
VICE World News

Vietnam Criticises ‘Inappropriate’ US Freedom Award for Jailed Journalist

Pham Doan Trang was awarded the International Women of Courage prize, a move Vietnam said was “not conducive for the development of bilateral relations.”

GS By [Govi Snell](#)

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PHAM DOAN TRANG WAS SENTENCED TO NINE YEARS IN PRISON FOR “ANTI-STATE PROPAGANDA” IN DECEMBER.
PHOTO: PAUL MOONEY

This week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced jailed Vietnamese dissident journalist Pham Doan Trang as a winner of the International Women of Courage prize—an annual award given by the Department of State to honor women advocating for human rights, peace, justice, and gender equity around the world.

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But the government of Vietnam—a communist-ruled one-party state—did not take kindly to the honor.

At a press conference on Thursday, Vietnam’s foreign ministry spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang responded to the U.S. giving Trang the courage award. Hang said the award was “unobjective” and “inappropriate” as Trang had broken Vietnamese law and been tried in court.

The U.S. prize was “not conducive for the development of bilateral relations,” she said.

Trang, who was arrested in October, was held without sentencing until late last year. On Dec. 14, a Hanoi court sentenced her to nine years’ imprisonment for spreading “anti-state propaganda.”

The response showcases a sticking point between the two countries: human rights. Last year, Joe Biden’s administration said the U.S. relationship with Vietnam will remain limited until Hanoi cleans up its human rights record.

Although the award has been critiqued by the government, Vietnamese activists celebrated the support given to Trang.

“I thank the U.S. for standing with Trang and human rights defenders in Vietnam,” Trinh Huu Long, the co-founder of pro-democracy nonprofit Legal Initiatives for Vietnam, told VICE World News.

“It is the Vietnamese government who consistently and systematically violates their own constitution and the international human rights treaties that they have ratified when [they] arrest and put people like Trang away for years.”

Long met Trang at a 2011 protest in Hanoi during the summer known as *Mùa Hè Đỏ Lửa* or “The Flaming Summer”—a series of rallies protesting Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea. The two became friends and co-founded Legal Initiatives for Vietnam. Long is now based in Taiwan so he, unlike so many of Vietnam’s activists, can criticise the ruling communist party and not risk being jailed.

Long said the Vietnamese constitution guarantees the right to free speech and political participation, but charging activists with anti-state propaganda is

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“It is a very common charge against journalists, activists, and dissidents in Vietnam,” he said. “There is no freedom of speech.”

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Phil Robertson, Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division, criticised the “outrageous and unacceptable imprisonment of human rights champion.”

“Vietnam criminalised Pham Doan Trang for simply exercising her rights to freedom of expression, and association,” he told VICE World News. “The US government award to her is both timely and very well deserved recognition of her accomplishments.”

When Trang was jailed in late 2020, she wasn’t surprised. The author, journalist and pro-democracy activist had been harassed by the Vietnamese police for years prior to arrest and had prepared a letter: “Just in case I am imprisoned.”

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“No one wants to sit in prison. But if prison is inevitable for freedom fighters, if prison can serve a predetermined purpose, then we should happily accept it,” she

She asked readers to prioritize the democratic movement in Vietnam over her release, asked for her mother to be taken care of, and requested her guitar be sent to her in jail.

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