

Vietnamese independent journalist Pham Doan Trang is jailed for 9 years

Trang had called for democracy and good governance in Vietnam, and had spoken with Radio Free Asia and the BBC.

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Journalist Pham Doan Trang stands trial at Hanoi People's Court on Dec. 14, 2021.

A court in Vietnam has sentenced an independent Vietnamese journalist and activist to nine years in prison following her conviction on a charge of “carrying out propaganda” against the state, her lawyer said on Tuesday.

Pham Doan Trang, who has won multiple foreign awards for her writing, was sentenced Tuesday at the Hanoi People’s Court, with trial judges handing down a sentence longer than the prison term requested by prosecutors, defense attorney Dang Dinh Manh told RFA.

“The trial’s atmosphere was pretty tense,” said Manh. “But finally the panel of judges came out and pronounced a sentence of nine years’ imprisonment, which was higher than that proposed by the Procuracy.”

“They had called only for a seven- or eight-year jail term,” Manh said, adding that the judges in announcing their verdict said that Trang’s actions had been harmful to society, and had therefore called for a harsher sentence.

The judges had based their decision only on the arguments and information provided by prosecutors and had rejected all arguments presented by lawyers working in Trang’s defense, Manh said.

“The verdict surprised us, and we think that Pham Doan Trang will certainly appeal against it.”

The U.S. State Department on Tuesday condemned the conviction and sentencing of Trang, saying she had done nothing more in her writings than peacefully express her opinions.

“We note as well the recent opinion of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which found Trang’s detention to be arbitrary and in contravention of Vietnam’s international human rights commitments and obligations,” said State Department spokesman Ned Price.

“The United States calls on the Vietnamese government to release Trang, who has been recognized internationally for her work to advance human rights and good governance in Vietnam, and to allow all individuals in Vietnam to express their views freely and without fear of retaliation,” Price said.

Writing on Monday on his Facebook page, defense lawyer Ngo Anh Tuan said that in a meeting with Trang on Oct. 19 — her first meeting with lawyers after her arrest — Trang said she had refused during 10 periods of interrogation to confess to the charges against her.

“In some of these sessions, investigators also asked her if she would be willing to leave Vietnam and live in a foreign country if it seemed she would be sentenced during her trial to many years in prison,” Tuan said, adding that Trang had refused to consider such a move.

“She said she would never be willing to be a ‘commodity’ to be exchanged with a foreign government,” he said.

'Propaganda against the state'

Arrested on Oct. 6, 2020, Pham Doan Trang was charged under Article 88 of Vietnam's 1999 Penal Code for disseminating anti-state propaganda according to an indictment made public on Oct. 18, more than a year after her arrest.

The indictment against Trang also accused her of speaking with two foreign media outlets, Radio Free Asia and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) “to allegedly defame the government of Vietnam and fabricate news,” according to a letter sent in October by 25 human rights groups calling for her release.

Author of a book on political engagement that angered authorities in Hanoi, Trang was a cofounder of Legal Initiatives for Vietnam, a California-based NGO that says its mission is “to build a democratic society in Vietnam through independent journalism, research and education.”

She also received the 2017 Homo Homini Award presented by the Czech human rights organization People in Need, and the Press Freedom Prize in 2019 from Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders.

Vietnam's already low tolerance of dissent deteriorated sharply last year with a spate of arrests of independent journalists, publishers, and Facebook personalities as authorities continued to stifle critics in the run-up to the ruling Communist Party Congress in January.

Arrests have continued through 2021.

Reported by RFA's Vietnamese Service. Translated by Anna Vu. Written in English by Richard Finney.