

Jailed Vietnamese journalist wins human rights award

Pham Doan Trang is serving a 9-year sentence for disseminating 'anti-state' information.

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Journalist Pham Doan Trang displays the books she wrote that were banned by the Vietnamese government, in a file photo.

Jailed Vietnamese journalist Pham Doan Trang was named this week as a recipient of the 2022 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders, the first rights activist from Vietnam to be given the award.

Trang, now serving a nine-year sentence in Vietnam for spreading “propaganda against the state,” was one of three activists selected this year by a jury of leading human rights NGOs and received the recognition in absentia, a personal representative told RFA after the announcement ceremony in Geneva, Switzerland.

“This award is a recognition not only from human rights organizations, but also from authorities in the city of Geneva for Pham Doan Trang’s efforts, and it confirms that everything she did was correct,” said Trinh Huu Long, editor-in-chief of *Luat Khoa* [Law] magazine.

“We need to protect people like Pham Doan Trang and continue what she started,” Long said. “We also need many more like Pham Doan Trang in order to bring about positive change in the human rights landscape in Vietnam.”

Vietnamese activist Pham Thanh Nghiem welcomed the news of Trang’s award, saying many rights advocates in Vietnam deserve similar recognition.

“Pham Doan Trang has been a prominent activist over the past few years, and her award is well-deserved,” Nghiem said. “I along with her family, friends and supporters who have loved and supported her all feel honored and see a part of ourselves in this recognition.”

The international respect shown to Trang and other activists in Vietnam contrasts sharply with the harsh punishments typically handed out to them by government authorities, Nghiem said.

“People often say that each award given for human rights and democracy promotion efforts in Vietnam can be seen as a slap in the face of the Vietnamese authorities,” she said. “I think that awards like this are an embarrassment for them.”

Trang, who has already won multiple foreign awards for her writing, was sentenced Dec. 14, 2021, at the Hanoi People’s Court, with trial judges handing down a sentence longer than the prison term requested by authorities, according to defense attorney Dang Dinh Manh.

'Propaganda against the state'

Trang was arrested on Oct. 6, 2020, and charged with disseminating anti-state propaganda, according to an indictment made public more than a year after her arrest.

The indictment also accused Trang of speaking with two foreign media outlets — Radio Free Asia and the British Broadcasting Corporation — “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 ahead of her trial.

Trang wrote a book on political engagement that had angered authorities in Hanoi and 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 in 2020 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 2021.

Arrests continued through the year.

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