

Vietnam sentences dissidents to prison for spreading anti-state propaganda

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Heard on Morning Edition

MICHAEL SULLIVAN

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Four prominent Vietnamese dissidents have been given harsh prison terms for speaking out against the government. Activists say it's part of an escalating crackdown on dissent.

SARAH MCCAMMON, HOST:

Vietnam has sentenced four dissidents to lengthy jail terms for what officials are calling spreading anti-state propaganda. Activists say it's part of an escalating crackdown on dissent. This is in a country

that the U.S. is keen to keep on its side in a bid to try to contain China, as Michael Sullivan reports.

MICHAEL SULLIVAN, BYLINE: Like its neighbor to the north, Vietnam is a one-party communist state. And like China, it tolerates little dissent. But four convictions in one week?

PHIL ROBERTSON: Well, the Vietnam government is telling the Vietnam people to sit down and shut up, that they are not going to accept any challenges to their rule. They're not going to accept demands for better governance or an end to corruption or to end the human rights abuses.

SULLIVAN: That's Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch. Human rights lawyer and activist Vi Tran has another explanation for the timing of last week's verdicts.

VI TRAN: I think it is a message, and the message is just, like, raising two middle fingers to the rest of the

Western countries.

SULLIVAN: Especially the European Union, she says. She thinks the EU has been a bit naive in its approach to Vietnam, especially in the runup to the free trade agreement the two signed not long ago. Here's an argument she says she heard frequently while in Brussels.

TRAN: If we, you know, help them raise the economy to a better place, human rights would come with it, right? They also say that, you know, Vietnam is needed in the geopolitical world because this is the place that we can counter China. So we should be nice to Vietnam a little bit, and they will be nicer to human rights defenders.

SULLIVAN: In fact, activists say the government's crackdown on dissent is just getting worse.

TRINH HUU LONG: 2021 is and has been a very difficult year for dissidents and journalists because

within one year, they prosecuted and tried and convicted three groups of activists.

SULLIVAN: More than 20 people in total, says activist and journalist Trinh Huu Long, among them his friend and colleague, the prominent journalist Pham Doan Trang.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: (Non-English language spoken).

SULLIVAN: Her conviction and sentencing last week was covered prominently on state-run media. Here's her friend, the human rights lawyer and journalist Vi Tran, reading Pham Doan Trang's defiant final statement to the court.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

TRAN: You may imprison me and bask in celebration for eliminating a long-standing thorn in your eye, but

you will never be rid of your ugly, authoritarian, undemocratic, anti-democratic reputation because an animal is forever an animal. It can never become human.

SULLIVAN: The judge sentenced Phan Doan Trang to nine years in prison, more than the prosecutors had asked for. There was an outpouring of support for her on social media, which Vietnam hasn't been able to keep a lid on the way neighboring China has. And the recent surge of the COVID pandemic in Vietnam has dinged the ruling party's reputation even more. Again, activist and journalist Trinh Huu Long.

TRINH: I see major changes in political attitudes among ordinary Vietnamese people. They are now much more critical, and they are more willing to stand up for what is right. And I think this is very bad news for the government.

SULLIVAN: But rights activists aren't likely to get much help from a West more concerned with China's

growing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

BILL HAYTON: I don't think the outside powers have any desire to rock the boat in Vietnam at the moment.

SULLIVAN: Bill Hayton is a Vietnam watcher at Chatham House think tank in London.

HAYTON: I think as long as Vietnam keeps its repression within certain limits, it'll be privately admonished, but it's not going to be publicly criticized by the big powers, and they're not going to take any practical measures like sanctions.

SULLIVAN: Another activist is scheduled to be sentenced next week. For NPR News, I'm Michael Sullivan in Chiang Rai.

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