

GUEST ESSAY

Let the Tragedy in My Homeland Be a Lesson

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Mr. Izgil is the author of the forthcoming book “Waiting to Be Arrested at Night: A Uyghur Poet’s Memoir of China’s Genocide,” from which this essay is adapted.

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About seven years ago, people around me started disappearing.

It began slowly, quietly. The editors of a well-known literature textbook were suddenly nowhere to be found. A friend of mine left for work and never came home.

My family and I are Uyghurs, and at the time we were living in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China. The political situation in our region had been growing gradually more tense for several years, but still, we hoped and assumed that these disappearances were isolated incidents.

Pretty soon, however, the scope of what was happening became terribly clear.

Since 2017, the Chinese government has carried out a program of mass internment in my homeland. In that time, over one million people — Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minorities — are estimated to have been placed in concentration camps referred to as “re-education centers.”

Some of my friends who disappeared in the early stages of this campaign were, we later learned, arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Others seemingly vanished without a trace.

For those who have never been through something like this, our tragedy is probably difficult to imagine. A decade ago, I couldn’t have imagined it myself. When catastrophe came for us, it crept up so gradually that at first we couldn’t see it for what it was. That’s how it often comes.

I was born in 1969 in Kashgar, an ancient city in the southwest of our homeland. After attending college in Beijing, I returned to the Uyghur region to work as a teacher, and in my free time continued writing poetry — my lifelong passion. When I attempted to go abroad for master’s studies, I was arrested on an absurd charge of “attempting to take illegal and confidential materials out of the country” and imprisoned in a labor camp. After three years, when I was finally released, I began a new career as a film director in Urumqi. Although the heavy hand of the state could be felt in every corner of our homeland, things were somewhat better in the regional capital.

After large-scale inter-communal violence broke out in Urumqi in the summer of 2009, new forms of repression gradually made themselves felt in the city and throughout the Uyghur region. Even locals, though, could not foresee the magnitude of the approaching danger.

Little attention was paid as, in the early 2010s, surveillance cameras were installed in every nook and cranny of our cities. When the police began random cellphone checks on the street, people were alarmed at first, but gradually grew used to it. Not long after, when highway checkpoints expanded and multiplied, folks privately expressed concern but ground their teeth and bore it. When, in 2016, police posts were constructed every 200 meters along city streets, people ignored them and hurried past.

As time passed, we adapted to these changes and to this new, more authoritarian way of life.

When the first internment camps were constructed in 2014, people took note. But at the time, the camps were only for Uyghur Islamic leaders, and we comforted ourselves knowing that the clergy members were all released after a month or two.

In the end, many of us — even intellectuals like me, who think of ourselves as being highly attuned to politics — failed to see what it was we were becoming inured to.

When the mass internment of Uyghurs began, devout Muslims were the first to be taken. I'm not particularly religious, so I assumed I'd be safe. After that, the Chinese government detained people who had visited any one of 26 countries it deemed linked to terrorism. Aside from three days in Turkey during a trip to Europe, I had never been to any of those countries, so I thought I would be all right. Then migrant laborers in Urumqi began getting arrested along with their families. My household was registered in Urumqi, and I enjoyed a degree of financial security and social status; I figured my family and I would be OK.

It wasn't until the police began detaining Uyghur intellectuals in our city — including some of my closest friends — that I began to understand the immediate danger I faced.

One evening, while driving home from work in June 2017, I saw something through the window that made me slow the car. On the edge of a Uyghur neighborhood, military police armed with automatic weapons were dismounting from transport trucks. Several officers were barking orders and dividing people into groups. Neighborhood committee cadres stood next to them, their telltale blue binders in their hands.

Someone shouted an order, and the police charged down the alleyways of the neighborhood. I couldn't tear my eyes away. The kind of scene I had witnessed only in movies was now unfolding a dozen meters away from me.

I thought of the fate that awaited the men and women living in those alleyways. While over the preceding months I had heard of innumerable Uyghurs being detained, it had all felt somewhat removed from me. In that moment, though, I knew that none of this was ever truly distant from any of us.

My family and I were lucky enough to escape to the United States in the autumn of that year. But few of our friends were so fortunate.

