

THE FINALISTS

Soltan Achilova (Turkmenistan)



Soltan Achilova (71) is an independent photojournalist and reporter in Turkmenistan, one of the most isolated and repressive countries in the world. She is shedding light on the many injustices and human rights violations people face in her country. With almost complete governmental control over its population, citizens of Turkmenistan have scarcely any recourse to defend their rights.

Her work illustrates issues affecting Turkmen citizens in their daily lives such as food insecurity, forced and illegal evictions, lack of adequate healthcare and the discrimination faced by people with disabilities.

She has reported on these issues for more than a decade, filing articles and reports smuggled on to foreign-based media outlets. Her photographs and findings were central to investigations of housing rights violations in Ashgabat conducted by the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch.

As an investigative journalist in a country without media freedom, Soltan Achilova is subject to severe forms of attacks and harassment. She

has been stopped from leaving the country on several occasions and has almost no access to the internet. Despite the difficult circumstances and personal hardships, she continues to investigate and stand alongside Turkmen citizens.

Loujain AlHathloul (Saudi Arabia)



Loujain AlHathloul (31) is a Saudi woman human rights activist. She is a leading advocate for the promotion of gender equality and women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

Before her arrest in 2018, Loujain AlHathloul was one of the key figures of the Women to Drive movement, which called for the abolition of the driving ban for women. She also advocated for the end of the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia and planned to open a

shelter for victims of gender-based violence.

Loujain began her activism in 2013 while still a student of French literature at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Despite the great risks her activism entailed, Loujain AlHathloul decided time and again to carry on her mission of giving a voice to the voiceless.

She was arrested for the first time in 2014 while driving from the UAE to neighboring Saudi Arabia. She has been in detention since May 2018, where she has been subject to torture, solitary confinement, and denial of access to her lawyers, family and medical care. Loujain could have been released on the condition she publicly deny she was tortured while in jail – but she refused to do so. In October 2020, she started a hunger strike to protest against the conditions of her detention. On November 25, her case was transferred to a Specialized Criminal Court, known as “terrorism court”. Her family was given one day only to prepare her defense. On December 28, the Court sentenced Loujain to five years and eight months in jail. The judge suspended 2 years and 10 months in addition to the time already served (since May 2018) which means that Loujain may be freed early 2021.

However, Loujain will be placed on a 5-year travel ban and 3 years of probation during which time any perceived *criminal activity* would result in her re-imprisonment.

Loujain AlHathloul is the winner of the PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award in 2019 and the ‘Prix Liberté’ (Normandie) in 2020. She was named one of TIME Magazine’s most influential people in 2019 and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Yu Wensheng (China)



Yu Wensheng (54) is a Chinese human rights lawyer from Beijing. He has been detained since 2018 for his activism in favor of the rule of law, democracy and governmental reform in China.

Before his human rights engagement, Yu Wensheng was a corporate lawyer. He gave up a successful career to focus on human rights cases, which ultimately led him to speak out more broadly on the rule of law in China.

Over the past ten years, Yu Wensheng worked on several high-profile human rights cases, the best known of which is his defense of human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang who was arrested in 2015 during a major crackdown on

human rights, called the *709 Crackdown*. Despite the risk of doing so, Yu Wensheng decided to take on the case.

Not only was he involved in legal human rights cases, but he also publicly advocated for constitutional changes and a revision of the legal system, namely the abolition of the death penalty and the introduction of a multi-party system.

As one of the best-known and most intrepid Chinese human rights activists, Yu Wensheng has faced the severest forms of repression by the Chinese state, including arbitrary detention, conviction during a secret trial, and expulsion from the legal bar. According to his wife, he is currently being held in solitary confinement, has been denied access to medical care and subjected to ill-treatments which resulted in his hand being crushed. In December 2020, a Chinese regional High Court upheld the four-year prison sentence against him. Ever since, his whereabouts are unknown.
