

Advocacy dossier

Sanaa Seif

سناء سيف

At liberty **Egypt**

Sanaa Seif was abducted in June 2020 outside the prosecutor's office where she had gone to file a complaint after being assaulted. She was sentenced to 18 months in prison for protesting her brother's detention and denied a fair trial. She served the full sentence and was released in December 2021. She had been imprisoned twice before, in 2014 to 2015 and in 2016.

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The case at a glance

Sanaa Seif was abducted in June 2020 outside the prosecutor's office where she had gone to file a complaint after being assaulted. She was sentenced to 18 months in prison for protesting her brother's detention and denied a fair trial. She served the full sentence and was released in December 2021. She had been imprisoned twice before, in 2014 to 2015 and in 2016.

Status **At liberty**	Arrested **23 Jun 2020**	Country **Egypt**
Sentence Eighteen months in prison.		
Charges Publishing and broadcasting false news Misusing a social media account Insulting a civil servant		

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Quash the conviction and drop any charges that remain on record against Sanaa Seif in connection with peaceful human rights work.

02 Confirm publicly that Sanaa Seif faces no residual travel, financial, or professional restriction arising from this case.

03 Guarantee that Sanaa Seif can resume that work without surveillance, summons, or further reprisal.

04 Provide effective remedy for the period of deprivation of liberty already served.

02

Documented violations

Each violation and the international standard it breaks.

Arbitrary detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9

Criminalisation of solidarity International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 21, 22 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 5

Denial of legal counsel International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14(3)

Judicial harassment UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Articles 9, 12

Physical assault International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 7, 9

Prolonged pretrial detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9(3)

Unfair trial International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14

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How the case unfolded

June 2014

Arrest

Arrested at march against the protest law

She was arrested at a march near the Ittihadiya presidential palace in Cairo against the protest law, together with Yara Sallam and others.

October 2014

Conviction

Sentenced to three years under the protest law

She and 22 others were sentenced to three years in prison under the protest law.

December 2014

Appeal: sentence reduced

Sentence reduced to two years on appeal

An appeal court reduced the sentence to two years in prison.

23 September 2015

Pardon

Pardoned by the president

She was included in a presidential pardon of 100 prisoners for Eid al-Adha.

23 September 2015

Release

Freed after about 15 months in prison

She was freed under the presidential pardon after about 15 months in prison.

May 2016

Conviction

Sentenced to six months for insulting a public official

She was sentenced to six months in prison for insulting a public official, a member of the prosecution. She refused to defend herself.

May 2016

Arrest

Hands herself in to serve the sentence

She handed herself in to serve the six-month sentence.

15 November 2016

Release

Released after serving six months

She was released after completing the six-month sentence.

29 September 2019

Context

Brother Alaa Abdel Fattah detained

Sanaa Seif's brother, blogger and activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, was arrested and detained in Tora Prison. His prolonged detention and the family's inability to communicate with him became the trigger for Sanaa's protest in June 2020.

22 June 2020

Physical assault

Assault outside Tora Prison

Sanaa Seif, her mother Laila Souef, and her sister Mona Seif were violently assaulted by a group of women in plain clothes during a small protest outside Tora Prison. Security forces present at the scene did not intervene.

23 June 2020

Arrest

Abduction outside prosecutor's office

Sanaa Seif was abducted by unknown men in a minibus outside the Public Prosecutor's headquarters in El Rehab, New Cairo, where she had gone to file a complaint about the previous day's assault. She was taken to the Supreme State Security Prosecution, which ordered her pre-trial detention.

5 July 2020

Hearing

First detention renewal hearing

The court renewed Sanaa Seif's pre-trial detention in a session she was not allowed to attend, citing COVID-19 precautionary measures. She and her lawyer were denied access to the investigation file.

19 July 2020

Hearing

Second detention renewal hearing

A second session renewed her detention without debate and in her absence.

28 July 2020

Hearing

Third detention renewal hearing

The court again renewed her detention on paper, without her presence.

17 August 2020

Hearing

Fourth detention renewal hearing

Her detention was renewed for a fourth time in a session she was barred from attending.

12 September 2020

Hearing

Trial proceedings begin

After two months in pre-trial detention, Sanaa Seif's case was referred to the Criminal Court and trial proceedings formally began.

17 March 2021

Ruling in absentia

Sentenced to 18 months in absence

The 10th South Cairo Criminal Court sentenced Sanaa Seif to 18 months in prison for publishing false news, misusing a social media account and insulting a public official. The verdict was read out in her absence. She remained held in El Qanatir women's prison.