Just a few months after we left, I learned of the arrest of my dear friend Perhat Tursun. Perhat and I had first met in college, where we bonded over our shared passion for literature, and we had grown close during our post-college years living in Urumqi, where Perhat pursued a successful career as a novelist, poet and critic.

Perhat is an original. He relishes challenging accepted notions, and his literary work combines depth with dark humor. Literature has always been everything for him. As one politically engaged friend of ours put it, "Perhat turns everything into literature."

A full year passed before I learned of Perhat's fate. He had been sentenced to 16 years in prison. Two more years passed before a journalist friend of mine was able to turn up more information. Perhat was in a prison in Atush, his hometown. The journalist even managed to learn the number of Perhat's prison cell: 0605. It's a meaningless number, but now it's a number I'll never forget. Perhat, who could find dark humor in anything, is now the victim of a terrifying injustice that easily matches the absurdities he mined in his own fiction.

Over the past six years I have learned of numerous other friends' prison sentences. They have varied in length, if not in their injustice and cruelty. Other friends, though, are simply gone. I have found no trace of them no matter how hard I've tried.

I tell myself that the lack of information is simply a result of the Chinese government's severing of communications between the Uyghur region and the outside world. I know, however, that there may be other explanations. I can't yet bring myself to face what my friends' silence might mean.

Since arriving in America, I have felt a sense of urgency to speak out about what has happened in my homeland — not only so that my community can find more support, but also so that the world can learn from our tragedy and help to avert others.

It is important to understand that profound injustice does not simply appear overnight. More often, it creeps up on you quietly. You may not notice it, or you may not want to. And injustice is infectious.

In spring 2017, when the Chinese government began the mass internment of Uyghurs, activists in the Uyghur diaspora tried to arouse the attention of the world, including the Chinese people.

Few paid attention at the time, but before long a draconian new extradition law was imposed on Hong Kong, and the world watched as the Chinese authorities suppressed the resulting mass protests. In 2020, the Chinese government announced plans to push the Mongol language out of the school system in Inner Mongolia, just as it had marginalized the Uyghur language in our homeland for two decades. At the same time, under the banner of the country's "zero Covid" policy, one Chinese city after another was sealed off, with people locked in their homes and in temporary hospitals.

Recently, after announcing plans to "Sinicize" Islam, the Chinese state has reportedly accelerated the demolition of mosques belonging to the Hui, a Chinese-speaking Muslim minority group. Amid China's saber-rattling toward Taiwan, every Uyghur felt a shiver of recognition to hear the Chinese ambassador to France declare that Taiwan's people should be "re-educated" if China took the island.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine last year, Xi Jinping's China has resisted describing Putin's war as an "invasion." You don't need to be a political scientist to see these two authoritarians' shared interests.

Not long after the war in Ukraine began, I was moved to hear that a number of Uyghur youths living in Europe had gone to help Ukraine. Two young Uyghurs living in Turkey even reached out to me to ask if I knew how they could join the Ukrainians on the front lines. I stressed how dangerous that would be, but their response was firm.

They told me that, even if they died in battle, it was important for the world to see Uyghurs stand in solidarity with others who need help. They said, in essence, that as long as their deaths brought more attention to our people's plight, that was enough for them.

Although their uncertain legal status in Turkey and their unfamiliarity with the language prevented them from reaching Ukraine, it was clear that they understood the connection between their own community's oppression and Russia's devastation of Ukraine.

The Uyghur diaspora has worked tirelessly to let the world know about the genocide unfolding in our homeland and to ask the world to take action. Over and over we have shared our bitter experiences; only we know the pain we feel each time we relive them.

But this catastrophe does not end with our community. The defense of Uyghurs' human rights is the defense of human rights everywhere. If repression can be contagious, so can justice. Humanity's shared values have a broader reach than any autocrat.

I urge you: Do not ignore the signs of creeping authoritarianism. Do not make the mistake of thinking that something like what has happened to my people couldn't happen elsewhere, that it couldn't happen in your country. It can.

This essay was translated from the Uyghur by Joshua L. Freeman (@jlfreeman6).

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