European Parliament

2019 Sakharov Prize laureate: Ilham Tohti

Space for freedom of thought is shrinking dramatically across the globe, as the geo-political and geo-economic clout of authoritarian regimes expands. The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought is therefore more important than ever: it enables the European Parliament to draw attention to the plight of those who stand up against the repression of human rights and fundamental freedoms, principles on which the EU is based and which it promotes in its external relations, in line with Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union. The 2019 Sakharov Prize laureate is renowned Uyghur economics professor Ilham Tohti, a moderate advocate of the rights of the Uyghur minority and of dialogue with the Han majority in China. In 2014, he was sentenced to life imprisonment on separatism-related charges, against the backdrop of China's hardening policy of countering religious extremism, ethnic separatism and terrorism – one that now frames Uyghur identity as a major national security threat. The Sakharov Prize is a €50 000 award, which will be presented at a ceremony in the European Parliament during the December plenary session in Strasbourg, in the presence of the other finalists.

Significance of the Sakharov Prize

Every year, since 1988, the European Parliament has awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to individuals or organisations for outstanding achievements in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms – notably the right to freedom of expression; safeguarding the rights of minorities; upholding international law; developing democracy; or implementing the rule of law. The prize was initiated by a 1985 parliamentary resolution adopted in memory of **Andrei Sakharov**, the eminent Soviet-Russian nuclear physicist, 1975 Nobel Peace Prize winner, dissident and human rights activist. The prize symbolises Sakharov's courageous defence of human rights, notably the freedom of thought and expression, and personal freedom, that were at times denied him during his professional career.

Award procedure and the 2019 Sakharov Prize finalists and laureate

Candidates for the Sakharov Prize can be nominated by a political group, or at least 40 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). From the list of nominees, three finalists are then shortlisted by MEPs in a joint vote of the Committees on Foreign Affairs and Development. For the 2019 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought the finalists were: 1) **Ilham Tohti**; 2) murdered Brazilian political activist and human rights defender, **Marielle Franco**, native Brazilian leader and environmentalist, **Chief Raoni**, and Brazilian environmentalist and human rights defender, **Claudelice Silva dos Santos**; and 3) **The Restorers**, a group of five students from Kenya – Stacy Owino, Cynthia Otieno, Purity Achieng, Mascrine Atieno and Ivy Akinyi – who have developed i-Cut, an app to help girls affected by female genital mutilation.

On 24 October 2019, Parliament's Conference of Presidents decided to honour **Ilham Tohti** with the 2019 Sakharov Prize. When announcing the decision, Parliament's President, David Sassoli, stressed that Ilham Tohti had been 'a voice of moderation and reconciliation'. He added that by 'awarding this prize, we strongly urge the Chinese government to release Tohti and we call for the respect of minority rights in China'. Ilham Tohti, a liberal Uyghur intellectual, who was previously nominated in 2016, is the third Chinese winner, and the first-ever Uyghur to receive the prize. Wei Jingsheng, who in 1978 called for 'The Fifth Modernisation: democracy', as China launched its economic reform and opening up policy, was awarded the prize in 1996, a year before he was released from prison to his US exile. Hu Jia, a dissident and democracy activist, was awarded the prize in 2008, three years before he was released from prison. Commenting on the 2019 award, a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry reportedly said: 'I hope that Europe can respect China's internal affairs and judicial sovereignty, and avoid celebrating a terrorist'. The 42nd EU-China Inter-parliamentary meeting, scheduled for 12 November 2019, and the related programme, were cancelled owing to the unavailability of the Chinese delegation.

