

## How the “empowered voices” of American Muslim women give me hope and strength: Reflections of a Uyghur human rights activist



By Zubayra Shamseden  
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I was honored to attend the October 11 MPAC ceremony spotlighting the three amazing, talented women who received the 2018 Empowering Voices Award in Washington, DC.

The inspiration I received that evening was something I deeply needed as a Uyghur woman.

Even for Uyghurs who live outside China, the dire situation in East Turkestan is our living nightmare. Every week brings new sorrow, as we learn of more deaths in custody in the “re-education” camps that hold more than a million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and members of other Turkic Muslims. Mothers and fathers are being taken away in the middle of the night. The orphanages are so overcrowded with Uyghur children whose parents are in the detention camps that the government is constantly building more – surrounding them by barbed wire. Now the government has announced an “anti-halal” campaign, punishing Uyghur Muslims who decline to eat pork.

Campaigning to stop this repression is utterly exhausting. With only a few vocal Uyghur organizations, we cannot keep up with the volume of urgent commitments. Uyghurs everywhere in the world carry a heavy moral and psychological burden. We cannot escape, even for a day, the pain of Chinese government’s ruthless program to wipe out our identity and faith. It is hitting hard every Uyghur soul, and we have to pray for a miracle to rescue our helpless loved ones back home, who are trapped a totalitarian machine of cruelty.

During the opening remarks that evening in Washington, the Qur’an recitation by young Muslim woman on stage suddenly brought me a mixed feeling. I felt a flood of warmth, but at the same time, an emotional reminder of the millions of imprisoned Uyghurs, especially women, imprisoned simply for wearing a headscarf, let alone reading Qur’an in a public event.

My vision and my mind flew to a different place. Countless questions and hopeful dreams began to appear in front of my eyes. I knew deep in my heart that every single guest at this glittering event would be our strong friend and supporter, if only they knew about the millions of suffering Uyghurs in East Turkestan.

I let my mind linger over the qualities of the people around me. They truly love pluralism and peace. They stand against racism and they care for their neighbors. They believe everyone should be able to dress however they like to dress, to speak

in the language that they are the most comfortable with. They practice tolerance for others, and wish to live in a society that practices tolerance for all.

Like Uyghurs, they strive to follow the rules of the holy book, which teaches them that hate is not a solution. Like Uyghurs, they know that God teaches us to be just, even if it brings personal hardship.

Suddenly the cheerful sound of clapping woke me up. I was back to reality, a reality where I was among people whose faith is so familiar to me, yet they didn't know me. We share the same faith, but they didn't see me until I greeted them, smiled, and started the conversation myself. After the ice was broken, we talked, we felt close, and we began to laugh and cry together.

These interactions reminded me of an issue that we Uyghurs have been very distressed about. The Muslim world, Muslim social organizations, Muslim religious leaders, and Muslim media are mute about Uyghur issues. We always ask, are they really unconcerned? Do they really not care about Uyghur Muslims?

But I learned something important by taking part in the MPAC evening. Just by attending one event, I found new friends and supporters who have heard our cry. I have to admit, like others in the Uyghur diaspora, I have not been confident about identifying myself as Muslim. I have not spent much time finding connections with Muslims in our democratic society.

I realized that I have channeled my identity as a Muslim into fighting back, as a victim of China's drive to wipe out my religion and my people, a despised minority in China. It is time for me to also draw strength from my identity, and from being a member of a loving and upright community of believers .

Before the evening was over, I was thrilled to hear one of the speakers talk about the Uyghurs alongside the Rohingya and other suffering people who need the attention of American Muslims. What a difference it makes to spend time with people who are proud supporters of Islamic and American values, of mercy, justice, peace, human dignity, freedom, and equality for all.

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