

Prominent dissident journalist jailed in Vietnam

PUBLISHED : 14 DEC 2021 AT 20:51

WRITER: [AFP](#)

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Pham Doan Trang (YouTube screenshot)

A Hanoi court on Tuesday sentenced one of its most prominent dissident journalists to nine years behind bars on anti-state charges, the latest jailing of a press worker in Vietnam.

Pham Doan Trang -- a campaigner for press freedom and civil rights -- has long been a thorn in the side of authorities, writing on a host of controversial issues from land grabs to police violence.

Arrested in Ho Chi Minh City in October 2020, the 43-year-old appeared in a Hanoi court Tuesday for a one-day trial -- observed by journalists and diplomats via a video that had its audio signal frequently cut.

The former state media reporter was accused of "spreading propaganda against the socialist republic of Vietnam", said judge Chu Phuong Ngoc.

"Her behaviour was dangerous for society... implemented with the intention of violating the socialist regime... and (she) must be seriously punished".

During the hearing, Trang testified to being detained 25 times since 2015, and said she had been "terrorised" by security forces.

She walked with a limp due to a leg injury sustained when police broke up an environmental protest she attended six years ago.

In 2016, as a freelancer, she wrote extensively on the country's worst environmental disaster, a toxic spill that killed tonnes of fish in central Vietnam and prompted rare protests across the country.

That same year she was detained by police on her way to a meeting with then-US President Barack Obama in Hanoi, who had invited her to join a gathering of activists during his visit.

Trang was detained again in November 2017 after meeting with a European Union delegation, which was preparing for the annual bilateral human rights dialogue between the EU and Vietnam.

In her book "Politics of a Police State", she recounted the continual harassment she endured during these years.

It included police pouring glue over her apartment's door lock to prevent her from leaving and posting intimate photos taken from her computer.

In a letter she wrote in 2019 entitled "Just in case I am imprisoned", Trang urged the public to focus on fighting for free and fair elections in Vietnam, rather than her freedom.

"I don't want freedom for just myself: that's too easy," she wrote.

"I want something greater: freedom for Vietnam."

Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for Campaigns Ming Yu Hah said the treatment of Trang was "cruelly emblematic of the Vietnamese authorities' repression of peaceful human rights activism across the country".

She called for Trang's immediate release, along with all other "unjustly detained human rights defenders in Viet Nam".

Before Trang's trial, Human Rights Watch said at least 146 people were behind bars in Vietnam for exercising their basic rights.

Two other activists will be tried this week in the communist one-party state, where independent media is banned.