Ilham Tohti – a voice for the entire Uyghur people

Ilham Tohti was born in 1969 in China's north-western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) which is home to about 10 million Turkic-speaking Uyghurs (about 45 % of the XUAR population) who practise a moderate form of Sunni Islam and enjoy close ethnic and cultural ties with Central Asian countries. Professor Tothi lectured at the Beijing-based Minzu University for ethnic minority studies, and published critical analyses on the impact of the Chinese government's assimilation policies on the cultural, social, economic, political and religious life of Uyghurs. In 2006, he set up the Chinese language website 'UighurBiz.cn' as a platform for inter-ethnic exchange between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. The website was shut down when Ilham Tothi was accused of having contributed through his website to the 2009 violent attacks perpetrated by Uyghur militants in the XUAR cities of Urumqi and Kashgar. Despite being outspoken in his advocacy of regional autonomy laws, Tohti was opposed to radical separatist movements, standing rather for dialogue and reconciliation with the Han majority. In 2014, after he had reportedly challenged the Chinese government's version of violent incidents involving Uyghurs, he was detained and, after a two-day show trial, sentenced to life in prison allegedly for 'separatism'. As researcher Darren Byler put it: 'Now, like Ilham, they [both Uyghur students and public intellectuals] realised that all of them could be accused of 'separatism'. There was no space to publicly suggest ways to oppose the elimination of Uyghur culture'.

Since his sentencing in 2014, Ilham Tohti has been awarded the 2014 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, the 2016 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders, and the 2017 Liberal International Prize for Freedom. In October 2019, he won the Council of Europe's Václav Havel Human Rights Prize.

China's approach to counter-terrorism, de-radicalisation and de-extremification

Since Xinjiang became part of China in 1949, successive Chinese governments have sought to integrate the predominantly rural Uyghurs economically and culturally, first with soft approaches, boosting economic development and respecting ethnic differences, but mainly benefiting incoming urban Han Chinese migrants. Later, government launched 'strike hard' campaigns, as deepening inter-ethnic socio-economic cleavages bred violence from Uyghur militants. The appearance of Uyghur foreign fighters in Syria in 2014 highlighted the interlinkages between the internal and external dimensions of the three interconnected threats to China's concept of stability – religious extremism, ethnic separatism and terrorism. China has stepped up the security element of its strategy for countering these 'three evils', and has linked them to the distinctiveness of Uyghur identity. As a result, the XUAR's public security budget has ballooned, leading to a pervasive and intrusive policing system reliant on ubiquitous cutting-edge surveillance cameras, ethnicity-sensitive facial recognition systems and an algorithm-based big-data analysis platform to identify politically 'untrustworthy' people. Since 2017, China has built a well-documented grid of 'de-extremification' mass internment camps whose existence it at first denied and then called 'vocational re-education and training centres' on the basis of 2018 XUAR legislation. The camps host an estimated one to two million Uyghurs, and other Muslim minorities, who are politically indoctrinated and have the cultural and religious features of their identity systematically eradicated, as China associates them with 'extremist' behaviour. China has justified the camps as successful preventive de-radicalisation measures that it appears keen to export.

Global responses to China's extra-judicial detention camps and high-tech illiberalism

In recent years, Parliament has systematically denounced massive violations of the Uyghur minority's human rights, in resolutions adopted in 2016, 2018 and 2019. The case of Ilham Tohti was raised during the 2019 EU-China Human Rights Dialogue. Western governments have criticised China's Uyghur policy in the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and in the UN Third Committee in 2019, prompting a group of other countries, including Muslim countries, to release joint statements defending China. The US Congress has adopted the Uighur Intervention and Global Humanitarian Unified Response Act of 2019. The US has banned the import of products made by firms in Xinjiang over their use of forced labour. It has also issued visa restrictions on key Chinese officials, and blacklisted 28 Chinese firms, including Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology, the Chinese government's main supplier of surveillance gear. The firm enjoys close ties with the Chinese government, and has come under scrutiny in some EU countries for its involvement in the repression of Uyghurs in China. The leaked 'China Cables'/'Xinjiang papers' give clear evidence of the repression that China has staunchly denied, and may prompt more actors to actually 'walk the talk'.