

Imprisoned Vietnamese journalist Pham Doan Trang has exemplified unrelenting courage in a country gripped by communist tyranny. It's time others stepped up and continued the fight for freedom.

By Trinh Huu Long; translated by Karie Nguyen

Editor's note: On May 27, 2019, Vietnamese journalist and blogger Pham Doan Trang wrote a letter entitled, "Just In Case I Am Imprisoned." It was her 41st birthday, and she was on the run with no fixed address.

She gave the letter to an American friend and instructed him to release it to the public if she was ever arrested. In the letter, she asked that her friends not just campaign for her freedom but also for the end of incarceration to fight for free elections and an end to single-party rule in Vietnam, [report](#) on the [New York Times](#).

The outspoken journalist knew it was only a matter of time before the police came for her. She has been active on civil rights issues in a country "where journalists and bloggers who do not toe the line of direction of the Communist Party face extremely severe repercussions," [said](#) Daniel Basch, director of the Asia-Pacific Desk of Reporters Without Borders. Doan Trang has been beaten and imprisoned. The international press freedom monitor awarded her a 2019 Press Freedom Prize for Imprisoned.

Doan Trang has written nine books, including "Politics for the Common Citizen." She also co-edited and started [Luât Khoa](#), an online magazine that specializes in providing information about law. She also co-edited [Trang edits The Vietnamese](#), an independent and non-profit online magazine. This op-ed was written in Vietnamese by Trinh Huu Long and was [published](#) in [Luât Khoa](#) on October 10, 2020, and [reprinted](#) in [The Vietnamese](#) on October 6, 2021 in [The Vietnamese](#).

On October 6, 2020, mere hours after the United States and Vietnam held their 24th annual Human Rights Dialogue via virtual sessions, the police arrested Doan Trang on charges of making and disseminating propaganda against the Vietnamese state. She faces up to 20 years in prison.

As of November 2020, according to The 88 Project, a [group](#) which advocates for Vietnamese activists who are persecuted because of their peaceful dissent, Doan Trang's family has not been able to see her. "Her family [visited the detention center](#) several times to bring her some supplies but they were not allowed to put her signature on the receipt for the supplies."

Every time an activist is arrested, several campaigns for his or her release emerge in response to the government's persecution of human rights. This method is the oldest, most familiar form the common citizenry uses to call for justice.

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I have been a part of those movements and have even organized several campaigns many times in the past nine years.

Yet, despite everything, I constantly ask myself, do these calls to action actually do anything? "Am I going to do this," I ask myself, "and are there any benefits in it or not?" These are just questions that constantly linger in the back of my mind.

Most likely, the arrested activists will remain in prison; their sentence will be upheld. In fact, their imprisonment might even be extended. Despite all our work, more and more people are incarcerated. There has been no change in our laws or institutions, despite all our efforts abroad.

And even if we're blessed with the smallest amount of luck, those arrested are granted asylum in another country, defeating the primary purpose of our campaigns.



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Pham Doan Trang, imprisoned blogger, journalist, and co-founder of the Vietnam Women's Union, has put some of my concerns

"I do not need my own freedom; I need something much more significant: freedom and democracy for Vietnam," she wrote in a letter titled "Case I Am Imprisoned." "This is a grandiose and far-fetched, but actually possible with everyone's

Pham Doan Trang wrote the letter on her 41st birthday, while she was in custody from the police. She wanted the letter released to the public only if she was indeed convicted and not merely detained. Eventually, she was released, and now faces a sentence of 10 years in prison.

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If Doan Trang merely wanted herself, she had at least two ways to attain this in the past.

The first was after her nine-day detention in 2009. If she was obedient and ceased all her activities regarding sensitive ties with social elements deemed “anti-state,” she would have continued to live a simple life.

The second was when she studied in the United States and could have chosen a path to naturalization or citizenship. In fact, at least three agencies and organizations wanted to sponsor her in America.

So, why did Doan Trang choose to return to her homeland? It is because she understands that personal freedom means nothing compared to the whole of Vietnam. Vietnam needs people to stand up for the freedom of everyone.

Such a concept is simple and easy to understand, yet making it a reality is challenging.

Doan Trang could have chosen to contribute to Vietnam’s fight from the outside as many of us, including myself, are doing. Yet, she chose the most complex, most painful, and most difficult path to contribute to the cause. She returned home and faced the problem head-on. She publicly spoke, gave talks, worked, wrote books, and even taught about democracy and freedom right in front of the authorities.

Doan Trang often told me that the best way to fight is to be an example, to be an inspiration, and to encourage others to do the same. Only then can we, as a society, start to see what democracy, human rights, and the rule of law look like in reality. Words without actions are meaningless.

Sadly, I do not know how successful Doan Trang’s efforts have been, nor how many lives have been touched by her words and deeds. But regarding her arrest in October 2020, I would like to share some thoughts.

Activists have a saying called “sharing fire,” which means sharing the tasks and responsibilities of dangerous activities with many people to reduce individual risk. Sometimes we coordinate our actions, but more often than not this is not the case; people passively participate in this process without discussing plans in advance.

What if the deeds Doan Trang had done in the past five years were divided among five people? Would she still have been arrested? More recently, if she had not produced the two **Don** reports, would she be in jail right now? (Dong Tam, a village on the outskirts of Hanoi, was “the target of a violent raid by police January 2020 with the aim of suppressing resistance by residents contesting their land by the authorities,” **reports** Reporters Without Borders.)

She often told me that these things are not difficult to accomplish and that there are many who share similar ideas with her. If so, why are there so few people standing up for what is right? Some people do, and Doan Trang was one of them. Yet because of inaction, apathy, or a lack of a handful of brave, noble souls like her shoulder the entire risk.



Calls to free Doan Trang and other imprisoned activists are not enough. Instead, the Vietnamese people should break free "from the shackles of fear, apathy, and apprehension to active progress and change."

Many of them will go to jail, while those who are content to watch from the sidelines will not. They will once again clamor for the release and freedom of those imprisoned. But in the end, nothing gets done. Rinse and repeat.

Will we Vietnamese forever play the same old games with the government? Will we continue to sheepishly and ineffectively demand the release of our friends? Then, when nothing gets

once again forget and return to the tolerated normalcy of life in this great prison that th
has made?

Things will be different if more people actively do their part to create social change, just
Doing so has two advantages.

The first is to “share the fire” with those still fighting to reduce their risk and limit their cha
captured. Government resources are limited, and they can only invest in monitoring and
few people.

Those outside Vietnam can do their part as well. For instance, to write something similar
Tam Report, we just need to collect data on the internet and conduct interviews online o
phone. It is not necessary to live in Vietnam physically to accomplish these tasks.

The second is to normalize press freedom, independent publishing, and political activiti
“sensitive.”

When these activities become commonplace, the government will be forced to accept
observed in the past when private businesses were considered illegal. Nonetheless, they
operate, and gradually the government had to admit that these establishments were a
component of the country’s economy. Since 1986, the state no longer considers owning
business a criminal offense.

For me, the best way to help Doan Trang and people like her is to play a more active rol
everyone will benefit when the political space expands. No one will ever be arrested or i
for writing or publishing books. I will no longer have to clamor for one person’s freedom
someone gets arrested. I will finally be able to rest.

Calls for freedom are good, but they are often not enough. We should release ourselves
shackles of fear, apathy, and apprehension to actively fight for progress and change.

Doan Trang has completed her mission and the responsibility now falls on our shoulder
were to be released tomorrow, even if she chooses to stay in Vietnam or decided to lea
continues in each one of us.

And if you love Doan Trang, I implore you to do what she would have done. ●