

Resisting Genocide: The Uyghur Struggle for Justice

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The fire in an apartment building in Ürümqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, triggered a wave of protest throughout China in opposition to the regime's zero-Covid policy. It also shone a spotlight on the Chinese state's oppression of Uyghur people. *Spectre's* Ashley Smith interviews Uyghur human rights lawyer and activist Rayhan Asat. Her brother, Ekpar Asat, was arrested and jailed in a concentration camp in 2016. Since then, she has campaigned for his release and for justice for the Uyghur people.

Rayhan Asat is a Uyghur human rights lawyer and advocate. She was born in Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang. In October 2022, Rayhan was honored in *Vox News'* inaugural Future Perfect 50 list. A graduate of Harvard University, she is currently a Tom and Andi Bernstein Fellow at Yale Law School.

You and your family have directly impacted by China's colonial repression of the Uyghur people. What happened to your brother?

January 5 was the seventh anniversary of my brother Ekpar Asat's incarceration in a Chinese concentration camp. The anniversary was very difficult and painful for me. I just can't believe that for seven years he's been in a camp and living a nightmare. His imprisonment has taken an enormous toll on me and my family.

I have somehow managed to survive. I'm in the West and am free to think for myself and be an advocate for my brother and for all my people. Sometimes I wonder how I get by. But then I flip the question and ask, "how is he getting by?" He's in far worse conditions. I've dedicated myself to changing those for him and all Uyghurs.

I didn't choose to be an activist. It was thrust upon me. This new role and new responsibility impacts me over and over again at different life events or just simple moments. I thought about this when I watched the recent film *Till*, about Emmett Till. In it, his mother, Mamie *Till*-Bradley, speaks to a crowd that while living in Chicago before Emmett's murder and said that she hadn't paid attention to all the injustices in the South. But once she lost her son, she realized that it was impossible to escape the consequences of such injustices and became a voice for African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement.

This resonated with me because it was similar to my experience. In Ürümqi, I was somewhat shielded from the horrors of Uyghur oppression, which has been far worse outside the capital city. We just kept our heads down and went on with our lives until the state went after my brother. Then I realized that there is no way for me to avoid the impact of Uyghur oppression. Oppression does not stay within discrete boundaries; everyone can become a target.

I realized that I had to speak out against what the Chinese state was doing to my people. I became human rights lawyer and activist. The injustice against my brother has compelled me to see the world through the lens of oppression and understand how it impacts entire peoples in our world from Iran to Palestine. I have no choice but to speak up and be the voice for my brother and all others like him.

The Chinese state's horrific treatment of the Uyghur people was highlighted by the horrific fire in an apartment building in Urumqi at the end of last year. The fire killed many and set off a wave protest throughout China against zero-Covid. In those protests there were signs of potential solidarity between Han Chinese and Uyghurs against the policies and conditions in Xinjiang. What is the significance as well as limits to this expression of solidarity?

It's important to understand the conditions that caused the fire and demonstrations. The fire was a direct result of the Chinese state's zero-Covid policy. The apartment building was under lockdown, so people were trapped inside when the fire started. That led to at least 10 people being burned alive. We know the number of deaths is far greater than the state reported number.

I remember one woman describing what happened on social media, which was censored. She said the fire escapes were locked, so she had to carry her three children down the stairs of the building as it burned around her. Tragically, one of her children died. She asked why would anyone lock the fire escapes?

A majority of Chinese people had similar experiences of senseless lockdowns. So, the tragedy in Ürümqi was something that almost everyone could relate to, and they responded with expressions of solidarity. The question for me was would the solidarity go beyond opposition to the shared condition of lockdown to opposition to what the Chinese state has been doing to the Uyghur people?

We have to remember that we're talking about two groups in vastly different positions in Chinese society. One, the Han Chinese, enjoy ethnic or racial privileges over the other, the Uyghur people. People do not like to talk about it but there is Han supremacy. It is not all that different than white supremacy or the privilege in the U.S.

