

writer Nuremuhamet Yasin and editor Korash Huseyin

PEN Canada honorary members from Xiangjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (northwestern China)

Uighur writer Nuremuhamet Yasin and literary editor Korash Huseyin are currently serving prison terms of 10 years and 3 years respectively for the publication of a single short story. The story, *Wild Pigeon*, is interpreted by the Chinese authorities to be a veiled criticism of their government in the northwestern Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

Yasin (an award-winning, prolific writer) was arrested in the city of Kashgar on November 29, 2004; his computer, containing an estimated 1,600 poems, commentaries, stories and an unfinished novel, was confiscated. After a closed trial on 2 February 2005 in which he was not permitted a lawyer, Yasin was sentenced to 10 years in prison for “inciting Uighur separatism.” His sentence was upheld on appeal. On 19 May, 2005, he was transferred to No. 1 Jail in the region’s capital, Urumqi, where he remains. Yasin is 31, married with two children. He is permitted no visitors.

The story, *Wild Pigeon*, was published in the November 2004 by the *Kashgar Literature Journal*. It is the first-person narrative of a young pigeon – the son of a pigeon king – who is trapped and caged by humans when he ventures out to search for a new home for his flock. In the end, he commits suicide by swallowing a poisonous strawberry rather than sacrifice his freedom, **as did Yasin’s own father who committed suicide under similar conditions years earlier**. “The poisons from the strawberry flow through me”, the pigeon remarks to himself at the end. ‘Now I can die freely. I feel as if my soul is on fire – soaring and free.’

Korash Huseyin, chief editor of the *Kashgar Literature Journal*, was sentenced to three years’ detention. All 2,000 copies of the issue in which the story was published were recalled by the Chinese authorities. Huseyin, 35, is married with three children.

An English version of *Wild Pigeon*, translated by Dolkun Kamberi, director of Radio Free Asia’s (RFA) Uighur service, is available online in two parts at:

http://www.rfa.org/english/uyghur/2005/06/27/wild_pigeon/

An excerpt from the story:

Here I am, seemingly in flight in the deep blue sky. I cannot tell if I am dreaming or awake. A bracing wind cuts into my wing—my spirit is soaring and my body is powerful and strong. The glow of morning seems endless, and sun streams brightly, beautifully on the world. Such beautiful landscapes! I climb ever higher as my spirits soar.

The strawberry fields disappear from view, and the world is suddenly broader, like a deep blue carpet spread out beneath me. This is a wonderland I have never seen before. I love this place as I love my hometown—with all my heart—all of it so beautiful beneath my wings....

Background on China

Although a number of steps have recently been taken by the Chinese authorities to improve the country's human rights situation, including the introduction of a clause promising to ensure human rights in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China in March 2004, the strengthening of the legal system and the allowance of more independent news reporting, the human rights situation in China remains very poor. Human rights organisations including Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Human Rights in China (HRIC) report high levels of arbitrary detention, a significant risk of ill-treatment and torture in detention, and at least 90% of the world's known executions.

Freedom of expression in China

Writers throughout China face considerable suppression – in fact China is currently one of the largest jailers of writers and journalists in the world – and the situation is believed to be worsening. The BBC cites an article by 'a well-known intellectual' written in late 2004 which states that intellectuals are now 'terrified' and that there are fears of a 'return to totalitarianism in the mainland.' It adds that the press has been ordered not to give publicity to several well-known intellectuals. For more information see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4094075.stm>.

Measures to restrict freedom of expression include arbitrary arrest, charging writers and journalists with the 'subversion of state power' or 'leaking state secrets', the use of the infamous 'Re-education Through Labour' (RTL) system to detain for up to three years without due process, the closure of independent publications, book banning, internet censorship and news blackouts. Furthermore, many human rights lawyers have been warned to give up the cases of dissident writers and some have been disbarred for failing to do so.

The situation in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) – as in Tibet and Inner Mongolia – is particularly alarming, as the Chinese authorities are anxious to prevent the secession of these regions and therefore impose especially restrictive measures to suppress not only criticism of the authorities as elsewhere in China but also any expressions of self-determination or even of religious and cultural differentiation.

About the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, the largest political subdivision of China, is a vast desert territory in the country's north-west. While the early 1930s and late 1940s saw brief periods of independence for the region, the latter with Soviet assistance, it remains under Chinese control, although since 1955 this has been by means of an autonomous local government.

However, many of the native 'Uighurs' – a Turkic, Sunni Muslim people with close cultural, historical and linguistic ties to other ethnic groups in central Asia, including the Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek and Turkmen people – are keen to gain further autonomy for the region. Some even want to establish it as an independent state, which they prefer to call East Turkestan (the name 'Xinjiang' which literally means 'New Frontier' and was given during the Manchu Qing Dynasty in China, is considered offensive by many advocates of independence).

