



Pham Doan Trang in a video interview with The 88 Project in 2019. (Photo: Screenshot of YouTube video/ The 88 Project)

Pham Doan Trang Goes to Prison

Trang has been arrested in Vietnam's most brazen attack on journalists since relations with the United States were normalized in 1995.



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At 11:30 p.m. on the night of October 6, Pham Doan Trang, one of Vietnam's most prominent journalists, was awakened by police banging on the door of her apartment and arrested in Ho Chi Minh City.

On that same day, Vietnam and the United States held the 24th annual US-Vietnam human rights dialogue, where they discussed freedom of speech, government censorship, and other issues that Trang regularly covers.

Trang is being charged under article 117 of Vietnam's penal code with "making, storing, distributing or disseminating information, documents and items against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam." In other words, her reporting is a crime punishable by up to twenty years in jail.

Trang has been arrested, beaten, and blackmailed by the government on previous occasions, but this latest crackdown—prior to Vietnam's one-every-five-year Communist Party Congress in January—is the country's most brazen attack on journalists since relations with the United States were normalized in 1995. Labor unrest, governmental corruption, land seizures, women's rights, and even reporting on environmental issues are now hotwire subjects that can land journalists and bloggers in prison for a decade or longer.

Founder of *Luat Khoa* ("Law") magazine, editor of *thevietnamese* website, and author of several books, including *Politics for Everyone* and *A Handbook for Families of Prisoners*, Trang in 2019 was awarded the Press Freedom Prize for Impact by Reporters Without Borders. As described at the ceremony in Berlin that Trang was not allowed to attend, the Prize is given yearly to a journalist "whose work has led to concrete improvements in journalistic freedom, independence, and pluralism."

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Before her arrest, Trang was investigating a violent clash between farmers and the police, something that happens regularly in Vietnam when farmland is seized by Party officials. Trang has no fixed address and moves regularly to avoid the kind of beating that in 2018 left her dumped on the roadside with a concussion and wounds to her face and legs.

"Pham Doan Trang is a true heroine given the situation of press freedom in Vietnam, where journalists and bloggers who do not toe the line of the current direction of the Communist Party face extremely severe repercussions," said Daniel Bastard, who heads the Asia-Pacific Desk of Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

“Pham Dan Trang faces an imminent risk of torture and other-ill treatment at the hands of the Vietnamese authorities. She must be immediately and unconditionally released,” said Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director for Campaigns, Ming Yu Hah.

“Vietnam’s scorched earth response to political dissent is on display for all to see with the arrest of prominent blogger and author Pham Doan Trang,” said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch. “Every day she spends behind bars is a grave injustice that violates Vietnam’s international human rights commitments and brings dishonor to the government.”

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I met Trang in Hanoi in 2015 and wrote about her work in my book *Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World*. Here is a description of our meeting.

Hanoi

As I walk out of my hotel into the splash of color and bustle that marks Vietnam’s capital, I pass a woman with squids wriggling in the paniers of her bicycle and a flower vendor squatting over a bucket of tight-budded roses. Perched on plastic stools lining the streets are groups of neatly-dressed people eating breakfast, buying raffle tickets, chatting, and selling everything from electric fans to chicken soup. Songbirds brought out for their morning airing sing in their wicker cages. Vendors cycle down the street selling brooms, baguettes, bananas. Hanoi on a sunny morning is like a pointillist painting come to life, with the dots scurrying around the canvas, hailing each other in a whirl of rubber wheels and two stroke Chinese motors.

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Near St. Joseph's cathedral, I turn into a trendy café filled with black sofas holding young professionals skyping on their laptops. I order a coffee and sit for a few minutes before a woman with a noticeable limp and creased brow slips into the seat across from me. She is carrying a backpack that looks like it holds everything she owns. We introduce ourselves, and Pham Doan Trang begins recounting her life as a journalist.

Trang was born in Hanoi 1978. Her parents were high school chemistry teachers. Her mother worked in Hanoi, while her father was posted to the western highlands, where he spent fourteen years, before hunger and malaria forced him back to the city. Trang graduated with a degree in economics from Vietnam's University of Foreign Trade. She attended when the school was on the cusp of big changes. Instruction in Russian suddenly flipped to English. "Facebook is where we get our news," Trang says, "but very few of Vietnam's thirty-five million Facebook users know how to speak English. So I think the duty of journalists who speak English is to tell the world what's happening here."

