

# SILENCED VOICES: Ilham Tohti

by Cathal Sheerin

Ilham Tohti, scholar, writer, and advocate for Uighur rights in China, felt that his days of freedom were numbered. On July 24, 2013, while watching the Chinese authorities' fierce repression of the growing Uighur unrest in Xinjiang, Tohti contacted Radio Free Asia and made a statement. He asked that his words be made public only in the event of his arrest:



Drawing: Maxine Young

*Ilham Tohti*

There is a lot of tension around here. In the past few days, I have been under constant surveillance by police vehicles and national security police officers. I have been under heavy supervision... anyone I have interacted with recently, regardless of ethnicity, Uighur or Han Chinese, has had to suffer interrogation by the government. I have realized that I don't have too many good days ahead of me, and I have a feeling that they [the Chinese government] may not have the best intentions in dealing with my situation. Therefore, I feel that it is necessary for me to leave a few words behind before I no longer have the ability to do so. Firstly, I would like to emphasize that currently, there are no physical marks or bruises on my body... I am currently very healthy and do not have any illnesses... If I do pass away in the near future, know that it is not because of natural illness and it certainly will not be suicide. I am a Uighur, a father, and a righteous man. I do not commend suicide and neither does the Uighur culture... I will never say anything that is against my morals and principles, nor will I ever say anything that may

harm my people. If I say anything that deviates from my morals after my arrest, know that those are not my words. Any word that is at conflict with my morals or brings harm to the Uighur people would most likely have been fabricated by the Chinese government. The only possibility of me uttering such words would be due to drugs or other substances intended to coerce a false confession... I have never associated myself with a terrorist organization or a foreign-based group. The path I have pursued all along is an honorable and a peaceful path. I have relied only on my pen and paper to diplomatically request human rights, legal rights, and autonomous regional rights for the Uighurs. I have never pursued a violent route and I have never joined a group that utilized violence. I will never view myself as a criminal... Many of my friends have been arrested lately. The number of police officers around me has been gradually increased... I have never spoken like this before, but I am almost confident that the Chinese government is trying to get rid of me this time.

Tohti's statement reads as if he were dictating his own obituary, and perhaps he thought he was: according to Amnesty International, the People's Republic of China executes more prisoners every year than all the other countries in the world combined. Radio Free Asia eventually published Tohti's words in February 2014, three weeks after his arrest in January of that year. At the end of February—although this was not revealed until June 2014—he was charged with “separatism,” a crime that carries the death penalty.

An economist by training and a public intellectual, Tohti, forty-five, is a professor at Minzu University of China in Beijing. He is one of the world's foremost scholars on Uighur issues. In 2006, he co-founded the website Uighur Online, with the aim of promoting understanding between ethnic Uighurs and Han Chinese. Relations between these two groups have grown especially fraught in recent years, largely due to the discrimination suffered by the Uighurs in Xinjiang, a fossil fuel rich region crucial to China's growing energy needs. Much of the proceeds of this carbon wealth go directly to the Han Chinese, bypassing the Uighurs, who also have to suffer harsh restrictions placed on



their Islamic religious and cultural practices. The resulting resentment has led to outbreaks of violence, which are blamed by the authorities on separatist or religious terror groups, and are dealt with severely: by June 2014, Xinjiang courts had sentenced 113 people to long jail terms for terrorist activities.

Tohti never promoted violence or preached separatism, but his outspoken views on Uighur rights made him very unpopular with the Chinese authorities. After the launch of his website, he found himself the frequent target of harassment, and in July 2009 Tohti was detained for speaking publicly about ethnic unrest in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang; at first, he was held under house arrest, but was eventually transferred to an unknown location and kept incommunicado for more than a month before being released in August 2009.

Tension between the Uighurs and the Chinese authorities intensified throughout 2013. On October 28 of that year, a car plowed through tourists in Tiananmen Square, before crashing outside the Gate of Heavenly Peace. Two bystanders and three of the car's passengers were killed; another thirty-eight people were injured. The Beijing

government described it as a suicide attack carried out by Uighur Muslim separatists. Shortly afterward, Tohti publicly urged the Chinese authorities not to respond with the usual wave of arrests, house-to-house searches, and increased surveillance in Xinjiang: “The best thing would be for the authorities to take a step back and examine what drives people to such desperation in the first place,” he said. A few weeks later, his car—which contained his children—was rammed by a vehicle driven by plainclothes security officers. They warned him not to speak to foreign reporters.

In December 2013, while the authorities were implementing a new strategic plan for “maintaining social stability” in Xinjiang, Tohti published his concerns about the increased pressure on Uighurs, challenging the government’s version of several incidents involving his people. That seems to have been the proverbial final straw.

On January 15, 2014, approximately forty officers descended on Tohti’s apartment in Beijing, where they detained the writer and rampaged through his home, confiscating computers, flash drives, books, papers, and his students’ assignments. Tohti’s young sons were threatened and forced to sit on the couch while they watched the officers tear up their parents’ belongings. The following day, the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry stated that Tohti had been “criminally detained” on suspicion of “committing crimes and violating the law.”

Following Tohti’s arrest, several of his students were also arrested, strip searched, and interrogated. Three of them were formally charged, while the whereabouts of a further two remain unknown.

Tohti was kept in extremely harsh conditions and was denied access to legal representation in the early months of his incarceration. In June 2014, after their first meeting, Tohti’s lawyer, Li Fangping, revealed to the world that his client had been shackled for the first twenty days of his detention, and that he had been denied food for ten days at the beginning of March 2014. This forced starvation seems to have been in reprisal for a violent attack carried out in Kunming while Tohti was in jail, and which the authorities blamed on Uighur militants.

After a closed-door trial in Urumqi in September 2014, he was convicted of separatism and given a life sentence. The government

presented evidence including a video of one of his lectures at a Beijing university in which he said Xinjiang belonged to Uighurs not Hans, according to state media. Amnesty International asserted Tohti's legal team was never shown evidence and furthermore denied access to its client for six months; they condemned the trial as an "affront to justice." U. S. Secretary of State John Kerry criticized what he called a harsh sentence, and called for Tohti's release.

After the trial, his lawyer said, "He told us that no matter the verdict, he will not be angry nor seek revenge. No matter whether he is in jail or if he is freed in the future, he will still advocate for dialogue between Uighurs and Han Chinese."

Tohti's appeal was rejected in November 2014.

Calls for Ilham Tohti's immediate and unconditional release can be sent to:

President Xi Jinping  
The State Council General Office  
2 Fuyoujie  
Xichengqu, Beijing 100017  
People's Republic of China  
Email: [english@gov.cn](mailto:english@gov.cn)

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Chinese diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., it is:

The Honorable Mr. Cui Tiankai  
Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the U.S.  
Email: [chinaembassy\\_us@fmprc.gov.cn](mailto:chinaembassy_us@fmprc.gov.cn)

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