

Beijing needs to talk to the Uighurs

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By Ahmed Rashid

Ilham Tohti during his trial © REUTERS/CCTV via Reuters TV

The sentencing of Chinese scholar [Ilham Tohti](#) to life imprisonment is a heinous injustice and incompatible with the rule of law on which China prides itself. Tohti, one of the best known Uighur scholars in the country, has spent a lifetime trying to build bridges between the alienated Muslim Uighur minority and the Han Chinese in order to end an escalating cycle of violence between the two communities.

In one of the harshest punishments meted out to a non-violent dissident, the court also ordered the confiscation of all of Tohti's possessions, leaving his wife and two children with no visible means of support.

Tohti's imprisonment is likely to lead to further militancy among a minority of Uighurs, including revenge attacks against Han Chinese. China's largest Muslim minority, the Uighurs have long advocated either independence from China or greater autonomy within China.

Only recently has a minority taken up Islamic militancy and developed links with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Yet China has condemned all shades of Uighur nationalism or Islamic opinion or demands for ethnic equality in education and jobs, branding it treason against the state.

A professor at Beijing's Minzu university, Tohti ran Uighur Online, a website focused on issues concerning the community. He never advocated violence, was highly respected by his Han Chinese academic colleagues and would have been an ideal interlocutor between the government and Uighur groups if only Beijing had wanted to go down the path of reconciliation.

Instead the court ruled: "Tohti organized this [student] group to write, edit, translate and reprint articles seeking Xinjiang's separation from China... Through online instigation, Tohti encouraged his fellow Uighurs to use violence." Tohti denied that he had encouraged separatism or violence; and, after his punishment was announced, he shouted: "I don't accept this."

Chinese writer Wang Lixiong said on Twitter that the government had created a "[Chinese Mandela](#)". China scholars and [human rights organisations](#) have expressed shock and anguish at the sentencing.

China has pursued harsh policies against the Uighurs reminiscent of the anti-religion policies of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in the former Soviet Union in the 1930s, when any public expression of religion was punished. Today any public demonstration of Muslim religious belief such as prayers, fasting, dress codes, performing rituals or attending the mosque regularly are condemned by the authorities. Students have been forced to abandon fasting and prayers if they are to receive decent grades or even gain entry into university.

The Uighurs are largely nationalist and secular rather than extremist Muslims. However, a small minority has moved from attending madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan to training with the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Some militants have also been recruited by Pakistani groups as well as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Last week the Chinese media reported that Uighur militants had fled the country to receive "terrorist training from Islamic State fighters" in Syria. It was the first time a pro-government newspaper, The Global Times, had reported a connection between Uighurs and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis).

This week two people were killed and several injured in at least three explosions in Luntai County, southwest of the regional capital, Urumqi. In most attacks on the police or Han Chinese, Uighur militants have used knives and axes rather than guns and explosives.

Meanwhile, the authorities are not sparing their own. Last week 17 officials in southern Xinjiang were punished for failing to prevent a series of Uighur attacks in July that left nearly 100 people dead.

China needs to engage swiftly in a dialogue with all Uighur political and religious leaders - both at home and in exile. The [violence in Xinjiang](#) is not out of hand but it could escalate if frustrated young Uighurs keen to practice their religion and culture are curtailed at every step.

Surely it is common sense for China to promote those Uighurs who are calling for a dialogue and a resolution to differences, rather than giving them life sentences. Nobody wants to see China's central Asian region plagued with the kind of horrendous terrorist violence rampant in Pakistan and Afghanistan.