In 2000, Trang began working as a journalist for VNExpress, Vietnam's first internet news site. Straightaway, she faced what she calls the "tragedy of the media" in Vietnam: censorship, self-censorship, government control, and the simple fact that "people are scared."

"We have thirty thousand journalists in Vietnam," she says. "Fewer than a hundred are political journalists, and fewer than twenty are democracy supporters. I can count them on my hands and feet. They face administrative sanctions, reductions in salary, fines, physical assault. Journalists are victims of the police state," she says, before reminding me that every newspaper in Vietnam is state-owned. "If you include bloggers, every year there are hundreds of assaults on journalists, and lots of journalists have been put in jail for political reasons."

She mentions Anh Ba Sam, "Brother Gossip," who used to run the "Sidewalk News Agency," a popular blog calling for democracy in Vietnam. Anh Ba Sam is the pen name of Nguyen Huu Vinh, another person I was hoping to meet, until I was informed that he is currently in prison, "to serve the investigating process." Charged under Article 258 of the penal code, which outlaws "abusing freedom and democracy to infringe upon the interests of the state," Vinh, if convicted, faces seven more years in prison.

A fifty-eight-year-old former policeman and the son of a Communist Party Central Committee member who twice served

as ambassador to the Soviet Union, “Brother Gossip” fits the profile of a criminal only in a country as paranoid as Vietnam. The denunciation campaign mounted against him in the press says that Vinh specializes in “reporting and commenting on current social and political issues of Vietnam with a deliberately critical tone” and “trying to uglify Vietnam to make her as bad and ugly as he is.”

Human Rights Watch estimates that as many as two hundred activists and bloggers like Vinh are currently imprisoned. Vietnam Right Now, a Hanoi-based human rights group, lists two hundred and fifty prisoners of conscience. “In 2013 I counted the number of political prisoners in Vietnam and came up with three hundred and twenty six, to be exact,” says Trang.

"The rest of her answer is straightforward. Democracy is the right to free and fair elections, organized political parties, majority rule with defense of minority interests, the rule of law, and freedom of speech and assembly. In other words, democracy is everything that we in the West take for granted and willingly compromise."

In November 2015, General Tran Dai Quang, Vietnam’s minister of public security (police), in an address before the National Assembly, explained how he used the country’s vague national security laws to stifle dissent and arrest critics. Quang said that between June 2012 and November 2015 “The police have received, arrested, and dealt with 1,410 cases involving 2,680 people who violated national security.” He went on to describe how he specifically targeted democracy and human rights groups, “which have about three hundred and fifty participants from fifty cities and provinces.”

While “Brother Gossip” is in jail, awaiting trial, two of his three web sites have been closed. This means the police have gained control of his passwords, but a third site remains open, run by supporters who have managed to keep their identities secret. Trang tells me

that her own web site, a blog set up in 2009, is currently blocked in Vietnam (although it, too, manages to keep publishing new articles).

I ask Trang what the word “democracy” means to her. “The democracy movement is hardly a movement,” she says. “It’s unorganized.” The rest of her answer is straightforward.

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“In Vietnam, you can’t enter politics unless you’re a member of the Communist Party,” she says. “Those of us who want to get people involved in government, actively, effectively, and meaningfully ... we are just waiting for the day they come to arrest us.”

Trang has been “temporarily” arrested many times. A few days before our meeting, she was detained by the police for seven hours. “It happens all the time,” she says. She had organized a seminar supporting victims of torture. “All the organizers were arrested, and the seminar was cancelled. ‘This is an illegal social gathering,’ they told us. ‘You’re inciting public disorder and disturbing the peace.’”

“The longest time they held me in detention was nine days,” she says. Trang swipes through her phone to show me photos of police assaults and beatings. I stare at a young man whose hand was smashed with a brick when he was roughed up by plainclothes policemen. Trang is limping today from a recent attack that left her lying in bed immobile for two days.

