

The people of our time

President of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Mustafa Al-Feki talks to **Dina Ezzat** about his profiles of people that sum up the recent history of Egypt

It was late last month that Dar Al-Masriya Al-Lebnaniya, a publishing house, held a well-attended signing of three recent books by Mustafa Al-Feki, a prominent diplomat, political commentator and chairman of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria.

The three books were published in 2016, 2017 and 2018 and consist of a series of profiles of leading figures who have shaped the history of the nation for over 60 years.

"I Knew them Well" (*Araftahom an Korb*), "People on the Road" (*Shakhssiyyat ala Al-Tariq*) and "My Memories with Them" (*Zekrayati maahom*) include over 600 profiles of men and women whose political, literary, scientific and other contributions have left an imprint on the country.

Al-Feki had personally met, worked with, or befriended all of them through his years in diplomacy, politics and intellectual life.

They include political figures from across the spectrum, with some controversial names. Al-Feki's profiles include figures such as Ibrahim Shoukri, a leftist-turned-Islamist and former leader of the Labour Party, Ashraf Marwan, son-in-law of former president Gamal Abdel-Nasser and bureau chief of late president Anwar Al-Sadat, Amin Fakhri Abdel-Nour, a prominent Coptic Wafd Party figure, Mahdi Akef, former supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Khairat Al-Shater, influential second man of the Islamist group, Zeinab Al-Ghazali, founder of the Women's League of the Muslim Brotherhood, leading artists including singers Um Kolthoum and Abdel-Halim Hafez, and prominent journalists Mohamed Al-Tabaai, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, Ahmed Bahaaeddin, and Fahmy Howeidy.

The three volumes of Al-Feki's profiles provide an insight into the politics of the six decades since the July Revolution in 1952, with an insight into the palace intrigues of the last years of the country's last monarch king Farouk to the declining years of ousted former president Hosni Mubarak.

While not often offering direct judgements, Al-Feki shares his dismay at the many political arrests that occurred during the rule of former president Gamal Abdel-Nasser, which included members of the Muslim Brotherhood like Farid Abdel-Khalek "who was too decent to attack Nasser" in interviews, suspected Islamist sympathisers like Ahmed Kamal Abul-Magd, "despite his unmistakable presence, on the political scene during Nasser's socialist days," and Abdel-Azim Anis, a prominent leftist academic "who suffered in Nasser's prisons but who still had faith in Nasser."

"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," Al-Feki said in an interview



with the *Weekly* following the signing of his books.

While diplomats and politicians, including autocrats like former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, have a "lion's share" in the three volumes, there is also special attention given to scientists and journalists.

Environmentalist Abdel-Fattah Al-Kassas is credited for his pioneering views that "never received due credit" like those of many prominent scientists in Egypt. Physicians like Ibrahim Badran and Yassin Abdel-Ghaffar are portrayed as modest and decent human beings not just as brilliant doctors. Meanwhile, Al-Tabaai, Heikal, Bahaaeddin and Howeidy are spotlighted for their exceptional influence, whether or not the author agrees with them.

"A good part of the story of our nation during the last six decades has to be attributed to leading figures in art, science and education. These people have always been the greatest soft-power reserve of the country. I have 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 20th century," Al-Feki said.

He added that "when I started writing these profiles that were published in the newspapers before I settled down to doing a selection in the three books, I was originally trying to 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."

He said that when writing the profiles he had been "deliberately reflecting on people who could inspire traits wor-

thy of respect. My point 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 good, not just unfortunate things to reflect on."

According to Al-Feki, while it would be true for anyone reading the history of the past six decades to question the ability of the Nasser era to observe political rights, it should be equally true to recognise that the Nasser era had the incredible inspiration of independence, leadership and social justice to draw upon.

"Ultimately, it was this inspiration that gained Nasser the support of prominent intellectual figures who were nevertheless subjected to harsh experiences during his rule," Al-Feki argued.

While the early years of the July Revolution did not necessarily enjoy the prompt admiration of new generations of artists and thinkers, prominent artists like Um Kolthoum and Abdel-Halim Hafez flourished during its heyday and prominent figures like former culture minister Tharwat Okasha provided wider access to art and culture.

Al-Feki said that while Nasser's rule could be blamed for violations of the architectural heritage of the former ruling Mohamed Ali family, the rule of Hosni Mubarak could be credited with a sincere attempt to restore many of these places.

This was precisely the point that the books were making — to explain that nothing is one-sided, he said. The 25 January Revolution attempted to condemn everything in the past as wrong, but this was not true as the profiles

were mostly written before 25 January 2011. "If we really want to move on, we have to read the past carefully and put things into context," he said.

Al-Feki said that "when we say that most of the leading figures of the second half of the 20th century had already attended school and university before the July Revolution, we need to also take note of the fact that the military defeat of 1967 took a very heavy toll on all the country's development plans, including the quality of education and other services."

Moreover, some of the accounts in the books, the product of first-hand information, reveal some otherwise unacknowledged details. They include accounts of the "often-underestimated political history of late president Anwar Al-Sadat in the lead-up to the July Revolution", "neglected details about cultural and literary contributions during Mubarak's rule", and "about the true commitment of Mubarak to securing the safety and integrity of Egyptian territory despite his cautious nature that prompted him to act as a caretaker president during the last 10 years of his rule."

Al-Feki's books also offer insight into the transformations in attitudes of society, such that the country's Copts and Muslims had a closer relationship when liberated from the religious bias in the years leading up to the July Revolution. In his account of prominent Coptic lawyer Amin Fakhri Abdel-Nour, Al-Feki recalls that when Abdel-Nour was going to propose to his future spouse he went to her family with the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Mustafa Al-Maraghi, in person, and that when Abdel-Nour's brother Maurice passed away the Muslims in his village asked to have him buried in the Muslim cemetery out of love and respect for him.

A few decades down the road, one Muslim family from the same village, Al-Feki writes, turned down the sponsorship the Abdel-Nour family gives to smart school students "because the family is Coptic".

On another path of transformation, Al-Feki reflects on changes in the style of the oldest Political Islam group in Egypt with accounts of the political arrogance demonstrated by the younger generation after the ouster of Mubarak.

"I subscribe to freedom of expression, and I have always had respect for various Islamist figures because of their open-mindedness and willingness to integrate despite my deep reservations about the ideas they hold," Al-Feki said. "But I can never condone or turn a blind eye to any attempt to resort to violence or to threaten national unity under any pretext."

Al-Feki's books fall short of reflecting on those who designed the fate of the nation in the post-January 2011 years. Perhaps there will be another series of profiles of figures from the last six years, which have seen opportunities offered and opportunities lost, as well as much disarray and hope.