
A FAMILY DIVIDED: A DAUGHTER'S STORY

An interview with Kekenos Rouzi, daughter of Rebiya Kadeer

By Aaron Gray

Rebiya Kadeer is a prominent human rights advocate who is considered to be a spiritual leader of the Uyghur people. She spent six years in a Chinese prison for standing up to the authoritarian Chinese government. In 1999, while on her way to meet with a delegation of U.S. congressional aides, Kadeer was arrested and then sentenced to eight years in prison for “stealing state secrets.” On March 17, 2005, three days before an official visit to Beijing by the U.S. Secretary of State, she was released from prison on medical grounds. Kadeer has been actively campaigning for the human rights of the Uyghur people since her release.

Kadeer is the mother of 11 children. In an attempt to reduce her influence among Uyghurs by pressuring her into silence after her exile to the United States, PRC authorities began an intense campaign of intimidation against her children inside the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), which is also known as East Turkestan.¹ Her children in East Turkestan have been harassed, fined, detained and arrested because of her human rights activities. Two of her sons, Ablikim and Alim, remain in prison.

Kekenos Rouzi, Kadeer's youngest child, is a seventeen-year-old high school senior. She was born in East Turkestan and currently lives in northern Virginia. She took a break from reading Hamlet for her English class to give this interview.

Aaron Gray (AG): *You spent the first eight years of your life in East Turkestan. What are your main memories from there?*

Kekenos Rouzi (KR): All of my time there I spent with my family. Those were some good memories. My mom, she traveled a lot, doing her business and trade.

I wouldn't even know when she was coming back. I would wake up and she would be sitting there on my bed. I would get so excited and happy!

I remember when I was coming to America, my mom was dropping us off at the airport. I didn't even know that she wasn't going to be coming with us. I was so young, I did not even realize what was going on. She took us to the airport. As we passed through the gate, my sisters were crying. I saw my mother, standing on the other side of the gate and I was wondering why she did not cross. I didn't realize until I sat down in the airplane and I was thinking, “Oh my god, my mom is not coming with us,” so I started crying and I realized that she was not going to be around for a long time. I think that was my last memory of my mother before coming to America.

AG: *How old were you when your mother was arrested? What was that like for you?*

KR: I was about nine, because it was a year after I moved [to the U.S.]. At that age I didn't really grasp what was going on. At first when I found out that she was in jail, I was thinking that this was just another little thing, that she would get out, that this would not turn out to be an eight-year sentence. The first day that I found out, my sisters were crying and my dad was really, really quiet, he didn't know what to do. I guess that I was in shock, but as time went on, it started to dawn on me that it was real, that she was going to be in there for a while.

My sisters would visit her in jail. That was the only information that we would get, what she looked like or what she said when they visited her.

That age is a crucial time in a child's life; you have to be with both parents, you need that. I had family sur-



This photo, dated February 22, 2002, shows (L to R) Akida, Kekenos, Reyla and Rouxian Rouzi, the four daughters of Rebiya Kadeer, after appearing before the U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Photo credits: JOYCE NALTCHAYAN/AFP/Getty Images.

rounding me and they were a really good influence on me, but I needed to build that relationship with my mother. I love my mother and we have a great relationship, but it was seven years lost.

AG: *What about her release?*

KR: Throughout her six years [in prison], we would come to D.C. and try to campaign for her release. And I remember the first time, I thought, this is it, she is going to get out, I was so sure of it. And then nothing happened for a while, so I was extremely disappointed. After that I decided not to get my hopes up, and started to

look at it as though it was probably not going to happen.

So then, my sister was on the phone, and then she hangs up and turns around and tells me that my mom is getting out. I started crying and bawling, and even with all of that I still had something in the back of my head saying to not believe it 100 percent. I didn't want to go all the way, because I know how devastating it would be to find out that it wasn't true. So I cried, then I got really excited and happy, but the 100 percent didn't get there until I saw her and I actually touched her with my hands at the airport.

That was a couple of days later. There were so many people there, all of the Uyghur people and that was great. There was part of me that wanted it to be a family moment, too, but that's okay. The whole time that we were waiting, I was really on edge and I didn't want to talk to anybody. Anything could have pushed me into either crying or screaming at someone. We waited and waited and waited, and I was thinking in my head, "What if she does not recognize me?" I know that is a childish notion, but I expected her to come out with

her long dresses and her long hair, but it was cut really short. She was wearing this plain long coat and she had short hair and I just ran forward and hugged her. It was an emotional high, everybody was crying around me, but I wasn't aware of anyone else but her.

We waited and waited and waited, and I was thinking in my head, "What if she does not recognize me?"

AG: *What do you think of your mother's activism for Uyghurs?*

KR: I am not surprised at all that she got up the next day and started on things. When she sets out to get things done, she really gets them done. She sets herself goals and you might not know how she does it, but she gets things done and as soon as she got [to the U.S.] the next day, everything was getting started up to work towards our cause, and she has been doing it ever since.

AG: *How did you feel about your mother's two Nobel Peace Prize nominations?*

KR: Just being nominated is an honor. I am so happy that she was nominated at all, because there are so many people that could have been. The people nominated alongside her are all really great people. I thought, if she wins that would be great, that would put us on the map. More and more people would know about our cause, and that would help us so much. Not because my mom would be famous, I don't really care about it in that sense. It is so our cause is more known. She feels that same way. But just to be nominated is an honor in itself.

AG: *What is it like for your family to be split between East Turkestan and the Washington, D.C. area? Tell me about your family's current situation.*

KR: My family that is in East Turkestan right now, I haven't really seen them since I was eight. I love them to death, of course, they are my family, but I have not seen them for a long time, which is a strain on our relationship.

Both of my brothers are in jail right now. It is another situation like my mother's and we are fighting to get them out, but my mother was a lot more high profile than they are, so it was easier to get her out than it will be for them. It is going to take longer.

I want to do more, but we are limited in what we can do. My mom and dad cannot go back to China and personally bring them out. We are doing the most that we can here. If I was given a chance to take their place, I would without question. It is unjust, like everything that the Chinese government has done to us. Right now we are working to make people more aware. We have to make people see what is being done to us, what has been done to us, and what they will continue to do if we do not stop it now.

AG: *Do you find that people are aware of Uyghur issues in the U.S.? What do you tell them about your situation?*

KR: Not a lot. People that I meet everyday, the people that I meet at school, everywhere that I go, there are not a lot of people who know about it. Every time that someone asks me where I am from, I have to explain the history and the background. Then they usually will ask, "What is [East Turkestan]?" I tell them that it is in central Asia and that it was taken over by China, and it is not on the map. But when you go into Washington D.C., and in Congress, a lot of people know about the issues. The closer to the political center, then the more people know about it.

AG: *What would be your feelings about going back to East Turkestan?*

My family that is in East Turkestan right now, I haven't really seen them since I was eight. I love them to death, of course, they are my family, but I have not seen them for a long time, which is a strain on our relationship.

KR: I would love to! I have always wanted to. My parents are not going to let me go. If they do let me go, it would be with so many safety precautions. I don't think that I will be arrested or anything like that, because I am not really in the limelight. But my parents worry that having the youngest daughter back there might be an opportunity to get snatched up. I don't think that anything would happen and I really would love to go back. It is my home country. As much as I love America—and I do love America, this is my second home—I would love to go back and I do plan on going back someday.

Note

1. Editor's note: Rather than use the name given to the region by the Chinese, many Uyghurs prefer to use "East Turkestan" for their homeland. It is also alternatively spelled "East Turkistan."