Cyber Trolls

Trang describes how Vietnam stage manages rigged elections, where one hundred percent voter turnout is matched by similarly large margins of victory. “A police state never tolerates the press,” she says. “The press is supposed to serve the interests of the Communist Party. The difference is that now we have social media. With other sources beside mainstream media, the state has lost its monopoly.

“Change is coming not because the state is more tolerant, but because it has lost control. It has to control the press plus the blogosphere. It has to deal with services based in the United States. The law requires Facebook to provide information to the police, and sometimes they do it. Google refuses, but Facebook

complies. They work for profit, not for human rights. I have a Facebook account, which is more accessible than my blog, but I am wary about Facebook being more “cooperative” with the government than Google.”

“In many ways, Vietnam is just a student of Big Brother China,” Trang says. China spends billions of dollars blocking internet sites from the outside world and surveilling the communication of its citizens. Trang explains how China has mastered the art of reverse engineering global services and swapping them for Chinese copies. For Google China substitutes Baidu. For Facebook and Twitter it provides Weibo. For eBay it offers Alibaba.

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Unfortunately for Little Brother Vietnam, the country’s attempts at emulating China in telecommunications and the internet have failed. Western technology arrived too suddenly and was embraced too enthusiastically to be blocked. None of Vietnam’s imitation Googles (vinaseek, socbay, coccoc) has replaced the original. Nor have imitation Facebooks (go.vn) succeeded. People tell a joke about the Vietnamese prime minister. He searches online for “failed policies of Nguyen Tan Dung.” Google retrieves a million articles. Vietnamese search engines find none.

“Vietnam is lost in the world technologically,” Trang says. “It’s way behind China.”

China began blocking foreign services as soon as they were introduced, and the Chinese market is big enough that even limited local services attracted large numbers of users. One unintended consequence of this reality is that Vietnam, unlike China, can block news only after it has been published. “This is why the Vietnamese government beats up so many bloggers and journalists,” Trang says. “It’s what happens when you can’t block information at the source.”

Instead of trying to ban Facebook and Google, the Vietnamese government has switched techniques. “They hack our accounts,” Trang says. “They report us to Facebook so that we lose our

accounts. They set up fake sites to attack us. They defame us. They steal our personal information and try to blackmail us with it.”

Trang describes how the government has hired tens of thousands of “public opinion agitators” (*du luan vien*), who are paid per posting to spread propaganda and disinformation and lead attacks against internet users. “At the end of the month, when they are trying to meet their quotas, you can see comments from these cyber troops flooding onto web sites.”

“My phone is tapped,” she says. “I hear agents talking in the background. You begin to fear for your safety. It becomes too dangerous to speak about human rights. This is why so few people do it.”

“In the political culture of Vietnam, people don’t want to be different from other people,” she says. “You will be isolated from friends, family, community members. This is especially hard for women. Police pressure your employers to dismiss you. You can’t find a job. You can’t rent an apartment, or you find yourself being evicted in the middle of the night. Young activists have to sleep in the parks overnight. You can be attacked or arrested or sent to prison for a long time.”

In January 2013, Ho Quang Loi, head of Hanoi’s Communist Party Propaganda Department, confirmed that they had hired nine hundred “rumormongers,” whose job was “to fully exploit the power of propaganda.” These internet trolls, “in obedience to orders from superiors in dealing with sensitive cases,” are programmed to function like “button-pressing, rapid response journalists.” Like China’s “50 Cent Party,” so named because they receive fifty Chinese cents per posting, the rumormongers flooding Vietnam’s cyberspace number in the thousands.

Not all the victories in the arms race between dissidents and the government go to the censors. “The good news is that in the past five years, some alternative media have emerged,” Trang wrote in a recent blog posting. She listed the protest movement against bauxite mining in the Vietnamese highlands and several alternative news sites. She is also encouraged by the release of political prisoner Nguyen Huu Cau, whose “anti-revolutionary” activities had put him behind bars for thirty-seven years.

When former army officer Dinh Dang Dinh was released from prison in 2014 and died less than a month later from cancer, two thousand people showed up for his funeral. The event— a silent

protest against the Chinese Aluminum Company being issued permits to strip mine bauxite in Vietnam's central highlands—was broken up by plainclothes police sent “to tear away commemoration banners from floral tributes” and disperse the crowd paying tribute to the “anti-state Dinh Dang Dinh.”