It is common in the U.S. to talk about white supremacy. That is not the case in China, where such discussions are frowned upon. State propaganda is quite powerful, repeating over and over that China is made up of 56 different ethnic groups that form one, big, happy family and that we're all sisters and brothers.

But Han privilege is a fact. The protests demonstrated this reality. Han people were able to go out on protests and even take pictures of themselves demonstrating. Of course, some have suffered repression afterward. But hardly any Uyghurs went out on any protests, and they certainly did not take photos. Why? Because they would be immediately arrested and thrown into concentration camps.

So, again, my question was whether Han people challenge both zero-Covid and the state's policies in Xinjiang. Would they start challenging the government over its internment of a million people in concentration camps? Would they oppose the systematic racial hatred against the Uyghur people?

I hoped so out of a spirit of cautious optimism. Other Uyghur activists justifiably were not so optimistic. I understand why. We are in the eighth year of Xi Jinping's People's War on Terror, and to this day we have heard very little opposition from the Han majority. So, many people dismissed the solidarity as just opposing zero-Covid lockdowns, and not opposing the oppression of Uyghurs.

In the end, it seemed like a very brief moment of hope. Now the state has lifted restrictions and it is trying to return life back to normal even in the face of mass infection and death. The protests have stopped, and people seem to have forgotten the Uyghurs. For us nothing has changed for the better. That shows the real limitations of the solidarity expressed during the protests.

The police state measures under zero-Covid were nothing new to Uyghurs. China has been carrying out systematic oppression of Uyghurs over the last several decades stretching all the way back to the Mao period. It intensified during the 1990s and especially under Xi Jinping over the last decade. What is the history of China's treatment of Uyghurs? What policies has Xi imposed and what impact has it had on Uyghur lives and livelihoods?

China has long called our lands the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In reality, autonomy for Uyghurs has never existed. By law we are supposed to be able to elect our governor. But that has little to do with reality. At best Uyghurs are allotted symbolic positions, but these are window dressing. People with real power are Han bureaucrats appointed by the central state.

They serve the central state and its economic projects. Since the 1950s, Beijing has pursued a policy of settler colonialism. They have given economic incentives for Han people to migrate to Xinjiang. Han overlords oversee everything, and Han settlers serve as privileged, loyal workers in the state and industry. Their migration has turned Uyghurs into a minority. We have been dispossessed of our land, our culture shattered, and our economic wellbeing destroyed.

The state has violated its claims to respect our culture, language, and religion. At best they have exoticized our culture for their entertainment. Initially, the state claimed to respect Uyghur language through bilingual signs and education. But in practice, they have not. At first, signs were in Uyghur and Chinese, with Uyghur in much larger letters. But soon that was reversed with the influx of Han settlers. Chinese now is in larger letters and Uyghur if it is there at all is in smaller letters. And their system of supposedly bilingual education has in fact suppressed the teaching of Uyghur.

They have limited our right to practice religion in particular. They do not allow anyone under the age of 18 to go to a mosque or practice religion of any sort. If you're affiliated to any government position, you are not allowed to practice any religion. This is nothing less than state-sponsored Islamophobia.

Conditions grew steadily worse between 2000 and 2014. During that period, the Chinese state aligned itself with President Bush's so-called War on Terror. When Bush told the world that any country not with the US was against it, China's opportunistic claim of a Uyghur terrorist threat found a sympathetic international audience.

Under Xi's leadership, however, China's policies underwent a qualitative transformation into something far more sinister; the policies became genocidal. He intensified both the economic exploitation of Xinjiang and the oppression of Uyghurs. He has used our fertile land, minerals, oil, and natural gas both for China's internal growth and its expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative into Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. They set up vast new cotton fields. Long before the current leadership, they drilled for our fossil fuels and built pipelines to transport our oil and gas to Han cities like Shanghai and Beijing. And they have used our forced labor to make commodities for Chinese as well as multinational corporations.

