

1 August 2017

Vietnam: Four human rights defenders arrested for anti-State activity

On 30 July 2017, the Vietnamese authorities simultaneously arrested four human rights defenders, all members of the Brotherhood for Democracy and former prisoners of conscience, at their homes in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Thanh Hoa. Nguyen Trung Ton, Nguyen Bac Truyen, Pham Van Troi and Truong Minh Duc were taken into custody and subsequently charged under Article 79 of the Penal Code for “carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people’s administration”, which can carry the death penalty.

Nguyen Trung Ton is a human rights defender and protestant pastor who advocates for democracy and freedom of religion in Vietnam. He is the current President of Brotherhood for Democracy, an independent civil society organisation which uses the Internet to promote human rights and coordinate the efforts of various pro-democracy actors in the country. In December 2011, Nguyen Trung Ton was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment and two years’ probation on charges of “anti-state propaganda” under Article 88 of the Penal Code. In recent years, he and his family have been constantly harassed and intimidated by the local authorities in Thanh Hoa province.

[Nguyen Bac Truyen](#) is a legal expert who promotes freedom of belief in the Mekong Delta region and is Head of the Vietnamese Political & Religious Prisoners Friendship Association, an organization for former prisoners of conscience. He has also provided free legal assistance to victims of land grabs, campaigned for multi-party democracy and called on the Vietnamese government to release all political prisoners.

[Truong Minh Duc](#) is a citizen journalist and the Deputy Head of the Brotherhood for Democracy in the Southern region of the country. He was arrested in 2007 and sentenced to 5 years in prison, convicted of “taking advantage of freedom and democracy to infringe upon the interests of the country”, under Article 258 of the Penal Code. Since being released in 2012, he has been harassed and repeatedly assaulted by unidentified people working for the government.

[Pham Van Troi](#) is a human rights defender and a former President of the Brotherhood for Democracy. He was arrested in 2008 and charged with “conducting anti-state propaganda” under Article 88 of the Penal Code. He was sentenced to four years in prison and an additional four years under house arrest. Since his release in 2012, he has continued to work promoting human rights and multi-party democracy.

On the morning of 30 July 2017, the Security Investigation Agency of Vietnam’s Ministry of Public Security carried out the arrests of Nguyen Trung Ton and Truong Minh Duc at their residence in Ho Chi Minh City and Pham Van Troi in Hanoi. The agency, which deployed a large number of police officers for the operation, searched their house and confiscated many of their personal items.

Meanwhile, Nguyen Bac Truyen was reported to have gone missing in Ho Chi Minh City after his wife failed to contact him over the phone. The Ministry of Public Security later published a statement confirming that the four defenders had been taken into custody.

The four defenders have all served previous jail sentences and are connected to Nguyen Van Dai, the co-founder of the Brotherhood for Democracy, who has been detained under article 88 of the Penal Code since December 2015. They were taken into custody and charged under Article 79 of the Vietnamese 1999 Penal Code. They will be held for investigation for up to four months and face imprisonment of between 12 and 20 years, life imprisonment or capital punishment if they are convicted.

On 24 July 2017, the Vietnamese authorities also arrested and charged environmental rights activist Le Dinh Luong under Article 79 of the Penal Code. The police said that the detention was based on his recent activities which “aim to overthrow the people’s government and cause social disorders.” The defender had spoken out against the Taiwanese company Formosa Plastics Corp. that caused one of Vietnam's biggest environmental disasters in April 2016.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest and detention of human rights defenders Nguyen Trung Ton, Nguyen Bac Truyen, Pham Van Troi and Truong Minh Duc under Article 79 of the Penal Code, which it believes are solely motivated by their peaceful and legitimate work for human rights in Vietnam.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Vietnam to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Nguyen Trung Ton, Nguyen Bac Truyen, Pham Van Troi and Truong Minh Duc and drop all charges against them, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Inform the family and lawyers of Nguyen Trung Ton, Nguyen Bac Truyen, Pham Van Troi and Truong Minh Duc of the place of their detention, and allow them immediate and unfettered access to them;
3. Return the documents confiscated during the raid, as they are manifestly not linked to any criminal activity;
4. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Vietnam and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.