

Biography of Rebiya Kadeer

Rebiya Kadeer is the most prominent human rights advocate and leader of the Uyghur people. Ms. Kadeer, 61, is the mother of eleven children, and a former laundress turned millionaire. She spent six years in a Chinese prison for standing up to the authoritarian Chinese government. Before her arrest in 1999, she was a well-known Uyghur businesswoman and at one time the seventh wealthiest individual in the People's Republic of China.

Ms. Kadeer is a loving mother, a philanthropist, and a political activist. She built up and ran a multimillion-dollar trading company and a department store in Urumchi, capital of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR, formerly East Turkistan). She was passionate in helping out down-trodden Uyghurs, especially women and children. In order to educate Uyghur children from poor families, she opened free classes using space in her department store. She started the "Thousand Mothers Movement" in December 1997, to empower Uyghur women to start their own businesses. Ms. Kadeer's philanthropic efforts were at first praised by the Chinese government. She was appointed a member of China's National People's Congress as well as the Political Consultative Congress in 1992, and a member of China's delegation to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

Initially, Ms. Kadeer hoped to improve the situation of the Uyghur people by working within the Chinese state system. She tried to persuade high-ranking Chinese officials, including China's president, to change their hard-line, repressive policies against the Uyghurs. Beijing's attitude toward Ms. Kadeer changed when she criticized China's treatment of her people during a National People's Congress session in March 1997. In her speech, she demanded that the Chinese government honor the autonomy conferred on the Uyghur people and respect their human rights. She strongly criticized China's harsh crackdown of the Uyghur student demonstration, which had taken place a month earlier in Ghulja City.

To punish Ms. Kadeer for her disloyalty to the Chinese Communist Party, she was stripped of her membership in both the National People's Congress and the Political Consultative Conference and forbidden to travel abroad. Beijing also pressured her to divorce her dissident husband, Sidik Rouzi, who had fled to the US in 1996.

In 1999, while on her way to meet with a US Congressional delegation, Ms. Kadeer was arrested and then sentenced to eight years in prison for 'stealing state secrets.'

Ms. Kadeer's case became an international embarrassment for the Chinese government after Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch publicized her case and aggressively pursued her freedom. In 2000, Human Rights Watch awarded Ms. Kadeer its highest human rights award. In 2004, Norway's Rafto Foundation honored her with the Rafto Award. Then, on March 17, 2005, three days before an official visit to Beijing by the US Secretary of State, she was released from prison on medical grounds.

Ms. Kadeer has been actively campaigning for the human rights of the Uyghur people since her release. Despite Chinese government efforts to discredit her, Ms. Kadeer remains the leader and 'Mother of the Uyghur nation', in whom the Uyghur people have put their hopes for the future.

(Kadeer's children and other family members have frequently been persecuted by the People's Republic of China authorities in retaliation for her human rights advocacy.)

-from Uyghur Human Rights Project Office in Washington, D.C. October, 2008