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Asia - China

Charged

Uyghur website editor and economist facing possible death penalty

1 August 2014

After being held for six months, Ilham Tohti has been formally charged with separatism

Ilham Tohti, an ethnic Uyghur economist at Beijing's Central University for Nationalities and editor of the *Uygurbiz.com* information website, was formally charged on 30 July with "separatism," a crime that carries the death penalty.

Regarded as a dissident by the Chinese authorities, Tohti was held incommunicado and denied food for the first ten days after his [arrest on 15 January](#). He has also been denied his defence rights, including any visit from his lawyer for the first five months.

This baseless charge suggests that the authorities now want to silence him for good.

Uygurbiz.com promotes cultural exchanges between China's Uyghur and Han peoples. Tohti was arrested at his Beijing home shortly after expressing concern about the growing crackdown in the western province of Xinjiang, which has a large Uyghur population. He was taken to Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, following his arrest.

[His family received no news](#) of him for the first few weeks after his arrest. His lawyer, Li Fangping, was not allowed to see him in Urumqi until 25 June.

"The separatism charge has been brought against Tohti at a time of violence in Xinjiang, which the government is trying to blame on separatists although it is more about demands for the restoration of civic rights and an end to the discrimination against the Uyghur minority," said Benjamin Ismail, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific desk.

"The unfairness of this charge is indicative of President Xi Jinping's strategy and his contempt for human rights and freedom of information and expression. We urge the entire international community to [follow the US lead](#) and to demand Tohti's immediate release."

When Tohti [was first arrested in 2009](#), the authorities provided no information about his whereabouts and initially suggested that he had "gone on holiday."

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