To carry such dispossession and exploitation requires repression. So, in 2014, Xi launched the so-called People's War on Terror. The state used various incidents to justify a campaign against "three evils"—"terrorism, extremism, and separatism." They used these "evils" not just to target specific groups of Uyghurs but Uyghurs as a whole. It is engaged in the collective punishment of an entire people. Every Uyghur is now viewed as a suspect, as being a potential terrorist, an extremist, and a

separatist.

The state runs massive surveillance operations, installs Han people in Uyghur homes, takes children away from their parents, arrests “suspects,” sends them to concentration camps, and forces them into work in giant sweatshops. The Chinese state itself has exposed how it does this in great detail in leaked [internal documents](#).

The surveillance systems monitor Uyghurs at home, in their segregated neighborhoods and areas, and at work. Cameras, phones, and the omnipresent police spy on everything people do, searching for any signs of “terrorism, extremism, and separatism.” Anyone it suspects of these, gets arrested and sent to concentration camps. Nearly one million people, including my brother, have been interned in them. They are subject to compulsory “reeducation” and forced labor.

As part of this securitization, the current government has tried to dismantle all distinctively Uyghur institutions from religion to the family. For example, the state has given Han men monetary rewards for marrying Uyghur women. Women are essentially forced into these arrangements, as they know that if they refuse they risk being sent to the concentration camps for “reeducation.”

Today Uyghurs as a people and a culture are being eradicated.

You have referred to this as genocide. There has been some discussion and debate about whether that is the right term. Some prefer cultural genocide. Why do you think it’s right to call it genocide?

There is no doubt that China is carrying out cultural genocide. They are systematically dismantling Uyghur society as it has existed—imposing settlers on us, denying our religious and language rights, installing spies in houses, forcing women into marriages, forcibly sterilizing women, interning us in mass numbers, and subjecting us to forced labor. They are destroying us as a people, and in that sense it is more than cultural genocide; it is outright genocide.

Some argue that mass murder like in Rwanda is not happening and therefore it is not genocide. Well, because we can’t investigate the camps, we do not know for sure whether mass murder is or is not happening. There has already been reports of hundreds of people being killed in one of the camps. Sometimes, families are given just bodies from the camps. With China’s Orwellian control over information, we don’t have pictures of mass murder. But we should not exclude any possibility of mass murder happening and let independent monitors decide. This is why establishing a missing person mechanism under the UN investigative system is very important.

But mass murder is not the only characteristic of genocide. [The UN Genocide Convention](#) lays out the following crimes to qualify attacks on a people as genocide: “(a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” By that definition there is no doubt that China is carrying out genocide.

Building resistance to this reign of terror is challenging. I just read Ilham Tohti’s *We Uyghurs Have No Say*, which makes eminently reasonable demands for reform and implementation of existing autonomy laws. And for that he was given a life sentence in jail. How have Uyghurs both in Xinjiang and in the diaspora tried to self-organize and resist this horrific oppression?

The Chinese government is engaged in such a massive repression that it is very difficult to for

Uyghurs to organize any kind of resistance inside Xinjiang. The state will just arrest any and every dissident and throw them in a concentration camp. [Ilham Tohti](#) is one example of many.

So, people like me and many more in the Uyghur diaspora must be our people's advocates. We must be a voice for the silenced in the most ethical manner. In that effort, I take inspiration from James Baldwin and other African American leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. I see them as models for what Uyghurs in the diaspora can and must do.

We have published articles, done interviews, and helped the stories of survivors in telling their stories. That in and of itself is resistance. But we face many challenges. The Uyghur diaspora is quite small and new to many Western societies. We do not have the numbers and therefore the capacity to do the kind of advocacy that Iranians or Palestinians have done in support of their struggles for liberation.

A new generation of Uyghurs is emerging, but it will take years to become leaders. We have to build our capacity, unite ourselves, and build alliances to oppose what is being done to the Uyghur people. That's why I take every opportunity to speak on international forums, campuses, synagogues, and community organizations. Jewish people intimately understand policies of racial hatred and their devastating impact on the survival of a race, and therefore have been a great ally. In fact, on my brother's birthday, three amazing Jewish friends joined me to celebrate him. This shows the human capacity for kindness and support across different cultures, races, religions, creeds, and views.

