

**CAMPAIGNS**

CHINA CENSORSHIP AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Five facts about Ilham Tohti, award-winning activist jailed in China

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Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti celebrates his birthday on 25 October, shortly after he was awarded the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for human rights. But who is he and why is he in prison in China?

Ilham Tohti is a respected economist who has highlighted abuses against China's Uighur minority.

A renowned Uighur intellectual in China, Ilham Tohti was an economics professor at Central University for Nationalities in the capital, Beijing. He has worked for two decades to build understanding between Uighurs and Han Chinese. Rejecting separatism and violence, he tried to reconcile differences between these ethnic groups. Uighurs, a mainly Muslim Turkic ethnic group, have faced widespread discrimination in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwest China.

Ilham Tohti has been put under surveillance and arrested many times for drawing attention to the plight of Uighurs in China.

Through his writing and lectures, Ilham highlighted government policies that limit the use of the Uighur language, severely restrict Uighurs' ability to practice their own religion, block their chances of getting a job, and encourage Han migration into the region, all fuelling discontent and ethnic tensions. Ilham was

the founder and director of the bilingual website “Uighur Online”, which reported on human rights violations suffered not only by Uighurs but also by ethnic Han Chinese. The website had been shut down by the authorities several times: first before the Beijing Olympics in 2008, again in March and April 2009, and now since 2014.

When ethnic violence erupted in the XUAR in 2009, Ilham was detained for several weeks after he posted information on the internet about Uighurs who had been detained, killed and had “disappeared” during and after the protests. In the following years, he was placed under house arrest for various periods.

“The path I have pursued all along is honourable and peaceful. I have relied only on pen and paper.”

Ilham Tohti

Ilham Tohti was last detained in January 2014 and is serving a life sentence on false charges of “separatism”.

On 15 January 2014, Ilham Tohti was taken from his home in Beijing by police. For five months, family and friends were not told where he was. He was denied food for 10 days and his feet were shackled for 20 days straight. On 23 September, following an unfair trial, he was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of “separatism”.

“Separatism” is often used by the Chinese authorities to suppress freedom of expression – even peaceful criticism of government policies. The government argues that any criticism of its ethnic policies is in fact an attempt to harm ethnic relations and covertly promote separatist ideas. Even though Ilham was openly opposed to separatism and only wanted to point out why Beijing’s policies were fuelling ethnic polarization, ultimately the government concluded that his work was shedding too much light on the dire situation of the Uighur community in the XUAR.

In January 2016, hundreds of academics called for Ilham Tohti’s freedom.

[Four hundred academics from across the world](#) called on China’s President Xi Jinping to immediately release Ilham. In an [open letter to President Xi](#), scholars from Harvard University, The University of Hong Kong, University of Oxford, and many others - wrote that the immediate and unconditional release of Professor Ilham Tohti would be “an important way of demonstrating China’s commitment to academic freedom”.

Ilham Tohti is among 11 cases we will be campaigning for in December as

part of Write for Rights 2016.

Ilham features in this year's [Write for Rights](#), Amnesty's global letter-writing campaign. Kicking off this December, we will be calling on people across the world to write for Ilham's rights – and hopefully get him released. As Ilham himself has said: "The path I have pursued all along is honourable and peaceful. I have relied only on pen and paper." So what better way for us to take action than by taking up our own pens and paper for him. Follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) – and look out for how you can join the campaign in December.

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