservations. 'His problem was that he didn't take full advantage of the "time factor" despite his extensive presidency, hence losing out on several valuable opportunities for the country during his term in office.'

With respect to the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Dr El Feki identifies 'the main goal of the revolution' as 'the call for social justice and equality in Egypt. This is the reason you could see signs reading "A loaf of bread and justice" at the heart of the mobilisation in Tahrir Square ... This is also why many raised the picture of Nasser, as he was considered the symbol of social justice during his period of leadership.' Dr El Feki insists, '[i]t is also important to note that none of the slogans of the Egyptian revolution made an indication towards foreign policy or propaganda against Israel.'

When asked about Mohammed Morsi, a President yet more controversial whose term was cut short after one year and one month, Dr El Feki keeps his response brief and forthright. 'With respect to President Morsi, he had no remarkable achievements during his tenure and his policies were widely considered to be a reflection of those the Muslim Brotherhood adopted.' When pressed on why Morsi's tenure proved fruitless, Dr El Feki insists that 'he made no progress whatsoever in any field of development. In fact, I believe his entire presidency was an immense failure.'

Dr El Feki passionately praises Egypt's current President Al Sisi as 'a practical leader, who prefers field work and a hands-on approach', whose 'aim is to modernise all fields of Egyptian life—especially with respect to education, health, and infrastructure.' Moreover, with regards to foreign policy, President Al Sisi 'has adopted a balanced approach which continues to strengthen Egypt's prosperous relations with other nations.'

Depicting him as a true reformer, Dr El Feki believes that President Al Sisi 'is one of the most active leaders we have ever had in spite of the many challenges facing our country, particularly the waves of terrorism haunting Egypt, economic reform challenges, and the responsibility of realising the hopes and dreams of the Egyptian layman.'

Turning to foreign affairs, locked in paralysis, the Israel–Palestine conflict is a human rights crisis with seemingly no end in sight. The issue has divided much of the Arab and Western worlds, and there

have been many different proposals for mitigation. However, Dr El Feki makes Egypt's stance abundantly clear. 'Egypt has no other goals than lifting the burden on the Palestinian people.'

Dr El Feki was initially hopeful about a 'two-state solution'. He noted in 2003:

Despite all the mistakes committed by the administration of George W. Bush, the announcement through the Security Council of a state of Israel and a state of Palestine is a step forward. It was never mentioned in Clinton's time or by any other previous President. It implies that Israel and Palestine can have clearly defined, fixed borders, and if we can build on such a breakthrough it will improve the image of the Americans and the British.

However, Dr El Feki recognises that, in the current climate, 'the regional and international circumstances have completely changed, and we are facing a new American administration. Therefore, the Palestinian factions must stand together in solidarity in order to present their case. We are in the stage of exploring the new US administration.'

Fascinated by Dr El Feki's proclamation that 'The "deal of the century" is buried with the departure of Donald Trump', I could not resist enquiring further into the layers of such an emboldened statement. Dr El Feki obliges me. 'While the package of the deal itself is considered new, the truth is that it is an extension of all the ideas and initiatives under the banner of what we call "the economic solution to the Palestinian problem."' Finding such stratagems inadequate and complacent, Dr El Feki notes that '[n]o achievements were realised through this kind of initiative, and it was completely rejected by the Palestinian and Arab hardliners, who viewed it as an attempt to liquidate the issue at large and negate the rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people.'

The mind of Dr El Feki, a diplomat, political scientist, historian, and renowned writer, is a cornucopia of expertise. He has also worked with and befriended countless influential and inspirational figures over his extensive career. They inspired several of his memoirs, infusing his writing with humorous, invigorating, and intellectually stimulating tones. El Feki tells me how his memoirs developed.

What I was trying to do when I was writing these profiles was to share my personal thoughts on some of the most prominent and influential people I have met during my life. I was not trying to write the history of the past 60 years, not intentionally anyway, but obviously I met very many people who had a direct impact on the history of the past six decades in very many ways.

Fervently emphasising the importance of Egyptian artistic, cultural, and scientific contributions on the world stage, Dr El Feki stresses that such contributions are embedded in the fabric of Egypt's history and progress. To divorce one from the other is to tell a false and incomplete narrative. 'A good part of the story of [the] nation during the last six decades has to be attributed to leading figures in art, science, and education.' El Feki cites such leading figures as the 'greatest soft power reserve of the country'. He has 'always been a believer in a nation's ability to exert influence through art and culture, and these things have certainly been an asset to Egypt during the twentieth and twenty-first [centuries].'

Dr El Feki reveals that his original aspirations for his memoirs revolved around 'writing these profiles that were to be published in the newspapers before [he] settled on covering a selection in

the three books'. He says his core intent was '[t]o share images of achievement and integrity that I have come across with the younger generation, in a sense offering possible role models for a younger generation complaining about the lack of inspiring figures.'

According to Dr El Feki, his memoirs were meant not to adjudicate or criticise, but to uplift and motivate younger generations by reminding them of the many inspiring and impactful achievements that Egypt has contributed to the world. In his own words, Dr El Feki was 'deliberately reflecting on people who could inspire traits worthy of respect'. He insists: 'My intention was not to judge anyone or any particular era, but instead to tell the story as I had seen it unfolding. In the history of the past six decades, contrary to some assumptions today, there were many positive, not just unfortunate, things to reflect on.'

When reflecting on his youth, Dr El Feki expresses a deep love for London. 'London is my favourite city in the world', he says simply. 'It is where I got my academic degrees and where my two daughters were born. In fact, I still have a house in the centre of London, where I come whenever possible to reconnect with my British and international friends and colleagues.' El Feki's degrees were a master's and PhD (1977) in Political Science from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Of all the stages of his life, Dr El Feki says his time at SOAS was his 'favourite experience'.

Dr El Feki has held numerous government positions. He was Secretary of Information and Follow-Up to the President. He was made Ambassador at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1995, and Senior First Assistant Foreign Minister in 2000. He is now Director of the New Library of Alexandria. Does he have any dreams left to accomplish? Dr El Feki says that he is 'currently fulfilling [a life] that combines all of [his] experiences and accomplishments.' He adds: 'I am completing my memoirs, which have surprisingly been very well received across Egypt and the Arab world ... I have just recently completed four editions in two weeks, which gives me plenty of time to create new dreams.'

Apart from his professional dreams however, his private aspirations consist of self-care and service to others. 'I am mainly looking forward to a peaceful life and better health, while at the same time helping the younger generation to fulfil their aspirations as much as I can.' Dr El Feki concludes our discussion with sentiments of hope and ambition.

I would like to tell my sons and daughters that life in itself is a constant challenge. This is why it is important to be fully supported by modern education, to adopt the best manners, and to embrace the new tools of our contemporary life. I hope that they will seize on all the chances and opportunities that emerge in their path, and that they will work together to protect and enhance the wellbeing of their respective countries.

Asseel Darwish is a first-year undergraduate in English at University College London, interested in foreign diplomacy and commercial law. She is a Senior Politics Editor at *CJLPA*. She has worked in mental health advocacy and course development within UCL's Student–Staff Consultative Committees, and is part of the new 'Student Voice Project'. In 2021 she will begin working for Ashbourne College as a content writer, and for the not-for-profit GoodWill Caravan, which gives vulnerable refugees emergency care.
