



# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Mathematicians Call on their Colleagues and on Mathematical Societies to Support the Egyptian Mathematician Laila Soueif and her Children

The case of Laila Soueif: <https://lailasoueif.org/call/>

Cliquez ici pour la version française: <https://lailasoueif.org/appe1/>

The Egyptian mathematician and activist Laila Soueif<sup>1</sup> gets no respite. She is a Professor of Mathematics at Cairo University and a founder of the March 9 Movement for University Autonomy in Egypt, and she and her family know all too well Egypt's political repression. In the 1980s, as their daughter Mona was born, her husband Ahmed Seif El-Islam, who had become known as an eminent lawyer and defender of human rights, was in prison for his left-wing political activity. In November 2013 following the coup d'état of Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, Soueif saw her son Alaa, who had been the icon of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011,<sup>2</sup> arrested once more.<sup>3</sup> A few months later in June 2014, it was the turn of her daughter Sanaa to be arrested<sup>4</sup> in a demonstration calling for freeing political prisoners including Alaa. Hardly two months later, Soueif's husband died<sup>5</sup> from complications following heart surgery. Laila and her three children, two of them in prison, undertook a hunger strike<sup>6</sup> which went on more than two months, protesting the imprisonment of Alaa and Sanaa.

In September 2019, Alaa, soon after being released from prison, was arrested<sup>7</sup> anew, and Laila again worked for his

release, along with her teaching at the University. After organizing a small demonstration calling for prisoners to be freed during the coronavirus epidemic, she was arrested<sup>8</sup> in turn, but let go the next day. Prison visits being suspended and communication with families cut off, Laila Soueif began a sit-in in front of the prison demanding that she be allowed to receive a letter from Alaa. She was physically attacked there, along with her daughters who had come to join her. When they went to the authorities to report the attack, Laila saw Sanaa taken away<sup>9</sup> by out-of-uniform police, and held in prison.

Laila and Mona are being smeared constantly in state-owned newspapers which routinely publish articles claiming they are foreign agents, terrorist sympathizers, etc...

When the press is severely muzzled, supporters of human rights and democracy urgently need international support. Currently Laila Soueif continues to struggle<sup>10</sup> for the release of her two children. We call on our colleagues and on mathematical societies to support her and her children by writing,<sup>11</sup> in your respective countries, to

- your Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- the Egyptian Embassy.

We invite you also to send messages to the Egyptian authorities, namely to

- the Public Prosecutor's Office;
- the Ministry of Justice;
- the Ministry of Higher Education;
- the Presidency.

A list of Egyptian authorities' addresses is available here: <https://lailasoueif.org/take-action/>.

### Signatories:

*Ahmed Abbes, mathematician,  
Director of Research at CNRS, Paris.*

*Sir John Ball, FRS, Professor of Mathematics  
at Heriot-Watt University, former President  
of the International Mathematical Union.*

\*We invite readers to submit letters to the editor at [notices-letters@ams.org](mailto:notices-letters@ams.org).

<sup>1</sup><https://mesana.org/awards/awardee/mesa-academic-freedom-award/laila-soueif>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/02/egyptian-activist-alaa-accuses-army>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/29/egypt-activist-arrest-crackdown-dissent-alaa-abd-el-fattah>

<sup>4</sup><https://dailynewsegypt.com/2014/12/28/presidential-palace-activists-sentenced-two-years-imprisonment/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/30/world/middleeast/ahmed-seif-who-was-tortured-in-egypt-and-became-rights-defender-dies-at-63.html>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.newsclick.in/alaa-abd-fattah-hungers-strike-freedom>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.accessnow.org/freealaa-egyptian-activist-alaa-abdel-fattah-on-hunger-strike-protesting-his-continued-illegal-detention/>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/egypt-arrests-activists-calling-prisoners-release-coronavirus-ahdaf-soueif>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/egypt-human-rights-activist-arrested-outside-public-prosecutors-office/>

<sup>10</sup>[https://www.democracynow.org/2020/7/6/egyptian\\_activist\\_laila\\_soueif\\_on\\_the](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/7/6/egyptian_activist_laila_soueif_on_the)

<sup>11</sup><https://lailasoueif.org/take-action/>

*Ivar Ekeland, FRSC, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics and former President, University of Paris-Dauphine.*

*Dusa McDuff, Kimmel Professor of Mathematics at Barnard College, Columbia University.*

*John W. Milnor, Laureate of the Abel Prize (2011), Distinguished Professor of Mathematics at Stony Brook University.*

*David Mumford, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, Brown and Harvard Universities, Laureate of the Fields Medal (1974), former President of the International Mathematical Union.*

*Bảo Châu Ngô, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Chicago, Laureate of the Fields Medal (2010).*

*Graeme Segal, FRS, Professor of Mathematics Emeritus, All Souls College, Oxford, former President of the London Mathematical Society.*

*Stephen Smale, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, University of California Berkeley, Laureate of the Fields Medal (1966).*

