

ILHAM TOHTI: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

PREPARED BY

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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, 2014, 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. He eventually became a faculty member at the same 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 time to time he was barred from teaching, and after 1999 he was unable to publish in normal venues.

In order to make the economic, social and developmental issues confronting the Uyghurs known to China's wider population, Ilham established the Chinese-language website *Uyghurbiz.net* in 2006 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 Uyghur grievances, information the Chinese state has sought to keep behind a veil of silence.

Following massive Chinese repression in Xinjiang in 2009, Ilham was taken into custody for weeks for posting information on Uyghurs who had been arrested, killed and "disappeared." In subsequent years he was subjected to periodic house arrests and barred from leaving the country.

Western governments and the [European Union](#) condemned Ilham Tohti's arrest and sentence. 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. In April, 2016, he was named a finalist for the [Martin Ennals Award](#).

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. His nomination for the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought has been supported by organizations and renowned individuals, including the Dalai Lama and Sakharov Prize laureate Hu Jia.

Statement to the Uyghur Service, Radio Free Asia before his arrest, July, 2013. <http://bit.do/statement-uyghur>
My Ideals and the Career Path I Have Chosen by Ilham Tohti. <http://bit.do/ideals-career>
Present-Day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang by Ilham Tohti. <http://bit.do/xinjiang-analysis>
Voice of America Interview with Uyghur Professor Ilham Tohti in 2013 <http://bit.do/voa-interview>
Ilham Tohti, a 30-minute Documentary <http://bit.do/ilhamtohti>