This desire for independence is related not only to the Uighurs' cultural and linguistic differences to the Han Chinese who make up the majority of the Chinese population, but also to policies pursued by the Chinese authorities in the region. While the central government insists

it has raised living standards in Xinjiang, Uighur activists disagree. The German-based World Uighur Congress states, for instance, that:

"The policies of political oppression, cultural assimilation, economic exploitation, ecological destruction, racial discrimination have gradually turned East Turkestan into a time bomb."

Beijing, however, will not permit secession because of the region's size, rich mineral resources and great strategic importance and according to AI and HRW, it is attempting to suppress such aspirations by cracking down on expressions of non-Han Chinese culture. Islam, considered fundamental to Uighur identity, has been the primary target despite a promise of religious freedom guaranteed in the Chinese constitution. A joint report issued by HRW and HRIC in April 2005 cites a 'considered state policy of.....religious repression' against Muslim Uighurs. The XUAR government has banned anyone under 18 from entering mosques, or from taking any religious instruction, and anyone in state or Communist Party employment is banned from overt displays of religious identity – including the wearing of beards, headscarves, fasting during Ramadan or prayer during working hours. Possession of Islamic texts not authorised by the government is grounds for arrest and detention. As a result of these measures, the province's 're-education through labour' camps are full beyond capacity, and around 200 Uighurs have been executed since 1997 for political crimes.

In order to gain international support for its actions, however, China has stated that these policies in the XUAR against even the most peaceful forms of Uighur dissent are carried out not to prevent secession but in the name of the suppression of international Islamic terrorism in the region, emphasising that 260 terrorist acts have been committed in the XUAR in the past twenty years. While there are genuine security concerns in the XUAR, it seems likely that any violence in the XUAR is related to the Uighurs' desire for independence, particularly in the context of increasing repression and the Uighurs' minority status, and not a more international agenda, and that Beijing's prime motivation is to prevent this secession. It is also clear that China cites its fear of Islamic terrorism only when expedient; at other times, the authorities insist that only "an extremely small number of elements" are engaged in separatism and that the situation is "stable."

In the wake of the attacks of September 11 2001, Washington became keen to enlist Chinese support for its efforts against Islamic terrorism, and agreed to co-sponsor the addition of a little-known Uighur organization, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), on the U.N.'s list of terrorist organizations purportedly linked to al-Qaeda and subject to the freezing of assets.

The US has since begun to acknowledge that China may be using the 'war on terror' to gain support for its fight against Uighur secession. In December 2003, the U.S. declined to support China's request to list another Uighur organization, the East Turkestan Liberation Organization, and has publicly insisted that the ETIM listing and the international war on terror should not be used by China to justify internal repression against political opponents or minorities. Furthermore, the US has refused to return more than twenty Uighurs held in Guantanamo Bay for fear that they will face torture or execution upon their return..

However, China still has significant support for its actions in the XUAR from its Central Asian neighbours via the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), who since 1996 have effectively silenced independent Uighur organizations on their soil and have repatriated refugees in response to requests by China. Some of those repatriated refugees were executed upon their return. In addition, China has been given full Russian support in exchange for China's endorsement of Russian actions in Chechnya.

What are the implications for freedom of expression in Xinjiang?

HRIC notes that China is claiming that terrorists have now become secret peaceful activists, presumably waiting for the right moment to revert to their former methods. This argument allows the authorities to accuse a dissenting writer or a non-violent group advocating minority rights of terrorist intentions and separatist crimes, justifying arrests, heavy sentences, and even the death penalty – not only for dissenting individuals peacefully protesting against the Chinese authorities, but even for those engaging in the cultural expression of their minority status.

This development follows the announcement of a crackdown on ‘separatist techniques’ including the media, literature, the performing arts and poetry by Xinjiang’s Communist Party Chief, Wang Lequan, in February 2002. The President of the Uighur American Association, Nury Turkel, states that, four months after the Party Secretary’s announcement, the authorities held a massive book burning in Kashgar. The government-owned Kashgar-Uyghur Publishing House reportedly burned 128 copies of “A Brief History of the Huns” and “Ancient Literature”, which the authorities said fomented separatism. It also burned copies of “Ancient Uyghur Craftsmanship,” a work documenting centuries-old Uyghur techniques of candle-making and carpentry.

The precarious situation faced by writers is clearly illustrated by the case of Nuremuhammet Yasin and Huseyin Korash, and also by the case of Tursunjan Emet, a Uighur poet from Urumqi. On January 1 2002, Emet recited a poem in Uighur at the end of a concert at the Xinjiang People’s Hall in the capital Urumqi. The Party committee ruled that the poem had an “anti-government” message and labeled the case as an “ethnic separatist crime in the area of the ideological front.” The Chairman of the Xinjiang provincial government immediately called for an investigation, vowing to purge all who “openly advocate separatism using the name of art,” and urged cadres to use “politics” as the only standard in judging artistic and literary work. Emet went into hiding immediately after the incident. He was then detained, probably in late January 2002. Official Chinese sources have since denied that he was ever detained. Unofficial sources indicate that he was released, some weeks, or possibly months, later.

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