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Vietnam: Free Prominent Blogger

Drop Politically Motivated Charges Against Pham Doan Trang



Pham Doan Trang with two books that she co-authored, 2019. © Private

Update: On December 14, 2021, a Hanoi court sentenced Pham Doan Trang to nine years in prison. Before her trial, Pham Doan Trang prepared a statement for publication. The English version is available [here](#). The original Vietnamese is available [here](#).

(New York) – The [Vietnamese](#) authorities should drop all criminal charges against the prominent human rights activist and blogger Pham Doan Trang and immediately release her, Human Rights Watch said today.

On December 14, 2021, a court in Hanoi is scheduled to put her on trial for “conducting propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” under Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code. She could receive up to 12 years in prison.

“The prolific writer Pham Doan Trang faces harsh retaliation from the government because of her decade of advocacy for free expression, press freedom, and human rights,” said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “By prosecuting her, the Vietnamese authorities show just how fearful they are of popular, critical voices.”

Police arrested Pham Doan Trang, 43, on October 6, 2020 in Ho Chi Minh City, just a few hours after the annual human rights dialogue between the United States and Vietnam, and transported her to Hanoi. After charging her, they held her for more than a year in pretrial detention without access to a lawyer. The case against her and her mistreatment violate the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Vietnam ratified in 1982.

Pham Doan Trang has long been involved in peaceful protests against government policies. She has joined demonstrations outside police stations and at airports when fellow activists have been detained, participated in anti-China protests, and helped lead pro-environmental marches. She exhibited solidarity for fellow activists by trying to attend government show trials, and, at great personal risk, she periodically visited families of imprisoned dissidents to provide them with support and assistance.

Government security forces frequently persecuted, harassed, and physically assaulted her. In 2009, the police [detained her for nine days](#) for “national security” reasons. Security agents subsequently detained and interrogated her on many occasions and placed her under house arrest to stop her from joining protests or meeting foreign diplomats.

She walks with a pronounced limp from an injury when security forces forcibly broke up an environmental protest in Hanoi in April 2015. In September 2015, she went to the police headquarters of Hai Ba Trung district in Hanoi [to protest the arbitrary detention](#) of a [fellow activist, Le Thu Ha](#), and others. There, security agents beat protesters, bloodying her mouth.

In May 2016, police detained and [prevented her](#) from attending a meeting with US President Barrack Obama, who had invited her to join a gathering of activists during [his visit to Hanoi](#). In November 2017, she was detained [after meeting with a European Union delegation](#) that was preparing for the [annual bilateral human rights dialogue](#) between the EU and Vietnam. Police detained her again in February and June 2018 and interrogated her about her writing and activities. In August 2018, security agents broke up a [concert](#) she was attending in Ho Chi Minh City, dragged her out, took her to a police station, and interrogated and [beat her](#). Afterward, they left her by the side of a road where six men in civilian clothes beat her.

In January 2020, Pham Doan Trang and fellow activists published the first edition of the [Dong Tam Report](#), which sheds light on the [violent land clash](#) at Dong Tam commune. In June 2020, authorities arrested three contributors of the report, Can Thi Theu and her sons Trinh Ba Phuong and Trinh Ba Tu. Police charged

them for anti-state propaganda under Article 117 of the Penal Code. In May 2021, a court in Hoa Binh province put [Can Thi Theu and Trinh Ba Tu](#) on trial, convicted, and sentenced them each to eight years in prison, to be followed by another three years on probation after they complete their prison terms. Trinh Ba Phuong is still in police custody since June 2020. A court in Hanoi is scheduled to hear his case together with land rights activist Nguyen Thi Tam on November 3, 2021. Nguyen Thi Tam was arrested in June 2020 on the same charge. Pham Doan Trang published the [third edition](#) of the Dong Tam Report on September 25, 2021.

