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## **The Daily Telegraph**

### **Novelist joins Cairo protest over police crackdown on reformers**

By Hugh Miles in Cairo

AHDAF SOUEIF, the Cairo-born novelist, has put aside her writing to take part in pro-democracy demonstrations that are being crushed with increasing brutality by the Egyptian police.

With her chic outfit, sunglasses and well-coiffed hair, Soueif cut an unlikely figure at a demonstration outside a Cairo police station on Thursday to call for the release of demonstrators - including her nephew - who have demanded political reforms from the regime of President Hosni Mubarak.

She was one of the few people who managed to get through the police cordon to the police station, which has become notorious as the place where pro-democracy activist Mohamed el-Sharqawi alleges he was beaten and sexually abused by police on May 25.

Soueif - best known in Britain for her 1999 novel *The Map of Love*, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize - says she never wanted to get so political. But as she watched the growing confrontation between the Egyptian government and reformists from her home in London, she felt she had no choice.

Three times in May riot police brutally subdued supporters of democratic reform in Cairo, making more than 600 arrests.

The US State Department said it was "troubled" by the allegations of torture in a country that is America's "strategic partner" in the Arab world, receiving \$1.7 billion [ pounds 900 million] in economic and military aid every year.

"The government is escalating everything," Soueif told reporters at the demonstration.

"They really just don't want any of this opposition. And so they're escalating it to frighten people off the street."

The issue of torture and sexual abuse in Egyptian police stations has given the demonstrations new impetus.

"Torture is routine in Egyptian police stations," said Ragia Shawky, a campaigner who was at the demonstration. "It is the way you get information. It's the way you deal with anyone who enters. Beating and humiliation is normal. Torture is the policy of the police."

Like most Egyptian analysts, Soueif believes that the government is now looking to the future, as the time approaches for the president's favoured son Gamal to be shoed-in as the next leader. The reform movement believes this will not happen as long as the elections are free and fair.

"If Gamal Mubarak is being proposed as president of Egypt, then he should go through the proper constitutional channels and the Egyptian people must have the right to say whether they want him or not, legally, through the ballot box," said Soueif.

Ahdaf Soueif's sister, Leila Soueif, is a Cairo University maths professor and one of the founders of the grassroots Kifaya movement (which means "enough" in Arabic), an organisation founded in the run-up to last year's elections to protest against Mr Mubarak's fifth term in office.

"Egypt has, if you like, been de-developed in the last 30 years," said Soueif. "Every aspect of civil life has deteriorated. Life for most people has become unacceptably difficult. And there is no reason for any of this except mismanagement and corruption."

Despite her passion for reform in Egypt, Soueif maintains that writing is still her first priority.

She said: "I don't expect or want to be more involved with politics. I am too involved already. I spend half the day trying to be an advocate and half the day trying to write. It would be marvellous if things were sorted out and I would not be needed any more."

