

# Innocence in Captivity: China's Long Imprisonment Policy

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## Executive Summary

The unjust, long imprisonments in the Uyghur region are one of the most critical dimensions of the ongoing genocide against Uyghurs and other Turkic people of the region. The trend started in 2016 and is continuing at an [unprecedented pace](#). The lack of transparency in the justice system in the Uyghur region and the [criminalization](#) of minor or vague charges as an [instrument of control](#) raise serious concerns at the international level. The due process does not presume the innocence of individuals, where most convictions are without a known trial. One of the highest imprisonment rates in the world is [recorded](#) in Konasheher County, where approximately one in 25 people are imprisoned for "terrorism" charges. Victims have no right to object to conviction and, most of the time, have no communication with the outside world, including their family members. According to [studies](#), Uyghur political prisoners are **93% less likely to be released** compared to Han prisoners. They are **nine times more likely to die in prison** compared to other ethnic minorities.

## The Unjust Long Imprisonments in the Uyghur Region

### Why is it unjust?

- > No transparency in the justice system.
- > Criminalization of minor or vague charges.
- > Long imprisonment an instrument of control.
- > No presumption of innocence.
- > Massive in scale, systematic by nature.

### What is the imprisonment rate?

- > Uyghur region has one of the highest imprisonment rate in China.
- > 540,826 people persecuted in the Uyghur region between 2017-2021, where 99.9% of them would have been convicted.
- > For instance, approximately 1/25 of population in Konasheher county is sentenced to prison, which is highest known in the world.

### Why is it concerning?

- Uyghur political prisoners are 93% less likely to be released, compare to Han Chinese.\*
- > Victims have no right to object conviction.
- > Trials are closed to public.
- > Victims are not allowed to communicate with outside world, including family members.

### Google these names



Prof. Dr. Rahile Dawut



Prof. Dr. Ilham Tohti



Dr. Gulshan Abbas



Yalqun Rozi



Ablajan Awut Ayup



Ekpar Asat



Abdulhabir Muhammad

\*Christoph Valentin Steinert, "The duration of political imprisonment: Evidence from China", Conflict Management and Peace Science, 2023, Vol. 40(4) 349-372.

## Escalating Imprisonments in the Uyghur Region

A profoundly concerning element of the ongoing genocide in the Uyghur region is the imposition of long prison sentences, which starkly illustrate the widespread persecution endured by Uyghurs and other people in the region. This trend began in 2016, peaked [in 2017](#), and subsided but remained notably higher than before [in 2018 and 2019](#). The lack of transparency surrounding the charges and legal processes has raised serious concerns regarding these imprisonments. Minoritized people of the region, including the Uyghurs and Kazakhs, appear [to bear the brunt of this injustice](#), often facing charges [related to terrorism and extremism](#). These vague charges, coupled with the absence of due process, intensify concerns that these long imprisonments are being wielded as [tools to suppress ethnoreligious identities](#) and [assert control over the affected populations](#).

The arbitrary nature of these imprisonments is evident in numerous cases where individuals have been sentenced to long prison terms [on unclear charges](#), highlighting the complete disregard for due process and fairness. Minor or vague offenses such as “inciting ethnic hatred,” engaging with “extremists,” or “endangering state security” content have become [pretexts for long-term incarceration](#). Vague charges undermine due process safeguards, with detainees often lacking proper legal representation and facing trials that [do not adhere to international standards of fairness](#). This systematic practice of long, unjust imprisonments serves to perpetuate the suffering of the Uyghur population and underscores the Chinese government’s [relentless efforts to erase their culture, religion, and identity](#). It is an integral part of the broader campaign of genocide happening in the Uyghur region, as these harsh sentences effectively silence and eradicate Uyghur voices and presence from society.

The sheer scale of these long imprisonments in the Uyghur region, for instance, in Konasheher County, where [approximately one in 25 people are sentenced to prison](#) on terrorism-related charges, is deeply alarming. Such an imprisonment rate, the highest known in the world, is emblematic of the Chinese government’s aggressive crackdown on Uyghurs, illustrated as a case for preventive securitization. These excessive sentences serve as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for action to address the ongoing genocide in the Uyghur region and secure justice for its victims within the broader context of genocidal policy architecture in the region.

