

Who is Ilham Tohti ?

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests and hosts,

It is a great honor for me to be standing here in front of you all and to address myself to you !

But the real honor for me is that you have invited me, as an active member of the Ilham Tohti initiative, to accept the Prize for the Freedom Prize of the Liberal International on behalf of Mr Ilham Tohti. Allow me also to thank our faithful friend Ilhan Kyuchyuk, who has done much to promote Ilham Tohti's name in and out of the European Parliament, as well as Lucia Parucci, from the UNPO, who has spared no effort to follow and precede each of our campaigns in favor of Ilham Tohti.

As you can see, Ilham Tohti is not able to be with us... It's not the first time you have offered the Prize of Freedom to a political prisoner. In 1992 LI gave the Prize to the Cuban 1992 prizewinner **Maria Elena Cruz Varela**, who was not able to leave her country because of the tough attitude of the Fidel Castro regime. At the time, Mr Lambsdorff suggested going to Cuba to try and deliver the Prize in person to Ms Cruz Varela. Such a brave initiative would not be possible in Mr Ilham Tohti's case. Because neither Mr Lambsdorff yesterday nor his successor today would be able to travel to Urumqi, the provincial capital of Xinjiang, where Ilham Tohti is now submitted to an inhuman and unjust punishment. He has been and sentenced to life imprisonment by the Chinese government. This is one of the most blatantly unfair sentences we have witnessed in many years. Many intellectuals, lawyers, activists and simple citizens have been arrested in China specially since the summer 2015 because of their opinions, or because they were fighting against injustice, but very few have been given life sentences. We know of Mr Wang Bingzhang, an active Chinese democrat who spent over 20 years in America and ran a monthly magazine named China Spring, and who is now sick in a Cantonese prison, accused of spying and terrorism, after being sentenced to life in 2003 during a one day trial, not open to the public. We know of Pastor Gong Shengliang, leader of an evangelical spiritual movement known as the South China

Church. He was also sentenced to life in 2001, accused of “using a heretical organization to undermine the implementation of the law ». Let me also quote the case of Mr Peng Ming, who died suddenly, exactly a year ago at the age of 62, on November 29th 2016. On October 2005, Peng Ming had been sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime of “organizing and leading a terrorist organization”. These three cases demonstrate the vulnerability of anyone in China who speaks out for democracy and human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The Chinese government clearly knows how to single out the bravest, most eloquent and rational individuals, ready to sacrifice their life and freedom for their ideals, even if those ideals are noble and peaceful. We have also witnessed the very sad death of Nobel Peace Prize Liu Xiaobo, who remained in jail until his death this last July 2017.

If I mention these examples, it is because these names may not be familiar to you. The Chinese Communist Party is now at the head of a rich and powerful country, and is trying to project its power far beyond its own borders. It uses soft power, it uses multi-million contracts and sometimes political pressure to get ahead with its grandiose projects, such as the New Silk Road Routes. It manages to prevent the press and most Human Rights Organizations to even pronounce the names of those we try to defend, such as Ilham Tohti. When you hear of such crimes like “terrorism”, “separatism”, “evil cults”, you will not want to know more, and believe sentencing such people is the right thing to do. But if we tell you who these people really are, what they were doing, you will know better !

Ilham Tohti is the most renowned Uighur intellectual in the People’s Republic of China. For over two decades he has worked tirelessly to foster dialogue and understanding between Uighurs and Chinese over the present-day repressive religious, cultural and political conditions exercised against the Uighurs, a Muslim, Turkic people living mostly in modern China’s northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. As a result of his efforts he was sentenced to life in prison in September 2014 following a two-day show trial. Despite political

persecution in the years leading up to his trial, he remained a voice of moderation and reconciliation.

Born in 1969 in Artush, Xinjiang, Ilham Tohti began his studies in 1985 at the institution that is today the Central Minzu University in Beijing, long known for studies of minorities. 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. From time to time he was barred from teaching, and after 1999 he was unable to publish in mainstream venues in China.

Ilham Tohti gave lectures at the Central Minzu University in Beijing, where he became very popular, and had hundreds of students wanting to attend his lectures, coming from all sides of China and the world. Not only Uighur students would come to listen, but also Tibetans, Mongolians, Han and students from other countries would come and learn from his extensive knowledge of Xinjiang and its relationship with China and the rest of the world.

He also established the Chinese-language website [Uighurbiz.net](http://Uighurbiz.net) in 2006 on the Uyghur issue. Throughout these years Ilham Tohti has adamantly rejected separatism.

Ilham Tohti has been serving life in prison in the First Prison of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous region in Urumqi since December 21, 2014 after his appeal was dismissed and his sentence upheld without a court hearing on November 21, 2014.

We estimate that, from the time he received family visit in June 2015 to the present, Ilham Tohti has received a total of less than ten hours visitation, mostly from his brothers still living in Xinjiang, over the span of more than two years. This is a calculated and cruel deprivation. His daughter Jewher, now studying in America, does not dare go back to China in order to visit her father for fear of being arrested too. We know of a niece of Ilham Tohti who spent a year in jail in Xinjiang, just because, as she was going on an errand on the streets, the content of her telephone was checked by the police, as it is routinely done everywhere in Xinjiang. They found a picture of

Ilham Tohti, her uncle, in her smartphone and she was arrested for that simple reason.

And now you understand why no one can speak out for Ilham Tohti from inside China. Anyone who asks for his liberation will be accused of terrorism. As for people, friends, or specialists outside China they can ask for his freedom, request his liberation but it comes with a risk : either you will never get an entry visa to get into China anymore, or, like the City Weimar, who is also going to give a Human Rights Prize to Ilham Tohti next month, has become the target of Chinese hackers trying to prevent the ceremony. Members of the Chinese Embassy have even tried to put pressure on the Bundestag, saying one should not attribute a Prize to a terrorist ! I must say I salute the city of Weimar for its courage to stand firm against pressure.

I have had the luck to meet personally with Ilham Tohti when he got invited by the French government in 2008 for an official visit to Paris. He was a very direct and lively person who spoke his mind without hesitating, in excellent Chinese. When I asked him if he was not afraid of being arrested if he talked so openly about the oppression the Uyghur people were suffering under the domination of the CCP, he answered immediately : “If I get arrested, it will make the world notice what we have to suffer from.”

In order to pursue Ilham Tohti’s mission, in order to remind the world that there is a man, that there is a Uyghur people, suffering under the Chinese Communist regime, we believe the attribution of the Freedom Prize of the Liberal International to Ilham Tohti can make a significant difference for this man of peace and revive the quest for social harmony in that part of the world. The Chinese government cannot go on pretending no one cares about Ilham Tohti.