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US protester released from detention in Vietnam after trial

24 July 2018



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Vi Tran, a human rights lawyer based in Taiwan who focuses on Vietnamese law, said in an email she was “beyond happy to see Will released” but suspected Vietnamese people facing the same charge would not be treated the same way.

It was wrong, she said, to say Nguyen and other demonstrators had been taking part in “illegal protests”, as state media outlets have done.

“No law in Vietnam has yet defined [or] regulated ‘protest’ or ‘demonstration’, except that the right to demonstrate is guaranteed in our constitution,” she said.

“I think the verdict again shows how the law in Vietnam is arbitrarily implemented. Recently, Vietnam sentenced six individuals on the same charge to up to 30 months in prison, and there are still 20 Vietnamese nationals ... awaiting their fate for participating in the same 10 June protest. I suspect none of them would receive the same leniency the court has shown to Will.”

Legal analysts had been unsure of how the court would rule and the outcome was the best for which Nguyen and his family could have hoped. Local media explained that though Nguyen was convicted, he was released since it was his first offense and he had shown repentance in a nationally televised confession.

The trial took place at the main courthouse in central Ho Chi Minh City. Outside the colonial-era building, police guarded intersections and shooed away passersby.

The US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, visited Hanoi before the trial and raised the case with his Vietnamese counterparts. He made no public comment.

The California congressman Jimmy Gomez led the crafting of an 18 July letter in which 19 members of Congress called for Pompeo to secure Nguyen’s freedom.

In a statement following the trial, Gomez said: “I take great comfort in knowing that my constituent, William Nguyen, will soon be reunited with his family after his harrowing ordeal in Vietnam. The sheer determination and resolve exhibited by the Nguyen family during this traumatic experience was nothing short of inspiring.”

In an email, an official from the US state department said: “We are pleased that the case of US citizen William Nguyen has been resolved. Mr Nguyen has been released from custody and is with his family. We have no higher priority than the safety and security of US citizens abroad.”