But I have faced obstacles in this effort. Many institutions are cautious about hosting Uyghurs to speak. They have ties with China, fear a backlash if they allow a Uyghur speaker, and want to avoid contributing to the growing tensions between the U.S. and China. As a result, it is difficult to have open discussions about the atrocities committed by the Chinese state.

The US and other Western states have criticized China for its oppression of Uyghurs. But many Western corporations have benefitted from the exploitation of unfree Uyghur labor. The U.S. also gave the People's War on Terror legitimacy by categorizing some Uyghur groups as terrorist. Has the U.S. and other Western states and corporations been complicit in Uyghur oppression?

There is no doubt that Western states, corporations, and institutions have been complicit in the atrocities committed against Uyghurs. China has collaborated with the U.S. and Western states in the War on Terror. Many [Western corporations have supply chains in Xinjiang](#) and benefit from forced labor. Academic institutions have been reluctant to feature Uyghurs speakers for fear of offending the Chinese state and losing their Chinese international students.

Contrast that with how all these states, businesses, and institutions responded to South African apartheid. From academia to Hollywood, Western governments, and the International Olympic Committee, most boycotted, divested, and sanctioned South Africa until apartheid fell. Nothing like this has been done to China.

Even states in the Global South, which have experiences of colonialism and slavery, have refused to recognize what's happening to Uyghurs. Most of them have put their economic relationship with China—its loans and investment—before the human rights of Uyghurs. Many Muslim countries have done the same.

The line from Western governments is particularly grating for me. They all say we need to compete with China while at the same time cooperate with it on issues like climate change. While some do speak out against atrocities against Uyghurs, this is a subordinate question for them. I can't imagine

Western leaders saying the same thing about Myanmar, which is engaged in a war on its own people and the Rohingya. They would never say we need to cooperate with that regime, but they say it about China.

They could say to China, you have to stop the genocide, or we will not cooperate and will sever our economic ties, which you have so benefitted from. Some, in private, have said to me that that's their view. When they do, I always ask them why not say that on record? They come up with various excuses for not doing so. Essentially, they always put their economic interdependence with China first, and Uyghurs last or at best second.

There has been some in Hollywood who have spoken out, but nothing on the scale of what they have done in support of Ukraine against Russia. Why? Because they know that China would censor their movies, music, or any creative project. So, Western states, corporations, Hollywood, and academic institutions have all been complicit either by direct connection to atrocities against Uyghurs or by their silence.

I find academic institutions' silence particularly offensive. Why create a culture where you cannot criticize a state committing genocide? Why not create a culture where you encourage students, especially Chinese students, to learn what is being done to Uyghurs and criticize the Chinese government?

Over the last decade, the intensification of Uyghur oppression has gone hand and glove with the crackdown throughout China on NGOs, social movements, and labor organizing. Many of the police state measures of digital surveillance pioneered in Xinjiang have been generalized during the pandemic on all of Chinese society. These conditions would seem to open up the possibility for solidarity between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. How can the resistance to zero-Covid be used to build solidarity and collaboration in resistance to the Chinese state?

Many have argued that Xinjiang was a laboratory for the Chinese government to build a surveillance state. I'm a little bit careful with those kinds of comparisons. We are seeing the expansion digital surveillance and control throughout China. But it's vastly different. Han Chinese may get tracked down for what they say online, but they are not the object of racial hatred, are not a suspect people, and do not get thrown into concentration camps.

For Uyghurs just having WhatsApp on your phone is one of the 48 behaviors that can get you detained and sent to a camp indefinitely. So, there is a qualitative difference between the state's treatment of Han dissent and Uyghurs as a people. That's why the solidarity we're seeking has been very difficult.

We are desperate for it, however. Imagine if you're in a concentration camp or if your loved one is in a concentration camp. A lot of are just so exhausted and desperate after nearly a decade of this People's War on Terror to find allies willing to listen and help challenge all the atrocities against Uyghurs.

