

Sentence of Ilham Tohti and Mismanagement of Ethnic Policy in China

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Ilham Tohti, a Uighur academic was sentenced to life imprisonment by a court in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) for inciting separatism. Many human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch expressed their shock on the severity of punishment and have condemned the sentence. The PRC wants this conviction to be message that they intend to send to the “splittist elements” in XUAR. The Chinese state does not differentiate between the moderate and extremist faces of Uighur ethnic leadership. PRC is consistent on its definition of ethnic separatism as a part of global terrorism since Jiang Zemin’s decision to support U.S. global war on terror. Silencing or alienating moderate forces within the Uighur leadership at a time when there exists a rising tide in extremism can be counterproductive.

This verdict comes at a time when violence related to Uighur ethnic issue has become a recurrent affair in Xinjiang. The official line of the party according to Nur Bekri, the governor of Xinjiang is “rigid crackdown” on ethnic separatists. This statement from Bekri comes in the context of a “major strategy shift” proposed by Xi Jinping at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee on December 19, 2013. This policy is in response to an increased number of ethnic violence incidents and a few riots not only in Xinjiang but also outside the region including Beijing. President Xi Jinping also advocated a tough stand on terrorists during his visit to Xinjiang in April 2014. The local leadership of Xinjiang has been given autonomy to deploy a complete crackdown on splittist elements and social stability has been declared as the XUAR’s priority in the year 2014.

Ilham Tohti, is a professor of Economics at Beijing Minzu University and also the co- founder of Uighur online, a website dedicated to advocating a peaceful understanding between the Uighurs and the Han Chinese. He is considered to be a moderate advocate for a peaceful solution to ethnic problems through meaningful interaction between the Chinese state and Uighur leadership. But the Chinese state and Xinjiang authorities' rigid crackdown policy depicted Tohti as a radical Uighur intellectual and a political dissenter. Xinjiang police have charged him with colluding with overseas forces to "spread separatist ideas, incite ethnic hatred and advocate

Xinjiang independence". The police statement also accused Tohti of teaching students about "violent Uyghur resistance" in his class and encouraging them to overthrow the Chinese government. He has been under house arrest and detention often since the mass riots in Urumqi in July 2009. There was no reduction in the rate of violence in Xinjiang since Tohti's detention nor has his involvement been proved in any of the violent incidents that occurred in Xinjiang recently.

Silencing Ilham Tohti means silencing those voices that critique the central government's oppressive policies in Xinjiang as the reason for generating more violent resistance from the Uighurs. The Tohti sentencing is likely to create more polarization between the Han Chinese and Uighurs. This kind of intolerance towards difference of opinion by projecting it as terrorism would only backfire on Beijing when the government claims its priority for Xinjiang region is the promotion of ethnic unity through development.

PRC's attempt to prosper and develop XUAR continues to lack trust and understanding between the state and the majority Uighurs of Xinjiang. It would have been in China's interest if Beijing had tried to take people like Ilham Tohti, who had never supported the demand for a separate Uighur state into confidence and succeed in having a constructive engagement on the issues behind ethnic separatism. The continuing depiction of Xinjiang issue as a security threat

by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the help of global terrorism rhetoric as well as its efforts to highlight stability of Xinjiang region as the state's priority summarize PRC's policy towards Xinjiang. Consequently, this 'stability security syndrome' failed to recognize a conservative form of Islam that is slowly gaining foothold in the region. Underrating and playing down the Uighur issue through silencing moderate voices would only trigger separatism and Chinese state would fail to engage with the region constructively.

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