

OPINION

Vietnamese rights activist marks first year in jail

Pham Doan Trang faces up to 20 years in prison on vague charges of spreading information 'opposing the state'

By **STEWART REES**

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Vietnamese journalist and activist Pham Doan Trang, in a file image. Photo: Wikimedia

Exactly a year ago, on October 6, 2020, officials of the Vietnamese and US governments met online for the 24th annual US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue. Officials discussed freedom of religion, the rule of law, bilateral cooperation, workers' rights, and freedom of expression during the three-hour virtual session.

Yet just hours after the conclusion of the meeting, police in Ho Chi Minh City arrested award-winning journalist, author and human-rights activist [Pham Doan Trang](#), who now faces up to 20 years in prison after being charged with spreading information “opposing the state.”

If that charge sounds unclear, that’s because it is. Article 117, the law under which Trang was charged, is so poorly defined that it could encapsulate virtually any criticism of the ruling Communist Party.

Indeed, that is precisely the point. This year, eight people have been arrested under the same charge. They include independent journalists, independent candidates for the National Assembly, and social-media users who have criticized the government online.

The arrest came as little surprise to Trang. The following day, fellow activist Will Nguyen [shared a letter](#) Trang had prepared in 2019 to be published in the event of her arrest. In the letter, Trang called for her fellow activists to take advantage of her imprisonment to push for legal and political reform in the country.

“Bear in mind,” she wrote, “the lengthier the prison term, the more leverage you have to negotiate with the Vietnamese government and pressure them into doing what we request.”

As demonstrated by the preparation of the letter, Trang saw her incarceration as inevitable. Perhaps the most surprising thing about her arrest is that it took so long, for Trang had long been on the radar of the security services for her outspoken views.

Trang, a former journalist for state media, is a founder of Luat Khoa and The Vietnamese, which provide independent online analysis of social, political and legal issues in Vietnam. Both sites are blocked by censors. Little surprise, then, that [Freedom House](#) rated Vietnam as “not free” in its most recent annual report on Internet freedom.

Trang has also been prevented from printing books since 2015. Undeterred, she has published numerous free-to-access books and handbooks online. These include “[Politics of a Police State](#),” “On Non-Violent Resistant Techniques,” and “Politics for the Masses.”

Her work has not gone unrecognized. Reporters Without Borders awarded her the Press Freedom Prize for Impact in 2019.

[Trang has long faced harassment](#) for her activism. In 2012, she was arrested during an anti-China protest in Hanoi. In 2015 Trang founded the environmental pressure group Green Trees in response to plans to fell thousands of historic trees in Hanoi. She was beaten by police during the peaceful protests that followed.

During then-US president Barack Obama’s visit to Vietnam in 2016, Trang was detained by police to prevent her from attending a meeting between him and domestic civil-society organizations.

In 2018, she was in effect placed under house arrest to prevent her from participating in the protests against highly controversial new draft laws concerning cybersecurity and the establishment of special economic zones. In August of the same year, Trang was beaten by plainclothes police while attending a concert by the singer Nguyen Tin, and was sent to hospital with a concussion.

The final straw for the Vietnamese authorities came with Trang's coverage and analysis of the violence between police and villagers at Dong Tam village, which left three policeman and village elder [Le Dinh Kinh](#) dead on January 9, 2020.

On September 26, 2020, Trang and [Will Nguyen](#) released a [65-page report](#) that challenged the official narrative of the violence, outlined how the actions of the police violated domestic and international law, and called for the international community to pressure the Vietnamese government into opening a "just and objective" investigation into the events of January 9.

For those hoping for a lenient sentence for Trang, the signs have not been good. In January of this year, three members of the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam (IJAVN) [received prison sentences](#) ranging from 11 to 15 years, while in July, the co-founder of IJAVN, [Pham Chi Thanh](#), was given a five-and-a-half-year sentence. Like Trang, the four IJAVN members were charged with writing articles "opposed to the state."

There is currently little to be positive about for proponents of free speech in Vietnam. Despite this, in February [Vietnam announced its intention](#) to run as a candidate for membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council for the 2023-2025 term.

If Vietnam is serious about its desire to contribute to the development of global human rights it should look to put its own house in order first. Unconditionally releasing Pham Doan Trang would be a good place to start.

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