

# Vietnam jails its ‘most famous activist’ for nine years

By Chris Humphrey

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HANOI — Pham Doan Trang, a Vietnamese activist known for her writing on women’s empowerment and environmental issues, was sentenced to nine years in prison Tuesday for disseminating anti-state propaganda. It was the latest crackdown on dissent in the Southeast Asian country and drew condemnation from rights groups.

The Hanoi People’s Court gave Trang more time in prison than the seven to eight years prosecutors had requested.

Trang, who was repeatedly interrupted by the judge during the trial, denied all charges. Her lawyers said she was informed of her trial date only a day beforehand.

There was heavy security at the courthouse, with riot police on hand and checkpoints on the main roads leading to the area, as well as numerous plainclothes agents.

“The trial was held under tight security control, which is not new for trials of this kind,” said Le Van Luan, one of the five lawyers for Trang. “The judge handed down a sentence that is heavier than what prosecutors recommended. That’s unusual.”

“Trang was in good spirits,” he told The Washington Post as he left the courthouse, adding that they would appeal to a higher court within 15 days.

Trang, 43, has written numerous books and co-founded independent media outlets. She also founded the environmental group Green Trees. In 2019, Reporters Without Borders awarded her a [Press Freedom Prize](#).

Despite opening the country to foreign investment and seeking closer ties with the United States, Vietnam’s ruling Communist Party retains tight control of the media and remains deeply intolerant of dissent. In a December 2020 report, Amnesty International said Vietnam held a record 170 prisoners of conscience, 40 percent of whom were incarcerated for sharing posts critical of the government on social media.

Nguyen Quang A, a prominent Vietnamese dissident, said the authorities were afraid of Trang, “the most famous activist in Vietnam.”

“By jailing her, they are removing a focal point for dissidents in order to silence others,” Nguyen said. “The message is that the police can arrest anyone, so be obedient.”

Part of the indictment focused on a [report](#) Trang released with Green Trees in 2016 about the [mass deaths of marine life](#) in Vietnam, as well as a report the following year on religious freedom. The authorities also accused her of speaking with foreign media organizations, including the BBC, to defame the Vietnamese government.

In January 2020, Trang spoke out about a clash over land rights in Dong Tam village — related to the construction of a military airport on farmland claimed by villagers on the outskirts of Hanoi.

Trang was initially detained in Ho Chi Minh City on Oct. 6, 2020, the same day officials from the United States and Vietnam held discussions on human rights and freedom of expression. Trang was held incommunicado until Oct. 19 of this year, when she was allowed to meet with one of her lawyers.

The case against Trang has spurred criticism from rights groups, embassies and journalist associations. In October, 28 advocacy groups, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders, condemned her detention and called for her release.

“It is clear that Pham Doan Trang is being persecuted for her long-standing work as an independent journalist, book publisher, and human rights defender,” the statement said.

Vietnam’s state media has said Trang was radicalized by hostile reactionaries after traveling overseas. Voice of Vietnam, the national radio broadcaster, said her writing had seriously harmed security and order while also angering the state and the Vietnamese people.

Zachary Abuza, a professor of Southeast Asia studies at the National War College in Washington, said Trang had become a headache for Vietnam’s rulers because she exposed how the government violated its own laws.

“They spent years harassing, intimidating and threatening her. She never backed down, ever, even when she knew they were coming for her. This is a woman of inordinate courage.”

In a letter titled “Just in case I am imprisoned,” released shortly after her arrest in October 2020, Trang called for electoral reforms, before adding, “Please take care of my mother.”

“I don’t want freedom for just myself; that’s too easy,” she wrote. “I want something greater: freedom for Vietnam.”