## Harsh Reality of Detention Statistics

The available data paint a distressing picture of the extensive and systematic utilization of detention as a mechanism of control within the Uyghur region. One of the most alarming aspects of this situation is the drastic surge in arrests, with statistics revealing a significant increase in individuals detained in the region, particularly since 2017. This escalation suggests [a deliberate strategy to apprehend a substantial number of individuals](#).

Furthermore, the data indicates a troubling focus on detaining members of minoritized groups, notably Uyghurs and Kazakhs. This selective emphasis raises concerns about [ethnic bias and unjust profiling](#). This targeting extends to gender as well, with an imbalance in gender distribution among detainees, with [a higher proportion of males subjected to detention](#), potentially signifying the singling out of distinct demographics within the populace.

The impact of these elevated detention numbers is profound, particularly on the families left behind. It has led to [emotional turmoil, financial hardship, and societal upheaval](#) in the Uyghur region. Moreover, this trend cuts across diverse age groups, from youth to the elderly, dispelling the notion that detention policies are exclusively geared toward [specific age brackets](#).

Another concerning aspect is the need for more clarity regarding charges and legal justification for detentions. Many detainees are held [without transparent legal processes](#), fostering concerns about the basis of their confinement. Some

individuals have allegedly been detained for protracted durations [without transparent insight into their fate or the reasons](#) for their continued captivity, contravening principles of due process and presumption of innocence.

In a [study](#) by Christoph Valentin Steinert from the University of Mannheim, Germany, data derived from the Political Prisoner Database (PPD) maintained [by the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China](#) revealed a concerning pattern of [discrimination against Uyghur political prisoners](#). Established in 1981 and continuously updated, the PPD had recorded 10,271 political prisoners as of July 23, 2020. This research revealed a profound ethnic bias against Uyghurs within China's criminal justice system, specifically concerning the duration of their political detentions. According to the data, the Uyghurs had an extreme unlikelihood of being released. It was 93% percent lower compared to ethnic Han Chinese. The findings of the study also suggest that Uyghurs are nine times more likely to die in prison compared to other ethnic minorities.

This discrimination against Uyghurs extends far beyond official legal channels. Extra-judicial detentions, which forgo standard legal procedures, further highlighted a marked bias against the Uyghurs. Such discrimination is deeply rooted in the [CCP's perception of Uyghurs as inherent threats](#). This is primarily attributed to their unique cultural and linguistic identities and historical resistance to Chinese dominion. Moreover, religious discrimination compounds the Uyghurs' challenges, resulting in extended prison sentences.

## **Selected Cases**

### **Rahile Dawut**

A [member](#) of the Chinese Communist Party and had received accolades from [China's Ministry of Culture](#), Rahile Dawut is globally recognized for her pioneering work in Uyghur ethnography, traditions, and folklore. Associated with [Xinjiang University's Minorities Folklore Research Center](#), she has been at the forefront of documenting [the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Uyghur community](#), notably the Uyghur shrines known as "Mazars." She disappeared in 2017; it was later confirmed that [Chinese authorities had arrested her](#) on the accusation of "[political separatism](#)" and "[endangering state security](#)" and sentenced her to life imprisonment, which are charges that are [ambiguous and unclear](#). Despite her significant contributions to Uyghur culture and her collaboration with the Chinese government, she was sentenced to life imprisonment. This life sentence was meted out after secretive trials, with the specifics of these charges shrouded [in obscurity](#).

### **Ilham Tohti**

Ilham Tohti is extensively recognized on the international stage for his efforts to foster dialogue and [promote equal rights for Uyghurs in China](#). His advocacy has primarily focused on the [peaceful promotion](#) of equal rights and genuine autonomy for the Uyghurs. Multiple prestigious international awards and nominations, including the Martin Ennals Award, the [Sakharov Prize](#), and the [Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize](#), have acknowledged Tohti's commitment to human rights and his contributions to interethnic understanding. However, he was arrested on charges of "separatism" and sentenced to [life imprisonment](#) despite his commitment to peaceful dialogue. His family has faced restrictions, with reports suggesting that they were [not allowed to visit him in prison](#).

