

Why the West Has Gone Soft on Human Rights in Vietnam

Hanoi's strategic importance to the U.S. and its allies has allowed the Communist Party greater leeway in silencing its critics.



By [David Hutt](#)

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On Tuesday, the Vietnamese activist Pham Doan Trang was jailed by a Hanoi court to nine years in prison. It was “a searing indictment of everything that is wrong with authoritarian Vietnam today,” [said](#) Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch.

Trang, a prominent independent journalist, book publisher, and human rights defender, has been harassed by the communist authorities for years, briefly going into hiding in 2018. She was arrested by the police in October last year and charged with disseminating anti-state propaganda. State prosecutors had asked for Trang to be jailed for between seven and eight years, but the Hanoi People’s Court increased the sentence to nine years.

Trang has been [called](#) the “most famous activist” in Vietnam. Her easy-to-read textbooks on political history, as well as her music and wider activism, especially on environmental issues, made her a key voice on social media. In 2019, Reporters Without Borders awarded her its Press Freedom Prize. She was also something of a key node between the disparate progressive camps, the link between pro-democracy urbanites, environmental campaigners, and rural land-rights activists.

“This prison sentence is a giant middle finger from Vietnam’s Ministry of Public Security to those in the United States and elsewhere who criticize Vietnam’s human rights record,” Bill Hayton, a former correspondent in Vietnam and now of Chatham House, told me. “The Vietnamese leadership knows that it can get away with jailing activists like Trang because Vietnam has become an important component

of outside powers' strategies in East and Southeast Asia.”

Trang was detained in October last year on the same day officials from the United States and Vietnam met to discuss human rights and freedom of expression. That hasn't been lost on many commentators, who accuse Western governments of doing next-to-nothing to confront Vietnam (now a close friend of the West because of its stance against Beijing's aggression in the South China Sea, as well as its economic importance and key position in global supply chains) about its dire human rights record.

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The implicit claim many Western governments have made is that as they trade more with Vietnam, and make Hanoi increasingly dependent on economic links to free societies, they gain additional leverage to pressure the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) into purposeful political reform. But so-called “change through trade” hasn't worked. As Western trade with Vietnam has increased, political rights in Vietnam have deteriorated. A report published by Amnesty International in late 2020 [asserted](#) that around 170 prisoners of conscience are currently detained in Vietnam, a record high in recent history. The 88 Project [asserts](#) that there are now 217 activists in prison, and another 306 at risk. Freedom House, in its latest survey of political rights across the world, downgraded Vietnam's score to 19 out of 100, the second-worst in Southeast Asia, after also-communist Laos.

Much of this deterioration has to do with the harder-line policies introduced after the Party

General Secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong, gained preponderance at the 2016 National Congress – and which have been maintained since he won a near-unprecedented third-term in office at the 13th National Congress in January. However, it's too easy to lay the blame on Trong, for that assumes the Western approach was working prior to 2016. It wasn't. Admittedly, in the years before 2016 the VCP arrested fewer activists and ordinary people. But Trong's hard-line policies were ever-present within the Party; greater trade with the U.S. and Europe obviously didn't prevent them from gaining prominence again. And Western governments relied on Hanoi's promises of reform, without waiting to see if it actually happened.

Despite this, the Biden administration is increasingly talking in ideological terms. Before his assumption of power, he said his foreign policy would be built around democracy. “Democracy doesn't happen by accident,” Biden [said](#) recently. “We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it, renew it.” Topping it off was his recent Summit for Democracy, which received mixed reviews from political pundits. Vietnam, of course, wasn't invited to the summit, although representatives of governments with less than stellar democratic credentials were. (Iraq and the DRC, anyone?)

But what Vietnam tells us is that the U.S. takes a two-pronged approach. Countries that wholly or somewhat align with Washington's rivalry with China, such as Vietnam, get off scot-free when it comes to their authoritarianism and human rights abuses. But countries on the other side of this rivalry, which are perceived as being closer to Beijing, are challenged because of their domestic politics.

The point was made (with a great deal of self-pity, admittedly) by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen this week. His government has butted heads with the United States since 2017, and matters escalated recently, with sanctions last month being imposed on two senior Cambodian naval officers and, this month, with the US imposing an arms embargo on Phnom Penh. Of course, the U.S. is right to point out Cambodia's authoritarian turn since 2017 and the numerous human rights abuses carried out by its government, which is also guilty of doing everything possible to stir American paranoia over suspicions it will allow Chinese troops to be stationed on Cambodian soil, the reason for the latest sanctions.

Yet, Hun Sen does have a point: Why is Cambodia punished and Vietnam privileged? Barack Obama lifted the U.S. arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016 and Joe Biden imposed an embargo on Cambodia this month, yet Vietnam unmistakably has a far more authoritarian political system and is a worse abuser of human rights.

Some skeptics are quick to pooh-pooh claims of a "New Cold War," asserting wrongly that the U.S.-China rivalry is too different from the U.S.-Soviet rivalry for the analogy to hold up. They forget that the Second World War was far from a replica of the First, while our "Second Cold War" does have many parallels to the first. And one of these parallels is Washington's decision to overlook authoritarianism and human rights abuses when committed by its apparent allies.

Values are important, but they will always be secondary to U.S. geopolitical concerns. Alliance are urgent, values are aspirational – and, indeed, the semantics of Biden's latest summit *for democracy*, not *of democrats*, spelled out the

difference in both short- and long-term thinking. Does it matter if the Vietnamese government has a terrible human rights record *now* if (also right now) it can be a bulwark against Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific?

For Vietnamese activists, that's a problem. Almost all pro-democracy voices in Vietnam are, first, pro-U.S. and, second, fervently nationalistic in wanting their government to challenge China on every perceivable issue. The two positions aren't just corollary but indistinguishable. However, the more Vietnam makes itself integral to America's strategic aims, the more Washington is likely to ignore political repression in Vietnam. If Vietnam wasn't such an important part of America's Indo-Pacific strategy, it's hard to imagine Washington not being far more critical of its government's repression. Or, more accurately, if Hanoi ever tipped its hat towards either superpower, rather than hedging between the two, then Washington would have more reason to act.

If Vietnam was fully in America's camp, or fully in China's camp, Washington would be in a much stronger position to challenge it on its abuses. Because Hanoi is hedging and playing hard to get, however, Washington cannot take the risk of pushing too hard on human rights and, as a result, "lose" Hanoi to Beijing. For Hanoi, hedging against the U.S. and China makes sense internationally *and* domestically.

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