The lack of solidarity has made me skeptical about the possibilities. But if I set aside that knee jerk reaction, I do think that Han Chinese people's opposition to zero-Covid was part of an awakening. Or at least it made me hopeful. Even though the protest were small, I hope that it is the beginning of people beginning to fight for their rights.

At the same time, Han Chinese have been subjected to so much racist state propaganda about Uyghurs that they have a lot to unlearn. I have had too many conversations with Chinese

international students where they say good things against zero-Covid lockdowns but then repeat propaganda about Uyghurs and Xinjiang.

I'm of course willing to engage them and raise their awareness, but I hate the fact that it's always the oppressed that need to do the heavy lifting. I've heard this from African Americans about the burden of exposing the realities of racism to white people. I feel the same way about educating Han Chinese about the Chinese state's genocidal policies toward Uyghurs.

I'm also increasingly disappointed with Chinese elites and intellectuals in the diaspora for their lack of compassion and unwillingness to speak up against their government's atrocities. They live in a free world and have access to all the evidence to make up their minds and act. But many choose to look away.

Nevertheless, I'm very cautiously optimistic about the possibility of building solidarity. But whether it happens or not it remains to be seen. I think professors in Western universities could play a pivotal role in opening space for these discussion with their Chinese students.

What are Uyghur activists demanding of the Chinese state. What policies and reforms do you think are necessary to improve conditions and guarantee civil and human rights for Uyghurs?

Like any oppressed group, there're various views among the activists. Many are doing important work. My view is to reframe the question and place importance on what the victims want and what's my responsibility in being their advocate. They want this nightmare to end. They want to reunite with their families.

On my brother's 7th anniversary of his imprisonment, I made a statement that we won't stop speaking out and organizing until the camps are turned into museums like the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC to commemorate this genocide and compel Chinese people to confront what was done by their government.

That's a long term vision, but the first step in ending the genocide is freeing all the people who are wrongly imprisoned in the concentration camps. It's hard for me to imagine next steps beyond that. But, at the same time, I do think about them and what kind of future we would want to build.

One activist and great legal mind in South Africa, Justice Albie Sachs, who was the victim of a white terrorist attack, inspires me. He said during the Truth and Reconciliation process that he forgave his attackers. He said the best vengeance is to establish rule of law and democracy in place of apartheid in South Africa. That should be our goal in Xinjiang and China.

But the South African truth and reconciliation process, while wildly successful, has also faced much criticism for failing to achieve justice. I don't see why accountability should be excluded from the truth and reconciliation process.

To achieve this, with the support of independent and international monitoring, the state must establish an accountability mechanism where perpetrators and chief architects of the camps, like Chen Quanguo, must face a trial. Only bringing cases against low-level officials won't achieve justice. That must include senior officials. Only after securing justice, equality, and democracy can the Uyghur people begin rebuilding our language, culture, and basic human dignity.

One thing that has been noticeable is the silence of so much of the left and progressives about the oppression of Uyghurs. They justify it by saying they don't want to line up with the US government or right wing politicians against the Chinese state. What, what's the

problem with that? What do you think people should do in the progressive community?

These are just excuses and alibis for inaction in the face of colossal injustice. That some conservatives have taken a stand for their own reasons should not be a reason for progressives to duck the responsibility of standing up for Uyghurs and their rights. It is unconscionable to excuse or remain silent while genocide is happening no matter who perpetrates it.

Progressive people and parties must be consistent. Whenever anyone is oppressed and exploited, they and their rights must defend them without exception. That must include African Americans, other oppressed groups like Asian Americans who have been subject to discrimination in recent years, and Uyghurs. The Uyghurs are not just facing discrimination but a genocide where our very survival as a people is at stake.

And we must refuse the temptation to see our struggles for justice in competition with one another. Solidarity with the oppressed must be universal otherwise it is meaningless. That's why I try to be in solidarity with all oppressed people whether they're, for example, African American, LGBTQ, Trans, or Asian-American. That is the basis for a common struggle for liberation.

Rayhan Asat

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