Three other prisoners of conscience, including legal scholar Cu Huy Ha Vu, were released in April 2014. Dr. Vu was flown directly from prison to exile in the United States, which suggested to Trang “that he may have been ‘traded’ by the Vietnamese government for some economic and political gains.” Two months later, another trade seems to have netted the release of labor activist Do Thi Minh Hanh.

Unfortunately, the good news was followed by another roundup of political prisoners, including Sidewalk News Agency's Anh Ba Sam and author Nguyen Quang Lap. Vietnam is happy to supply mice to the world's global cats, and among its various shortages, Vietnam has never recorded a shortage of mice.

A Confession

Traveling to the Philippines, which does not require a visa for Vietnamese visitors, Trang secretly left Vietnam in January 2013. The following year, she received a fellowship from the German government to study public policy at the University of Southern California. After ten months in Los Angeles, she was offered political asylum in the United States but chose instead to return to Vietnam. In January 2015, she was arrested at the airport in Hanoi and told she was on a blacklist of people not allowed to leave the country.

“News about my detention went viral on Facebook,” she says. “They released me that night but told me I was banned from leaving Vietnam for ‘national security reasons.’” Today, one of Vietnam's best political reporters is basically unemployed and unemployable.

Back in 2009, when Trang was working as a columnist for *VietnamNet*, she and two well-known bloggers were arrested in a crackdown on dissidents. Held for nine days, she was accused of making “advocacy tee-shirts” and leading protests against Chinese bauxite mining.

“In tears, before the Tet holiday, I wrote a confession telling everyone that I

could do nothing to defend myself and them. I asked them to forgive me,' she says."

"They confiscated my lap top when I was in jail and opened it to find private photos of me with my former lover," she says. "They tried to make me sign forty of these photos and confess to being in them. I refused to do this. Then they 'invited' my mother to the police station. With my mother seated at a table in front of me, they held up each photo and threatened to turn it around and show her the picture. My mother is a traditional Asian woman who doesn't believe in having sex before marriage. She looked miserable.

"They forced me to sign the photos and write a confession in front of my mother. 'This is my body. I am having sex with this man,' I wrote out forty times. "Over the years, they have tried to silence me by threatening to use these photos."

Trang slumps in her chair as she tells me this story. Her face is grave and unsmiling. "In tears, before the Tet holiday, I wrote a confession telling everyone that I could do nothing to defend myself and them. I asked them to forgive me," she says.

Trang's "Confession" was published on her blog in February 2015. "I must admit that I am not in the best of moods as I sit down to write these lines right at this very moment," she warns her readers. "For the past six months, since the summer of 2014, when I was still completing my fellowship in the U.S., I have been regularly receiving threatening messages from unidentifiable Facebook pages with the same contents: they will disseminate to the Internet private, sexual images of mine—Pham Doan Trang—if I continue with my works, [which] are described as 'subversive activities' by them."

Trang goes on to describe the "sad story of some six years ago," when she was arrested and the blackmail began. Often, in the middle of the night, she was "awakened by threatening and unidentified messages, harsh comments made by the government's internet trolls. I realized that, sooner or later, those pictures [would be] disseminated by posting on a website dedicated to 'war on dissidents' [or] by sending them directly to the people whom I would not want to be aware of this story. Worse yet, they could be photo-shopped and disseminated with additional untrue and malicious information (this is how the

internet trolls paid by the government have been treating dissidents) to create horrible tales about me.

“Even though it is truly heart-rending, I must write this ‘confession’ at the end of this lunar year because I simply cannot predict when my private pictures will be posted online with highlights and red circles, etc.

“I want to offer my apology to those who will be affected by this incident, if it happens the way I fear. I want to tell them that I do not have the power to defend myself and that it is impossible for me to take up the responsibility of securing those pictures once the security police have their hands on them.”

Soon after Trang’s return from the United States, her intimate photos began leaking onto the internet. “The police aren’t using physical torture and imprisonment, but something more subtle,” she says. “I suffered psychological trauma after that. I flash back to dozens of policemen staring at my photos, my body exposed before them. I cannot forget the way my mother looked that day—a traditional, soft-spoken woman who was then in her late sixties, wracked with misery and pain.”

