

Pham Doan Trang: Human rights journalist in jail for “anti state activities” By Caitlin Tilley

Vietnamese journalist Pham Doan Trang knew she would be arrested at some point, and even wrote a farewell letter, but she didn't know when – until, on 6 October 2020, police turned up in the middle of the night at her flat in Ho Chi Minh City. She is now embarking on a nine-year jail sentence in Hanoi Detention Centre. One-party rule and state-controlled media in Vietnam saw her prosecuted for propaganda against the state, but her former colleague, Will Nguyen, says her real crime was telling the truth. “She told the truth – about the [Communist] Party, about citizens' political rights, and about how the Party was trampling these rights. In short, she tried to empower the people, the Party's greatest fear.”

In her [final statement](#) at her trial, 43-year-old Trang said: “You may imprison me and bask in celebration for eliminating a longstanding thorn in your eye, but you will never be rid of your ugly, authoritarian, undemocratic, anti-democratic reputation.” Trang's elderly mother has not seen her since the trial in December 2021, and numerous requests to visit have been ignored.

Trang comes from humble beginnings, living in poverty and enduring “all kinds of discrimination that a woman in Vietnam faces”, close friend Trinh Huu Long said. Long is also editor-in-chief of *Luat Khoa Magazine*, which he co-founded with Trang in 2014. He believes her upbringing was the reason for her immense empathy. “Whenever she sees someone, she can quickly feel that person's struggles. Because of that, she can see what others don't. She can come up with topics that no one thinks about, she can come up with questions that no one thinks about,” he says.

She became an independent journalist and writer, and wrote the first LGBTQ+ biography in Vietnam, of Nguyen Van Dung. Daniel Bastard, Asia-Pacific Director at [Reporters without Borders \(RSF\)](#), says: “All the time, she wrote for Vietnamese people, and she realised that the limits she had to cope with when she was a state media journalist were preventing her from doing her job honestly”.

In 2006, Trang started her [blog](#), which began as a way for her to practise her English, but later became a way for her to publish what the wider media would not. Long says: “She will never let a story slip, she will find every means possible to publish her stories.” She wanted to document the democracy and civil rights movement that could otherwise be forgotten about. Trang wrote about a multitude of issues affecting citizens, including Sino-Vietnamese relations, the South China Sea issue, human rights, land disputes. Long says: “It is just so admirable that she has such deep care about how people are struggling on a daily basis, not only politically but also economically.”

Trang was willing to take huge risks to get people heard in her stories. In 2012, hundreds of farmers near Hanoi protested against the government taking 5.8 hectares of their land away and giving it to developers without properly consulting with them. The mainstream media stayed silent and no journalists dared to talk about it. But Trang decided she had to be there to give the farmers a voice. Long described the village as a “battlefield”, but Trang told him, “I have to go”. “She went there fully knowing that she could be in great danger,” Long says.

As all press in Vietnam is state-owned, publishing books was a way for Trang to avoid control, and she created her own company, the Liberal Publishing House. She gave her [farewell letter](#) to her main

English copy-editor and translator, Vietnamese democracy advocate Nguyen, and instructed him to publicise it in the event of her arrest, which he said she knew “was only a matter of time”.

Long says many government officials actually sympathise with and support Trang. “Or at least, they know that what she is doing is right. The thing is that they cannot publicly support her, they could not even publicly like her post on Facebook. That is the problem. But they have a way of listening to her, and they have a way of sending messages to her that they respect her work.”

According to Bastard, the Vietnamese government is responsible for the physical abuse Trang has suffered over the years. She has been beaten so badly on her back and feet with wooden sticks that she now walks with a limp and often cannot sleep because of the pain. “As she is an impassioned guitar player, she was always viscerally terrified that police would torture her and mangle her hands permanently, as they have other dissidents. She also suffered a concussion when thugs beat her with a motorcycle helmet during a concert raid in 2018 and still has headaches from that occasionally,” says Nguyen.

Journalists being detained in Vietnam is becoming more and more common, with the number imprisoned having risen steadily for the past four or five years, as Bastard explains: “Ten years ago, when a journalist was sentenced because of propaganda against the state, they would get one or two years in jail. Now, these same journalists would get eight or nine years in jail.” Vietnam has become a major tourist destination, particularly with gap year students, known for its beautiful landscapes and delicious food. “But they don’t know that it’s still one-party rule where there is no free press. It is important to remind the world about this.”

Bastard is not hopeful Trang will be released before the nine years are up. When journalists have been freed in the past, they have had to go into exile, and Trang is determined to stay in Vietnam. “She wants to stay with her people,” Bastard says, and this makes it much harder for RSF to ask for her release. Long says he hopes she will change her mind and is concerned her illnesses are so severe she might not be able to endure them much longer. When her lawyers visited in March 2022, she was losing weight and receiving no medical attention in prison, which Long says is a kind of torture in itself.

Trang has received a number of awards over the years, including the Press Freedom Award for Impact from RSF in 2019. To support Trang, people can sign the RSF’s [petition](#) calling for her release, and also [write to her](#), as she speaks good English. Long says Trang’s “ultimate goal” is to get more people, especially young people, involved in politics. “Spreading her words, reading her books, writing books, opening up magazines, trying to educate the public about their rights, that’s what she wants.”