23 December 2021

Release

Released after 18-month sentence

Seif completed her sentence and was released from prison.

11 May 2022

Defender activity

International advocacy at Stanford

She spoke at Stanford University with journalist Sharif Abdel Kouddous about human rights in Egypt and her brother Alaa Abdel Fattah's book, You Have Not Yet Been Defeated.

23 September 2025

Context

Brother Alaa pardoned and released

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi pardoned her brother Alaa Abd El-Fattah on 22 September 2025 and he was freed the next day, after six years in prison and years of campaigning by his family.

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The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Sanaa Seif has been free since 23 December 2021, when she completed an 18-month sentence for false news, misuse of social media and insulting a public official. No new case against her has been reported. Her brother Alaa Abdel Fattah, whose detention she campaigned against, was pardoned in September 2025 and moved to the United Kingdom in December 2025.

Background and Work

Sanaa Seif is a human rights activist and member of a family that has been targeted for decades by Egyptian security authorities. Her brother, Alaa Abdel Fattah, is a blogger and founding member of the "No to Military Trials for Civilians" movement. He has been imprisoned repeatedly since 2011. Sanaa herself has campaigned publicly for the release of political prisoners and against impunity for state violence.

In early 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, Egyptian prison authorities suspended family visits indefinitely. By June, Alaa's family had received no communication from him for months. Prison staff refused to accept letters or to provide any information about his health or whereabouts. On 22 June 2020, Sanaa, her mother Laila Souef, and her sister Mona Seif staged a small protest outside Tora Prison in Maadi, Cairo, holding signs and asking to be allowed contact with Alaa.

Earlier Imprisonments

Sanaa Seif had been imprisoned twice before 2020. In June 2014 she was arrested at a march near the Ittihadiya presidential palace in Cairo against the protest law. In October 2014 she and 22 others were sentenced to three years in prison under that law, reduced to two years on appeal in December 2014. She was freed on 23 September 2015 under a presidential pardon. In May 2016 she was sentenced to six months in prison for insulting a public official, a member of the prosecution; she refused to defend herself and handed herself in. She was released on 15 November 2016 after serving the sentence.

The Assault and Abduction

During the protest on 22 June 2020, a group of women in plain clothes attacked the three family members in full view of prison security forces. The guards did not intervene. The women beat Sanaa, her mother, and her sister, causing visible injuries. The following day, 23 June, the three women went to the headquarters of the Public Prosecutor in El Rehab, New Cairo, to lodge a formal complaint about the assault.

As Sanaa left the prosecutor's office, unknown men abducted her in broad daylight, forcing her into a minibus. She was transported directly to the Supreme State Security Prosecution, which ordered her pre-trial detention. The official arrest report later submitted to the court falsified the location of her arrest, making no mention of the abduction outside the prosecutor's headquarters.

Detention and Legal Proceedings

The Supreme State Security Prosecution accused Sanaa Seif of "publishing and broadcasting false news", misusing a social media account and "insulting a civil servant." The charges related to her

protest outside Tora Prison and her public statements about her brother's detention. After two months in pre-trial detention, the case was referred to the Criminal Court. Trial proceedings began on 12 September 2020.

Throughout the proceedings, Sanaa and her lawyers were denied access to the investigation file, the arrest warrants, and the full case record. Under the pretext of COVID-19 precautionary measures, she was prevented from attending hearings on 5 July, 19 July, 28 July, and 17 August 2020. During those sessions, the court renewed her pre-trial detention without debate and without her presence. Her lawyers documented multiple violations of fair-trial guarantees, including the falsified arrest report and the prosecution's refusal to investigate her complaint about the assault.

On 17 March 2021, the 10th South Cairo Criminal Court sentenced Sanaa Seif to 18 months in prison. The verdict was delivered by the chief judge in her absence. She remained detained in El Qanatir women's prison.

Conditions and Health

Sanaa Seif was held in El Qanatir women's prison throughout her pre-trial detention and after sentencing. The facility is located north of Cairo and has been the subject of repeated complaints by families and lawyers regarding denial of visits, poor medical care, and overcrowding. During the period of her detention, pandemic restrictions were selectively enforced, used to bar her from attending her own trial hearings, but not to improve conditions inside the prison or to permit safe family communication.

International and Family Response

Her sister Mona Seif publicly disclosed the circumstances of the verdict on 17 March 2021, noting that the judge had ruled without Sanaa present. International human rights organizations called for her immediate release and for an investigation into her abduction and the assault on her family. No such investigation has been opened. The complaint she filed on 23 June 2020 about the attack outside Tora Prison was never meaningfully examined by the prosecution.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/sanaa-seif/

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