In the indictment, the People's Procuracy of Hanoi alleges that Pham Doan Trang's writing between November 2017 and December 2018 violates Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code. She is accused of unlawfully storing materials in English: 1) "Brief Report on the Marine Life Disaster in Vietnam"; 2) "General Assessments on the Human Rights Situation in Vietnam"; 3) "Report Assessment of the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion in Relation to the Exercise of the Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief in Vietnam"; and 4) the Vietnamese version of the report on 2016 Law on Belief and Religion. According to the indictment, "these documents have the content of propagandizing a psychological warfare, spreading fake information that sow confusion for the people; propagandizing information that distort the guidelines and policies of the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, defame the people's administration." The authorities also charged Pham Doan Trang for participating in a round-table discussion on BBC Vietnamese and giving an interview to RFA Vietnamese.

"Writing about environmental disaster, human rights abuses, the lack of freedom of religion, and talking to international media are not crimes, but the authorities have decided that they are," Robertson said. "The government should welcome Pham Doan Trang's investigations into wrongdoing, abuses, and malfeasance, rather than punish her."

Pham Doan Trang was an editor of "Tuan Vietnam," an online weekly that is a component of VietnamNet, one of the country's most popular news websites. She has published articles in both print and online media. She co-authored "*Autobiography of a Gay Man*" (Bong, Tu truyen cua mot nguoi dong tinh), a best-selling book published in 2008 about discrimination against gay men in Vietnam and their demands for equal rights.

She contributed to *Vietnam and the Conflict on the Eastern Sea* (Vietnam & Tranh chap Bien Dong), published in 2012. She is the contributor to two other books published in samizdat form: *Anh Ba Sam*, a book about the work and imprisonment of [prominent blogger Nguyen Huu Vinh](#); and *From Facebook Down to the Street* (Tu Facebook xuống đường), which documents rights activism and protests in Vietnam from 2011 to 2016.

She is an outspoken [blogger](#) on topics including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, women's rights, environmental issues, the territorial conflict between Vietnam and China, police brutality, suppression of activists, and aspects of law and human rights. She promotes election reform and human rights education. Her articles and blogs often focus on the role of media in social and political life.

Aided by other bloggers, she wrote and published on her blog a brief history of the Vietnamese "[blogosphere](#)." She has written, in real time, on the arbitrary and illegal arrests of activists, protesters, and

bloggers, and the forced closure of an online newspaper. She frequently urges people to use social media in a responsible way that promotes a non-violent, thriving civil society movement.

Pham Doan Trang has also consistently advocated for an impartial, rights-respecting justice system. She has been an editor of the online [Law Magazine](#), which has published many articles and translations concerning lawyers and human rights, the struggle against forced confessions, state use of corporal punishment, domestic violence, legal reforms in China, high-profile death sentence cases in Vietnam, protections against self-incrimination, and many other topics.

Pham Doan Trang has also written about international issues such as the democracy movement in Hong Kong, for which she provided a timeline of events and key issues for Vietnamese readers who cannot read other languages, and the human rights crisis in Crimea. In both instances, she also translated English language articles about these subjects into Vietnamese, which others distributed in Vietnam.

Pham Doan Trang's work also seeks to bring international attention to Vietnam's abysmal human rights record. Her blog includes English translations of her writings in Vietnamese, including calls for the release of political prisoners. Other entries include "[Report on Suppression of Bloggers Celebrating International HR Day in Vietnam](#)," "[Refoulement When Vietnam Hands Uighur Immigrants Back to China?](#)," "[The Laws of State Impunity](#)," "[Media Censorship in Vietnam](#)," and "[Chronology of Blogging Movement in Vietnam](#)." She is also the co-editor for the English website [Vietnam Right Now](#), which aims to distribute "objective, accurate, and timely information on the current social and political conditions in Vietnam today."

In February 2019, Pham Doan Trang co-founded the Liberal Publishing House, which publishes a range of non-fiction books written by Vietnamese authors on topics such as political science, public policy, and other social issues, such as *Politics of a Police State*, *Non-Violent Resistance*, *Politics for the Common People*, *Life Behind Iron Bars*, and *A Handbook for Families of Prisoners*. The government considers these books sensitive and has effectively banned their publication. She left the publishing house in July 2020. In May 2021, the police announced that they [arrested a person](#) for allegedly distributing books published by the Liberal Publishing House.

"The Vietnamese government faces no accountability for its decades of repression of critics like Pham Doan Trang," Robertson said. "The country's donors and trade partners such as the US, the EU, Australia, and Japan need to stop sweeping Vietnam's systemic violations under the rug."
