



## **Chinese human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng named Laureate of the 2021 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders**

**Geneva, 11 February 2021 – The Martin Ennals Foundation has granted Yu Wensheng, a leading Chinese human rights lawyer, the 2021 Martin Ennals Award. Wensheng was among the three Finalists to the Award selected by a Jury of ten global human rights organizations, along with Loujain AlHathloul, Saudi Arabia, and Soltan Achilova, Turkmenistan.**

This year, three outstanding human rights defenders based in authoritarian states were nominated for the 2021 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders. Laureate Yu Wensheng (China) and co-Finalists Loujain AlHathloul (Saudi Arabia) and Soltan Achilova (Turkmenistan) distinguish themselves by their bravery and deep commitment to human rights, despite the many attempts to silence them by their authoritarian governments.

*“The Martin Ennals Foundation is proud to honor three Awardees united by their fight for justice and the fact that they are deprived of the right to express themselves. On the eve of the Chinese New Year, we hope this recognition of Yu Wensheng’s work will shine a light on his achievements and help him regain the freedom he has lost”,* says **Philippe Currat**, President of the Board of the Martin Ennals Foundation.

With confinements clamping down on communities across the world, the Martin Ennals Foundation was determined to transcend the pandemic by celebrating them with an enhanced online ceremony, livestreamed on 11 February at 6pm CET from Geneva to worldwide locations.

*“While the COVID-19 pandemic affects all of us around the world, human rights defenders are paying a particularly heavy price. In regions where human rights were violated long before the pandemic, this crisis served as a pretext to further reduce civic space. Today, more than ever, the City of Geneva stands by those brave defenders and thanks them for their contribution to our common humanity”,* says Member of the Geneva executive **Alfonso Gomez**.

### **A lawyer holding his government to account**

Yu Wensheng (54) is a human rights lawyer in China who drew the ire of government authorities by defending other lawyers detained in the 709 crackdown and calling for constitutional reform. Wensheng is detained since 2018; he has been harassed, disbarred, and convicted in secret for inciting subversion against state power. Reports also say that while in custody, Wensheng has been tortured and is denied medical care. In December 2020, a regional Court of Jiangsu province upheld an appeal against his four-year prison sentence. He has now been sent to Nanjing prison, 1045 Km away from his family who could recently briefly talk to him via videoconference.

His wife, Xu Yan, welcomed her husband’s nomination to the Martin Ennals Award: *“It is an honor for my husband, but also an encouragement to all Chinese human rights defenders to pursue their work despite the hardships”,* she said. Xu Yan keeps relentlessly fighting for her husband’s freedom while his health is failing behind bars: *“My husband always helped others and defended the rule of law. He was never guilty and should be acquitted immediately”.*

*"In 2020, Chinese authorities harassed human rights defenders raising concerns about COVID, defending ethnic minorities, and standing up against corruption. Yu Wensheng and his wife Xu Yan deserve all our support as they bravely call for basic human rights and the rule of law."*, says **Andrew Anderson**, Front Line Defenders Executive Director and member of the Jury.

### Finalists Loujain Alhathloul and Soltan Achilova

This year's Finalists of the Martin Ennals Award are Loujain AlHathloul (Saudi Arabia), and Soltan Achilova (Turkmenistan).

- **AlHathloul** is a leading women's rights defender, who fiercely advocated for the *Women to drive* movement and for the end of the male guardianship system. She was imprisoned in 2018 on charges related to national security. Tortured, denied medical care, and subjected to solitary confinement, Loujain (31) was sentenced to 5 years and 8 months in prison on 28 December 2020. Her release is expected to take effect any moment, but her family keeps fighting for Loujain's release to be unconditional. *"A five-year travel ban, three years of probation and a life-long labeling as a terrorist: this is not freedom! Loujain and all other women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia should be released unconditionally"*, claims her sister Lina AlHathloul.
- **Achilova** is an independent reporter documenting on human rights violations in Turkmenistan. Despite threats, surveillance and harassment, she denounces those abuses and reports on rampant Covid infections, endemic food insecurity and forced evictions. Due to her 71 years of age and health issues, Soltan has often thought of giving up her work, but *"someone must tell the world about what's really going on in Turkmenistan"*, she believes.

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### Notes to editors

- The **Martin Ennals Foundation** provides support to human rights defenders to pursue their causes, through a financial prize, international recognition and opportunities for professional and personal growth. The **Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders** honors individuals showing outstanding commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, despite the risks involved.
- The **Jury of the Martin Ennals Award** is comprised of ten of the world's leading human rights organizations: Amnesty International, FIDH, Human Rights First, HURIDOCS, International Service for Human Rights, Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World), Front Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch, the International Commission of Jurists and the World Organization Against Torture.
- The **City of Geneva** has hosted the Award ceremony since 2008, together with the Martin Ennals Foundation. The support of the City, by means of its Service for International Solidarity, reflects its mission to promote human rights both internationally and locally.
- Learn more about the Martin Ennals Foundation: [www.martinennalsaward.org](http://www.martinennalsaward.org)
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