*Cédric Villani, Member of the French National Assembly, Laureate of the Fields Medal (2010).*

*There are 26 signatories in all.*

## Letter to the Editor

Just before Christmas 2019 two secretaries and the librarian at the Mittag-Leffler Institute at Stockholm were given notice of the immediate termination of their appointments. These measures were taken by the management of the Institute, together with the chairman of the Board, under the auspices of the Royal Swedish Academy of Science which “owns” the Institute. The Board itself was never consulted, the excuse being that this was an internal affair concerning personnel and none of the business of the Board, besides which they probably would not have approved. In fact, the Board did not and several members, especially the non-Swedish, voiced great concern. Strong pressure was applied on the chairman to convene an extra board-meeting, which was subsequently done, during which the matter was heatedly discussed, but no generally acceptable explanation was forthcoming beyond references to conflicts of personality.

One may argue that the handling of the staff is wholly within the jurisdiction of the appointed manager, who is responsible solely to the Board, and that the staff exists to serve an Institute (in this case Institut Mittag-Leffler) and not the other way around. But to fully appreciate the matter one needs to understand the special nature of the Institute on which I unfortunately do not have space to elaborate. Suffice it to say that the Institute is intimate in size and the devotion of the staff during its modern phase as an International Institute has been essential for its success.

The two secretaries who were responsible for contacts with visitors counted for almost half the staff, their departure necessitating a reorganization, the extent of which is yet to be known and whose consequences, due to the interruption by Covid-19, are yet to be evaluated. Former managers of the Institute were disturbed by these events, and were in particular worried that the control of the Institute would no longer lie with the mathematicians but be taken over by the Academy, within which mathematicians play but a minor role.

The pride of the Institute is its library, at the time of Mittag-Leffler’s donation the most distinguished private mathematical library in the world with many remarkable items in its holdings. The present management has decided that no new books should be acquired and that in view of digitalization invited guests should rely on their home institutions to access new literature or possibly use the library of the mathematics department of Stockholm University six miles away. Consequently the office of the librarian is now considered redundant. Admittedly this seems to be a world-wide trend, whose long-term consequences are yet to be seen. But the management seems not to have understood that the real treasure of the Institute lies in its historical archives (in particular the Weierstraß-Nachlass) which are now for all intents and purposes abandoned, to the dismay and frustration of the community of historians of mathematics who can no longer consult it. The former librarian Mikael Rågstedt, who has served the Institute faithfully for almost forty years, knows it better than anyone else in the world. Personally indignant as I may be of the cruel treatment levied against him I need nevertheless to put the interests of the Institute and mathematics above that of the individual. The Institute has an obligation to mathematics to avail itself of his unique expertise, just as he has an obligation to assist in conveying it to his successors. As it is, he is now prevented from doing his duty.

What is at stake is the continued integrity of a cultural treasure well deserving a mathematical form of a UNESCO protection.

—Ulf Persson  
*Prof. Em. of Mathematics  
 Chalmers University of Technology  
 Göteborg, Sweden  
 ulfp@chalmers.se*

*Gert Schubring  
 Guest Researcher  
 Instituto de Matemática  
 Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro  
 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

*Peter Ullrich  
 Prof. of Mathematics  
 University Koblenz-Landau  
 Koblenz, Germany*

Christer Oscar Kiselman  
 Guest Professor at Uppsala University  
 Chair, Board of Institut Mittag-Leffler 1997–2003  
 Uppsala, Sweden

Arild Stubhaug  
 Author of biographies of Abel, Lie, and Mittag-Leffler  
 Oslo, Norway

### Time Zone Shift Improves Access to JMM

I want to thank the JMM organizers for holding the meeting on Mountain Standard Time.

As a resident of the Pacific time zone, this made it possible for me to attend the full day of events each day, even if it meant starting early. My colleagues in Alaska and Hawai'i, who are currently one and three hours earlier than us, respectively, were especially grateful. In the US alone, there are six time zones, and in January they cover seven hours, so scheduling the conference in the middle was inclusive, and I applaud your consideration.

If we had remained on Eastern time, the Invited Paper Session I organized would have begun at 4:40 a.m. my time. While 6:40 is still early, it was a reasonable compromise.

Even this schedule might not have worked for some participants—the earliest events may still have been too early for people in the Western time zones and the latest events might have been late for people in the Eastern time zones. But having the conference on Mountain time at least tried to balance the extremes.

I am also so impressed with how well the meetings went. Like everyone, I am burnt out on Zoom and was not sure how a multi-day virtual conference would go. It was fantastic! Don't get me wrong—I cannot wait to do this in person again. But given our constraints...

I can't imagine how much work it was to put together such a large and complex virtual meeting. I know how much work the in-person conference is, and this must have been so much harder. Thank you to everyone who worked on this meeting for such a great success.

—Nancy Ann Neudauer  
 Professor of Mathematics  
 Pacific University

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