“That humiliation is still with me,” she says. “My apartment is bugged. I can’t change clothes in my room anymore. I have no more privacy.”

“When I was offered asylum in the United States, I told the consular official, ‘I don’t want to be a burden. You have enough political refugees.’”

“‘You are not a burden. You are an asset,’ he told me. I have never heard these words in my own country, where I have been arrested and beaten many times.”

“On a national level, I see signs of hope in Vietnam. More and more young people want to build a democracy. Many others are declining to become members of the communist party. But here the phrase ‘anti-communist party’ means ‘anti-state.’ This is illegal. It is a crime.”

“For myself I see no hope. I no longer have the chance to live a peaceful life. No more love life. No more family life. No more privacy. I have to live as a public enemy, with police repression.

“You can never take the prison out of someone’s mind,” she says. “It becomes part of your life. I can never get those nine days of

detention out of my mind, with the police preaching to me in front of my mother about morality.

“My scandal has given me a slave mind. Fear is all around, and the police take advantage of this.”

Sweet Virtues

Trang invites me to attend a journalism class that she teaches once a week at a café on the outskirts of Hanoi. “These are very brave students,” she says. “Classes like this are raided by the police.”

Later in the week, I give a taxi driver a piece of paper with an address written on it. We drive into Hanoi’s western suburbs, before I am dropped on the shores of a small lake. The lake is surrounded by outdoor cafes full of people eating boiled crabs and drinking beer. I watch the festivities until I notice an alley leading away from the lake. I walk down the alley and turn left to discover a small café that doubles as a kind of community center. I leave my shoes at the door and walk upstairs to a carpeted room with low tables. At the far end of the room are seven young Vietnamese, dressed casually in jeans and tee shirts, except for one young woman in a skirt. Trang walks in behind me, still limping badly from her encounter with the police. She unslings her backpack and lowers herself to the floor with a wince. “Maybe tomorrow I’ll go to the hospital for a checkup,” she says.

"They are doing nothing more than exploring the world around them, which, unfortunately, in Vietnam makes them criminals."

We order iced coffee and tea and introduce ourselves. Among the students are a young man finishing a law degree, an “activist promoting civil society,” a corporate accountant, a first-year engineering student, a specialist in mobile networks, another student studying “economic law” (“Vietnam doesn’t train many criminal lawyers,” he says), a hotel desk clerk, and the young woman, who has just finished medical school. They tell me they are studying journalism to understand what is happening around them. Many of them are political activists. For a Green Hanoi is one of their causes, a group that recently organized rallies to prevent Hanoi from chopping down its old trees. One

young man, a practicing Catholic, tells me about the lack of religious freedom in Vietnam, which has long been a political flashpoint.

Trang explains how public meetings in Vietnam are blocked. “You have to leave your apartment one or two days in advance to get to a protest. Otherwise, the police shut you in. The government is scared to see young people gather in groups,” she says. “They’re afraid of what they might do in the future.”

The students begin asking me questions about journalism. “Are there occasions when journalists should not publish something?” “Is truth always the ultimate goal of journalism?” “Is there ever anything more important than publishing the truth?” They are polite, inquisitive, curious. They are doing nothing more than exploring the world around them, which, unfortunately, in Vietnam makes them criminals.

For these young people, “democracy” is not a plot to overthrow the government. It is a request to vote in elections that aren’t rigged. “Freedom of speech” is the desire to talk among themselves about Vietnam and the larger world. “The rule of law” is a wish to assemble in discussion groups, go to poetry readings, watch movies, and read books without being beaten and harassed. For someone like me, jaded by the hypocrisy laid on top of our basic values, it is a shock to be reminded of the sweet virtues of political freedom.

At the end of the evening, I wish the students luck in trying to do journalism in a country that fears it. We retrieve our shoes at the door and walk down the alley one by one, pretending not to know each other. I stroll among the lakeside cafes, still filled with people drinking beer, before hailing a taxi back to the city.

Excerpt from Thomas A. Bass, Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World (University of Massachusetts Press, 2017)

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