### **Gulshan Abbas**

Gulshan Abbas is a retired physician and ethnic Uyghur who disappeared from her home in September 2018. In December 2020, her family acquired the information that authorities imprisoned Dr. Abbas and held a secret trial in March 2019, where she was sentenced to 20 years in prison for the unfounded charge of "[taking part in organized terrorism, aiding terrorist activities and seriously disrupting social order](#)." It is [reported](#) that she suffers from high

blood pressure and severe back pain that often leads to immobilization, osteoporosis, and recurring migraines. Gulshan [has no access to her family members](#), which raises serious concerns for her health and wellbeing.

### **Yalqun Rozi**

Yalqun Rozi is a distinguished Uyghur literary critic, writer, public speaker, and publisher. He has been an important figure in preserving and proliferating Uyghur culture and literacy tradition. During his career, he [compiled](#) over 12 textbooks for Uyghur schools and published around 20 books that covered subjects in religion, culture, and politics. In 2016, Rozi was detained on [vague grounds of “ideological problems.”](#) After enduring a year in an undisclosed location, he was slapped with a conviction in [January 2018](#). He was imprisoned with a [15-year sentence](#) for accusations of inciting separatism and promoting Pan-Turkism, violence, terrorism, and separatism due to [Uyghur language textbooks](#) he compiled under the directive and approval of the Chinese government.

### **Ablajan Awut Ayup**

Ablajan Awut Ayup is a famous Uyghur pop singer, songwriter, and dancer. He is known for promoting Uyghur culture and identity as well as [building a cultural bridge with the Chinese](#) through his bilingual songs. His songs are a fusion of traditional elements and contemporary styles, containing numerous traces of Uyghur folklore and culture. He was taken into custody by the Chinese authorities in February 2018; the exact reason for his detention has [not been officially disclosed](#). Allegedly, his arrest could be related to the themes of his music, which include promoting Uyghur culture. It [might also be due to](#) his philanthropic activities within the Uyghur community and his travel to Malaysia. His current whereabouts have not been disclosed; his friend mentions his [being sentenced to over ten years in prison](#), which could not be confirmed.

### **Ekpar Asat**

Ekpar Asat is a tech entrepreneur and founder of the Uyghur-language website Baghdax. Ekpar was characterized as a [“bridge builder”](#) between cultures because of his involvement in media platforms to create a space for the exchange of ideas and debate. Ekpar Asat was included as one of 16 cases in the U.S. Department of State's [#WithoutJustCause Political Prisoners Campaign](#). He disappeared in April 2016 and was [convicted](#) without a known trial for 15 years imprisonment. The reason for imprisonment is reportedly for “inciting ethnic hatred,” which is [followed](#) by his return from the United States after attending a leadership program organized by the U.S. Department of State. The accusation against Ekpar is [absurd](#) as state-run news reports that featured his business or his participation in government-sponsored events.

### **Abdulhabir Muhammad**

Abduhabir Muhammad holds MA in Business and Administration from Binghamton University in New York. He is a Uyghur entrepreneur, founder of HOLD Education in Beijing, once heralded in Chinese media [as a model of patriotism](#) for Uyghur youth and [received various awards](#) in 2018, when the mass detention of Uyghur was at its peak. However, in 2022, he was sentenced to a 15-year prison with accusations of religious extremism and national separatism. He was surveilled in Beijing by Xinjiang Personnel Service Management Working Group, an entity focused on monitoring Uyghurs in Beijing, and four police officers from the Uyghur region detained him in Beijing. Allegedly, the reasons for his imprisonment could be his statement on “Halal food” or students who went abroad through his higher-education agency. His brothers, who communicate with him, were also arrested, according to the local police. Chinese authorities labeled his case a state secret, withholding details. Even with a confirmed 15-year sentence, [the police officer lacks specifics on his precise location](#).