



Home > What we do > Human Rights Support > Vietnam > The Homo Homini Prize for 2017...



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Press Releases

Democracy

Festival One World

Human rights

Social networks

Women's rights

Political transition

Prague, February 13th, 2018. “You cannot be afraid,” says Pham Doan Trang, who will be awarded the Homo Homini prize for the courage she employs while tirelessly pursuing a democratic change within her country, despite harassment and persecution. On her blog, Trang highlights the injustices committed by the communist regime and tries to explain to her fellow Vietnamese citizens that they too have the right to stand up against repressions. Despite being constantly intimidated for her actions by the state apparatus, she will not be discouraged. She has to hide, but she will not stop writing. Her recently published book, the 9th she has written, discusses democracy, and its circulation is strictly prohibited in Vietnam.

Pham Doan Trang is one of the leading figures of the contemporary Vietnamese dissent. She uses plain words to fight the lack of freedom, corruption and the despotism of the communist regime. Independent media do not exist in Vietnam, and so her articles, which comment on the situation in the country and are critical to the current regime, are published through two different channels: on her Facebook page, which has 40 thousand followers, and on her blog, which is visited by approximately 20 thousand people a day. Her recently published samizdat book – Politics for All – presents and explains basic political concepts. Despite its distribution being prohibited in Vietnam, Trang hopes for the internet to help her spread its contents to as many as possible.

“It would be better if we were to live in a world where such awards would not have to exist,” says Pham Doan Trang about the Homo Homini award, which People in Need annually bestows on personalities who have significantly contributed to the promotion of human rights and democracy and nonviolent solutions to political conflicts. “In a world where we would not have to talk about the abuse of human rights, because such things would not happen. This is not the world we live in, though. And that is why I need your international support. Only then can the pressure on the Vietnamese regime become meaningful and bring about a change for the better.”

Homo Homini is the first international award presented to Pham Doan Trang.



Vietnamese regime suppresses freedom of speech

According to the highly regarded international organization Freedom House, Vietnam occupies the bottom fifth of the least free nations of the world. The French non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders ranks Vietnam 175th in its Press Freedom Index. And according to the Human Rights Watch, the human rights situation in the country is “worsening significantly”.

Attending the elections to the National Assembly, the legislative body of the government, is compulsory, and there is no real choice. Independent candidates have to be essentially approved by the Communist Party, which holds all three sources of power, the judicial, legislative, and executive. The freedom of religion is severely restricted, peaceful protests are suppressed by force and the media are subjected to state control.

The death penalty is still in use in Vietnam, and it presents a threat even to political opponents of the regime. Human rights activists are often imprisoned based on vague charges, such as “spreading anti-state propaganda” or “undermining national unity”.

Even tiny hints of criticism towards the regime are harshly suppressed, which could have been witnessed particularly during the past year. For instance, at the beginning of February, Hoang Duc Binh, a young activist and a catholic, was sentenced to 14 years in prison for streaming live videos from a protest of Vietnamese fishermen in an area subjected to an environmental disaster. He was accused of “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the state”. In July last year, the famous blogger Me Nam, internationally known as “Mother Mushroom”, was convicted and imprisoned for 10 year for her critical remarks on her personal Facebook page and on her blog, which referred to international sources.

„The situation has worsened significantly. More than 20 people were detained only last year – for articles published on their personal blogs or for Facebook statuses. We can talk about targeted and systematic efforts to silence critical voices,” says Sylva Horáková, director of People in Need’s Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. “It is very challenging to continue to pursue democratic values and protection of human rights in such an environment. Trang does not give up on her efforts and that is why she deserves our absolute support.”

“I am not afraid,” says Trang, who was beaten by the police on several occasions in the past and whose colleagues were sentenced to several years in prison. “If you are afraid, you better not do anything. But if you are already doing something, do not feel fear.”

The Homo Homini prize is being awarded since the 1990s, and it is traditionally presented during the opening ceremony of the One World Human Rights Documentary Film Festival. This year, it will be presented on March 5th at the Prague Crossroads.

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