

# Ahmed Mourad, court photographer

Mourad, the official photographer Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi, also writes successful thrillers...

by Farian Sabahi

“**T**he hardest thing to deal with when taking photographs of President Hosni Mubarak was the stark contrast between spending time with the high and mighty during the day and my evening return home to my wife and daughters in a popular neighbourhood where people do nothing but complain about their daily toil. After five years I’d amassed so much material I felt duty bound to put down all I’d witnessed on paper”.

Thirty five years old, with a shy smile and dark, thick-lensed glasses, Ahmed Mourad is the palace photographer in Cairo. After graduating from the College of Photographic and Film Studies, he applied for the post as official portrait photographer for President Mubarak.

Since 2007 Mourad has also been writing thrillers set in Egypt, a new literary genre for the Arab world. His books talk of corruption and abuse of power, with an attention to detail and painstaking descriptions of the settings that betray his photographic background.

So far, only his novel *Vertigo* has been translated into English and published by the Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation. It has now been adapted for television and won the Carical Foundation’s 2013 Mediterranean Culture Award. It portrays a world of big business getting rich by exploiting people.

In *Diamond Dust*, Mourad described Egypt from the 1950s to the Tahrir Square revolution: a story soon to be made into a film. While a cinema production company has already raised 40 million Egyptian pounds (€4.3M) for a big screen version of *The Blue Elephant*, which sold



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60,000 copies in nine months. This work features elves, examining the age old fear they arouse in Middle Eastern peoples.

Mourad writes thrillers by night, while by day he trains his Nikon 28-300mm lens on Egyptian political life, without resorting to Photoshop because “if the agencies spot that a photo has been touched up, they reject it right away”.

Ten years with Mubarak, one year with Mohamed Morsi, then the next raia to come along. All different personalities, even in their approach to the camera: “Mubarak didn’t pay much attention to photos; he was more interested in other forms of media. Morsi always seemed to freeze in front of the camera; he only relaxed when we walked out. But neither of them could match President Sadat: he certainly knew how to strike a pose!”

Mourad has no qualms about expressing his own political views, beyond the camera: “Mubarak tried his best, but failed because there was so much corruption and he stayed in power too long”. This may be a very lenient view of a dictator, but it is shared by many Egyptians.

His opinion of Mubarak’s successor is harsher: “Morsi was not a real president, he merely followed the orders of the Muslim Brotherhood and, day after day, he became deaf to the people’s requests”.

He uses more sarcastic tones to talk about the Muslim Brotherhood, who “have had the great merit of uniting citizens, Christians and Muslims, the police and the armed forces. People from all walks of life joined together to say no! to policies dictated by religion, to the idea of

a ruling God, a theocracy, a regime where a single priest hands out blessings and indulgences”.

As for what is going on in Egypt now, Mourad says “Overall I’m optimistic, it will take another two or three years to achieve stability”. Of course the present is worrying too, given that “The terrorist threat is linked to a political entity that has held power and is trying to get it back - a wounded beast can be dangerous. But it can’t succeed because our society is no longer prepared to put up with the Muslim Brotherhood and its decision to appoint fundamentalists in key positions. Just think of the religious zealot put in charge of a famous theater: he cancelled the ballet program because there’s no mention of classical dance in the Koran. They took something away from us without giving us anything in exchange - it’s hard not to have a negative view of them.”

Rebellion is compulsory, and in fact in *Diamond Dust* the young journalist Sara, whom the main character Taha fancies so much, is an example of someone who sticks her neck out and puts up staunch opposition. Tangled plots, a clever mix of mystery and exposé, with a touch of irony and even nostalgia for a society respectful of minorities, Mourad’s novels are an expression of Egyptian society. Because “Political writing cannot do without reality, which must be mixed with the secrets of the human soul. I feel as if I’m a chef knowingly combining ingredients, and sometimes like a gardener, arranging a bouquet by picking a red flower here and a yellow leaf from a little further over there”.

However, Ahmed Mourad’s works have not escaped criticism: “I’ve been rebuked for my use of dialect and

rude language in *Diamond Dust*. I wanted to use the language of prostitutes, the kind of words the police use to insult peddlers and prisoners. I did it on purpose, to stir things up, show reality in all its ugliness, because the Tahrir Square revolution has fuelled the need to know and now there is a yearning for awareness. Of course I have enemies, but a man with no enemies is like a dish with no salt. I can’t please everyone; even the prophets couldn’t manage that!” **E**

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Farian Sabahi is a leader writer on Iran for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* and writes about Islamic culture for the daily *IlSole24Ore*.

**E** Ahmed Mourad worked for ten years as the official photographer of Egyptian Presidents Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi.



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