Dear President Xi Jinping,

On the eve of the third anniversary of the detention of prominent Uighur economics professor and writer Ilham Tohti to life in prison on the charge of “separatism”, Amnesty International and the undersigned scholars are urging your government to immediately and unconditionally release him considering your obligations and commitments to human rights.

As President of the People’s Republic of China, you have the duty to ensure that the international human rights obligations that your country has undertaken are implemented. Moreover, in the past you have stressed the need for ethnic harmony and highlighted the importance of human rights. At the Second Central Work Forum on Xinjiang, you underscored the desire for each ethnicity in China to “mutually understand each other” and “mutually respect each other”. Similarly, in your summary of the key elements the Fourth Plenum of the Chinese Community Party, whose aim is the “construction of a rule of law country”, you laid out your government’s goal of having “human rights earnestly respected and protected” by 2020.

Professor Ilham Tohti was sentenced on 23 September 2014, after a politicized trial that was marred by numerous procedural irregularities and is now serving a life sentence solely for expressing ideas that fell well within the boundaries of freedom of expression as an academic and writer.

Ilham Tohti is a Uighur from northwest China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Uighurs, a 10-million-strong, Turkish-speaking ethnic group that are predominantly Muslim, face widespread discrimination in employment, education, housing, and curtailed religious freedom as well as political marginalization. In recent years, there have been numerous clashes between Uighurs and security personnel, including some incidents in which innocent civilians have been targets of indiscriminate killing. In reaction to these incidents, in May 2014, a “strike hard” campaign was launched in the XUAR, and speedy arrests, quick trials and mass sentencing have been prioritized. In 2014 the number of criminal cases handled by the courts rose 40 percent, and Uighurs have experienced further restrictions of freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and the ability to travel. Foreign journalists’ have become increasingly unable to report on the XUAR without facing heavy interference from government minders, and the authorities have sought to further restrict and control discussion on issues related to Uighurs and the XUAR, including in academia.

Although Ilham Tohti was openly critical of government policies in Xinjiang and towards Uighurs, he has consistently opposed violence and has worked peacefully to build bridges between ethnic communities in accordance with Chinese laws. He was the founder and director of the bilingual website “Uighur Online”, which reported on human rights violations suffered not only by Uighurs but also by ethnic Han Chinese.

He was first taken away from his home in Beijing by public security officers on 15 January 2014. He was held incommunicado and denied legal access for approximately six months, and according to his lawyers, he was denied food for ten days and had his feet shackled for over 20 days.

Authorities accused Ilham Tohti of using “Uighur Online” to lead a “criminal gang” and post articles and information about Chinese government policies in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region to promote separatist ideas and incite ethnic hatred. Selected portions of his university lectures, which were recorded by a CCTV camera that was installed in his lecture hall, were presented in the trial and broadcast afterwards on national television, in an attempt to portray Tohti as a separatist who had incited ethnic tension.

In the months before his trial, Ilham Tohti’s lawyers were not granted full access to these surveillance tapes of his lectures, which they believe would have been crucial in mounting his defence. The court did not allow his students, who would have been key witnesses in proving his innocence, to give testimony at the trial, even though Tohti’s lawyers had requested the witnesses to testify at the trial, and despite the fact that video clips of Tohti’s students denouncing him were broadcast on national television. One of his lawyers was forced to quit the case following political pressure.

Ilham Tohti is a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression, a right enshrined in the Chinese Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which China signed in 1998 and has repeatedly stated the intention to ratify.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the body of independent experts that monitors States Parties’ compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which China ratified in 2001, has stated in its General Comment 13:

“Academic freedom includes the liberty of individuals to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which they work, to fulfil their functions without discrimination or fear of repression by the State or any other actor…”

As Chinese universities strive for greater international recognition and cooperation with foreign

institutions of higher education, we urge the Chinese government to fully respect freedom of expression and association and academic freedom in all scholarly endeavours. The immediate and unconditional release of Ilham Tohti would be an important way of demonstrating China’s commitment to academic freedom, as well as a renewed dedication towards increasing mutual understanding among ethnicities and decreasing ethnic tension.

Yours sincerely