

ILHAM TOHTI: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

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Ilham Tohti is the most renowned Uyghur public intellectual in the People's Republic of China. For over two decades he has worked tirelessly to foster dialogue and understanding between Uyghurs and Chinese over the present-day repressive religious, cultural and political conditions of the Uyghurs, a Muslim Turkic people living mostly in modern China's northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. As a result of his efforts he was sentenced in September to life in prison following a two-day show trial. He remains a voice of moderation and reconciliation in spite of what has been done to him.

Ilham was born in 1969 in Artush, in Xinjiang, and began his studies in 1985 at the institution that is today the Central Minzu University in Beijing, and known for minority studies. Following years of advanced study and research, he became a faculty member at Central Minzu University and a recognized expert on economic and social issues pertaining to Xinjiang and Central Asia. As a scholar, he has been forthright about problems and abuses in Xinjiang, and his work led to official surveillance and harassment that began as early as 1994. From 1999 to 2003 he was barred from teaching. After 1999, the authorities also made it impossible for him to publish in normal venues.

In order to make the economic, social and developmental issues confronting the Uyghurs known to China's population more broadly, Ilham made use of the internet. In 2006 Ilham established the website *Uyghurbiz.net* (a partially [archived site](#) exists today), a Chinese-language site, in order to foster dialogue and understanding between Uyghurs and Chinese on the Uyghur Issue. Over the course of its existence it was shut down periodically and people writing for it were harassed.

Ilham Tohti has adamantly rejected separatism and sought reconciliation by bringing to light repressive Chinese policies and Uyghur grievances, information the Chinese state sought to keep behind a veil of silence. The fact that foreign reporters posted to China regularly consulted the site and spoke with Ilham about events in Xinjiang further incited official displeasure with Ilham's activities.

In 2009, in the face of massive Chinese repression in Xinjiang, Ilham Tohti posted information on Uyghurs who had been arrested, killed and "disappeared" during and after the protests. As a result Ilham was taken into custody for weeks. In subsequent years he was subjected to periodic house arrests. En route to the US to be a visiting scholar in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University in early 2013, he was detained at the airport and prevented from leaving China.

Ilham Tohti's final arrest came on January 15, 2014. He was afterwards charged with separatism and sentenced to life imprisonment. The entire process elicited a wave of support for Ilham and protest against his treatment at the hands of the Chinese authorities and a rigged legal system. Numerous statements condemning his trial and sentence were made by Western governments and the European Union. He received the Barbara Goldsmith "Freedom to Write" Award from the PEN America Center in May 2014. In January, 2016, [several hundred academics](#) petitioned the Chinese leadership for his release.

Ilham Tohti's case is particularly important given the crucial international issues and human rights concerns on which it touches: the fostering of moderate Islamic values in the face of state-directed religious repression; efforts to open lines of dialogue between a Muslim minority and a non-Muslim majority population; and the suppression of non-violent dissent by an authoritarian state.

Ilham Tohti's life and career have exemplified the ideals of Andrei Sakharov. He is a deserving candidate for the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. His nomination has been supported by numerous organizations and renowned individuals, including the Dalai Lama and Sakharov Prize laureate Hu Jia.

Further reading:

My Ideals and the Career Path I Have Chosen, by Ilham Tohti, 2011.

<https://chinachange.org/2014/04/06/my-ideals-and-the-career-path-i-have-chosen/>

Present-Day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region: Overview and Recommendations, by Ilham Tohti, 2011.

<https://chinachange.org/2015/05/19/present-day-ethnic-problems-in-xinjiang-uighur-autonomous-region-overview-and-recommendations-for-download/>

VOA Interview with Uighur Professor Ilham Tohti in 2013

<https://chinachange.org/2016/01/15/voa-interview-with-uighur-professor-ilham-tohti-in-2013/>

Ilham Tohti, a 32-minute Documentary

<https://chinachange.org/2015/10/26/ilham-tohti-documentary/>