

Tense One-Day Trial Ends in 9-Year Sentence for Vietnamese Journalist

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A lawyer for Vietnamese author and journalist Pham Doan Trang has described as tense the one-day trial that resulted in a nine-year sentence for Trang on Tuesday.

The award-winning journalist was convicted of “spreading anti-state propaganda” under Article 88 of Vietnam’s Penal Code. The charge has been criticized by her lawyer Dang Dinh Manh and international rights organizations, who say Trang is being penalized for her work.

“We believe what Trang has done was merely exercising the right to freedom of speech,” said Manh, one of five lawyers who defended the 43-year-old journalist.

He added that the charge contradicts provisions in Vietnam’s constitution that protect free speech.

The lawyer told VOA the Hanoi People's Court judges maintained that Trang's behavior was "dangerous to the society and the administration.”

Manh added that in an unusual move, the court handed down a prison term longer than requested by the prosecution.

Manh said that Trang was frequently interrupted when addressing the court.

The journalist, who was arrested in October 2020, pleaded not guilty.

“We believe that the conviction of Trang does not have enough of a legal basis,” said Manh.

Trang’s family has protested the sentence. Her brother, Nguyen Chinh Truc, who attended the trial with their 81-year-old mother, told VOA he raised objections at the hearing.

International reaction

The United States and other governments, along with international rights groups, have condemned the conviction of Trang, who is known for her reports on human rights and legal issues affecting Vietnamese.

In a statement released Tuesday, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said that Trang “did nothing more than peacefully express her opinions.”

He called on Vietnam to release the journalist “who has been recognized internationally for her work to advance human rights and good governance in Vietnam.”

Britain, Germany and the Czech Republic also voiced concern at the sentencing.

Vietnam's Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to VOA's request for comment on Trang's case and the international condemnation of her conviction.

The ministry spokesperson has previously said that only criminals are imprisoned in Vietnam.

Trang is one of at least 23 journalists in jail for their work as of December, according to data by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

In 2019, Trang was honored with the prize for impact by media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

The watchdog criticized her sentencing and is campaigning to have Trang released.

"This is political justice carried out on the ruling party's orders with the sole aim of punishing a journalist just for trying to inform her fellow citizens," Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk, said in a statement.

"We urge the international community to impose targeted sanctions on the Vietnamese officials responsible for Pham Doan Trang's unacceptable fate, in order to obtain her immediate release," he added.

Before becoming an advocate for democracy and human rights in Vietnam, Trang worked for state-owned newspapers.

She founded the online law and human rights magazine Luat Khoa and has authored several books that authorities banned from publication.

In May 2016, the journalist was detained and prevented from meeting then-U.S. President Barack Obama, who had invited her to take part in a forum during his visit to Hanoi.

Trang's lawyer, Manh, said they may appeal the sentence. Trang's brother, Truc, said the family will discuss options with her legal team.

In a letter titled "JUST IN CASE I AM IMPRISONED," that was shared publicly shortly after Trang was arrested in October 2020, she called for reforms of election laws in Vietnam.

"I don't want a campaign that calls on the Vietnamese government to simply 'free Trang'," she wrote. "I want a comprehensive social movement that pushes the government to 'free' Trang and pass new election laws."

The letter was published by Will Nguyen, who wrote a report with her on the Dong Tam land dispute in 2020. For years, residents of Dong Tam have resisted efforts by the military to build an airport on their land. Land disputes are common in Vietnam.

Before her arrest, Trang said she did not want to be a pawn for the government. Her brother told VOA on Tuesday, “We don’t think Trang will change that position.”

This story originated in VOA’s Vietnamese service. Some information provided by AFP and Reuters.