

## PRESS FREEDOM

# Vietnamese Critics, Others Slam Journalist's 9-Year Sentence

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HANOI, VIETNAM — The Dec. 14 sentencing of Vietnamese journalist Pham Thi Doan Trang, commonly known as Pham Doan Trang, to nine years in prison for “spreading anti-state propaganda” has angered members of the public here as well as observers outside the country.

Trang regularly published information alleging human rights violations and police brutality. She was arrested in October 2020. She has been one of the most vocal critics of Vietnam's human rights record in recent years.

The arrest came just hours after the 24th annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Hanoi.

“The sentence is too heavy,” said Minh Pham, a media specialist in Ho Chi Minh City who argued that Trang did not deserve such a long sentence.

“This sort of trial made me more cautious about speaking and expressing my views in the press and on social media in the future. I feel insecure. It is better to avoid talking about political issues, because regardless of the degree of difference in opinion, it will be labeled as an ‘anti-national’ act,” he told VOA.

Similarly, Oanh Vu, who works in the food and beverage industry, said Vietnam still has a long way to go when it comes to freedom of expression.

She told VOA, “Trang's case has become a sad story as we are heading to the end of this year. But anyway, it is optimistic to see some people are still supporting her and other political prisoners as well. They called for donations to give them [the prisoners] Tet gifts, and provide assistance for their families in their absence. It is also a very practical way to support and help.”

A freelance journalist, who asked not to be named, told VOA he thought Trang's heavy sentence could be a message to others, since the government may not be able to arrest all the dissidents just because of what they write on social media.

“I think they may use Trang to warn others ... with the hope that other journalists or dissidents will see what happened to Trang and decide to step back,” he said.

“But I do think the government will have to change its approach sooner or later. Nowadays, people can express their opinion on various social media platforms, especially apps made by Western tech companies. That means, as Vietnam is promoting international integration, they will not be able to prevent people from using social media. In recent years, we have seen Facebook groups spreading propaganda. They attract attention and earn support from the youth as well.”

Zachary Abuza, a professor of Southeast Asia studies at the National War College in Washington, also sees a larger purpose in the handling of Trang’s case.

“The government can't go and arrest every dissenter or person who makes an anti-government post on Facebook,” he told VOA. “The government is really trying to be very strategic in going after the most influential individuals. They try to figure out who is influencing others and hope that that serves as a deterrent.”

The Trang case spurred several foreign governments to express concern about the human rights situation in Vietnam, although the country has maintained a good relationship with the United States and the European Union. Currently, Vietnam is trying to persuade EU members to ratify an investment protection agreement, in addition to an EU free trade agreement that has been ratified.

However, a Dec. 16 statement by the EU spokesperson called for Trang’s release.

The statement said that actions taken against Trang “on the basis of her extensive and peaceful journalistic work defending civil and political rights are in violation of Vietnam’s international human rights obligations, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Vietnam is a party since 1982.”

The EU also called on Vietnamese authorities to release all human rights defenders arbitrarily detained and to guarantee the right to a fair trial for all individuals.

“The European Union will continue to monitor the human rights situation in Vietnam, and work with the authorities towards the improvement of the human rights situation in the country,” the statement said.

The Trang sentencing came just days after the U.S. President Joe Biden hosted the highly publicized Summit for Democracy, designed to push back against what Trang and many see as an erosion of democratic values in many countries.

“While the Biden Administration has said that democracy promotion is a high foreign policy priority, I've not seen it manifest in Southeast Asia, where getting states to balance against China is a higher priority. Security always trumps values,” he said.

Abuza also warned that such long sentences for public speech will hurt Vietnam's international standing, since there are real limits to how far Western democracies can go in overlooking a full frontal assault on dissent.

Yet, Vietnam has not been really penalized internationally for its human rights situation, according to Carl Thayer, an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales in Australia, who is a Southeast Asia regional specialist.

“In part this was due to the [former U.S. President Donald] Trump administration's indifference to human rights which resulted in Vietnam getting a free pass. Vietnam's willingness to hold bilateral dialogues on human rights with its comprehensive and strategic partners has also assisted in defusing this issue,” he told VOA.

“Also, Vietnam has been pragmatic in adjusting its behavior to prevent setbacks and/or economic sanctions to its larger diplomatic and economic objectives. For example, Vietnam has a history of releasing political prisoners to defuse pressure, and allowing dissidents to settle abroad.”

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