

Civil Society Calls on China to Immediately Release Uyghur Professor Ilham Tohti Five Years After His Arrest

On the five year anniversary of the arrest of Uyghur professor Ilham Tohti, civil society is calling for China to grant his immediate release and to heed calls for the release of an untold number of Uyghur scholars currently detained.

Ilham Tohti, a Uyghur economist, writer and professor, founded the website “Uighurbiz.net” in 2006 to promote conciliation between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, but was arrested on January 15, 2014. Despite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention finding his detention to be arbitrary in March 2014, Tohti was [sentenced to life in prison](#) in September of that year on charges of “separatism” after just a two-day trial.

The legal process involving Tohti was met with [significant issues](#) throughout. His lawyers were unable to meet him for six months following the initial arrest, his defense team was not provided with complete evidence by the prosecutor, nor were their requested witnesses allowed to testify during the trial.

Professor Ilham Tohti, for a number of years, criticised oppressive policies against Uyghurs and wrote extensively on [constructive approaches](#) to overcome unequal treatment between ethnic groups. Notably, he called for dialogue and reconciliation, using his web platform as the primary vehicle.

Ilham has been serving his life sentence since December 2014 at Urumqi’s No. 1 Prison. Since then, he has been allowed visits by close family every three months and limited to one hour. Complicating this has been his continued detention in Urumqi, despite his family living in Beijing – a likely punitive move from Beijing. ChinaChange has noted that Tohti has been held in solitary confinement until at least early 2016 and has been denied the right to communicate with family and friends aside from minimal visits.

ChinaChange also [reported](#) that Tohti’s 25-year old niece from Atush was sentenced in early 2016 to ten years in prison for possessing photos of him and two articles about him by Radio Free Asia on her cell phone.

Seven of his students (Perhat Halmurat, Shohret Nijat, Luo Yuwei, Mutellip Imin, Abduqeyum Ablimit, Atikem Rozi and [Akbar Imin](#)) all remain imprisoned on separatism charges, but their whereabouts and conditions remain unknown.

At the time, Ilham’s case stood as a warning shot directed at Uyghur intellectuals and activists in China more broadly. The Chinese government has evidently failed to yield to his advice and now operates one of the most obtrusive surveillance states in the world while arbitrarily locking up Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in political indoctrination facilities. Estimates of the number detained range from several hundred thousand to well over a million.

Coinciding with the construction of the camps has been the detention of hundreds more Uyghur scholars and writers in the region. Notable scholars detained include professor [Rahile Dawut](#), a respected specialist on Uyghur culture; professor [Halmurat Ghophur](#), a prominent medical scientist; [Gheyret Abdurahman](#), the deputy head of the Linguistics Department at the Academy of Social Sciences of Xinjiang; [Qurban Mamut](#), a writer and magazine editor;

[Abdulqadir Jalaleddin](#), a literature professor at Xinjiang Pedagogical University; and [Askar Yunus](#), a prominent historian of the Kyrgyz ethnic community, among many others.

We, the undersigned are therefore calling for the release of Ilham Tohti as well as all those scholars arbitrarily detained in political indoctrination facilities.

Organizations:

Amnesty International

ChinaChange

CSW

Free Tibet

Frontline Defenders

Ilham Tohti Initiative

International Campaign for Tibet

International Tibet Network Secretariat

PEN International

Scholars at Risk

Society for Threatened Peoples

Taiwan Association for Human Rights

Tibet Initiative Deutschland

Tibet Justice Center

Tibet Watch

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)

Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP)

World Uyghur Congress (WUC)

Scholars:

Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor (Emeritus), MIT, Cambridge MA
Laureate Professor, University of Arizona, Tucson AZ

Rachel Harris, Reader in the Music of Central Asia and China, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Nathan Light, Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University (Sweden)

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David Brophy, Senior Lecturer, University of Sydney (Australia)

James Leibold, Associate Professor, La Trobe University (Australia)

Gardner Bovington, Associate Professor, Indiana University (US)

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