



SILENCED VOICES: Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh

by Cathal Sheerin

During an interview in 2015, Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, one of Vietnam's most famous alternative commentators and online activists said, "People ask me, 'Why do you do that? Why don't you stay silent like others and live a normal life?' [I] have a role: to publish the truth... and I do this for my children's future."

Quynh, thirty-seven, is a political blogger in a country where political blogging is banned.

On June 29, 2017, following a trial that lasted just one day, she was convicted under Article 88 of the Penal Code of "conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam." Specifically, she was judged to have "harmed national unity," "eroded the public trust in the government," and "threatened national security." She was handed a ten-year prison sentence. Before her trial, she had been held incommunicado for nine months.

Quynh, who is known online as Me Nam (Mother Mushroom), has been blogging since 2006. Her pen name comes from her youngest daughter's nickname: Mushroom. She is the recipient of numerous



Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh

Illustration by Maxine Young

prizes, including the 2017 International Women of Courage Award, the 2015 Civil Rights Defender of the Year Award, and the 2010 Hellman/Hammett Award. Her writing, which she posts both to her personal blog and to Dan Lam Bao, a platform run by Vietnamese exiles, generally focuses on environmental problems, political issues, and social injustice. It is often highly critical of the government.

But Quynh is not just a blogger. She is an opinion-former, a cofounder of the Vietnamese Bloggers Network, a leader with an independent voice. And in a strictly controlled state like Vietnam, that does not go unpunished.

It's difficult for someone brought up in a democracy to imagine the full horror of living in a society where the government exercises repressive control over most aspects of public life, but the U.S. State Department's 2016 human rights report on Vietnam provides a fairly exhaustive summary of what the Vietnamese have to suffer:

The most significant human rights problems in the country were severe government restrictions of citizens' political rights, particularly their right to change their government through free and fair elections; limits on citizens' civil liberties, including freedom of assembly, association, and expression; and inadequate protection of citizens' due process rights, including protection against arbitrary detention. Other human rights abuses included arbitrary and unlawful deprivation of life; police attacks and corporal punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention for political activities; continued police mistreatment of suspects during arrest and detention, including the use of lethal force and austere prison conditions; and denial of the right to a fair and expeditious trial.

The judicial system was opaque and lacked independence, and political and economic influences regularly affected judicial outcomes. The government limited freedom of speech and suppressed dissent; exercised control over and censored the press; restricted internet freedom and freedom of religion; maintained often-heavy surveillance of activists; and continued to limit privacy rights and freedoms of assembly, association, and movement. The government continued to closely control registration of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including hu-

man rights organizations. Authorities restricted visits by human rights NGOs and foreign press agencies that did not agree to government oversight. Corruption remained widespread throughout public sector institutions, including police. The government maintained limits on workers' rights to form and join independent unions and did not enforce safe and healthy working conditions adequately.

The internet is the only place where dissidents like Quynh can reach a mass audience without having to go through the state censor. However, the Vietnamese government is doing all it can to make this as difficult as possible. In recent years, the Ministry of Public Security has developed a secretive internet monitoring unit that seeks to reduce and restrict the online activities of Vietnam's citizens. It does this through a combination of surveillance and lawmaking. Of the many government regulations issued to clamp down on digital free expression, two in particular stand out: the 2008 Ministry of Information Circular No. 7, which bans bloggers from posting about politics, state secrets, and national security; and a 2010 order that requires internet cafés in Hanoi to install monitoring software on all their computers, register the identities of all their clients, and keep a log of all their online activities.

Although what Quynh was doing was exceptionally risky, publishing her views online wasn't something that she was prepared to give up. Perhaps this was because, for Quynh, the internet, free expression, and politics were essential parts of her development as a human being. Her mother, Nguyen Thi Tuyet Lan, says that Quynh's political awakening came when, while studying foreign languages at university, she came into contact with the diversity of the online world. It opened her eyes: "She asked me, 'Mom, do you know this or that [about the government]?' " remembers Lan. "I said I did. She questioned me, 'Why didn't you tell me?' I told her I knew, but [that]... this is not a society where you can speak out, and they will denounce you."

Before they arrested her in 2016, the Vietnamese authorities had been harassing Quynh for years: she had suffered travel bans, physical attacks, and death threats because of her blogging. In 2009, she was

detained and questioned for nine days after publishing an article that criticized Vietnam's foreign policy toward China (over a territorial dispute). The police demanded that she close down her blog; she didn't, and was placed under surveillance.

This surveillance was part of a much larger campaign aimed at putting dissident bloggers out of business. In 2010, the government authorized a massive cyber attack on the blogs and computers of noted Vietnamese bloggers at home and in exile. This included the use of malware to infect and take control of computers. Neel Mehta of the Google Security Team estimates that tens of thousands of computers could have been affected. Alongside these hi-tech tactics, the authorities also made use of the more traditional methods of intimidation, detaining seven bloggers in the first two months of 2010 alone.

When she was arrested in 2016, Quynh was visiting the jailed activist Nguyen Huu Quoc Duy. According to reports, the police forced Quynh into a car and drove her to her home, where they confiscated computer equipment, her cell phone, and campaigning materials that she'd been using to protest a recent toxic waste spill. Later, she was charged with "conducting propaganda" and held without access to her lawyer (and denied visitors) for nine months. Her first meeting with a lawyer took place just nine days before her trial in June 2017.

Throughout this period, the authorities also targeted Quynh's relatives. Her mother says that she was subjected to surveillance and harassment in the street by state security agents.

Quynh's detention was condemned by governments and human rights organizations around the world: within days the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, called for the blogger's immediate release.

Her subsequent conviction drew similar responses: five U.N. Special Rapporteurs released a statement describing the prosecution as "little more than a show trial"; U.S. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert announced that the United States was calling on Vietnam "to release 'Mother Mushroom' and all other prisoners of conscience immediately, and to allow all individuals in Vietnam to express their views freely."

Quynh is resilient. After her conviction—and while waiting for her sentence to be handed down—she told the court, “Each person only has one life, but if I had the chance to choose again I would still choose my way.” Whereas others might have attempted to show remorse in the hope of a more lenient sentence, Quynh chose defiance.

And defiance seems to be a family trait. After Quynh was sentenced, her mother, Lan, though clearly suffering, said, “I was very proud of her. My daughter has done a normal thing in an abnormal society... [now] she has to pay the price of prison.” Lan has taken on the responsibility of raising Quynh’s two young daughters.

Calls for the release of Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh and of all Vietnamese bloggers who have been imprisoned solely for exercising their right to free expression may be sent to the following address:

Ambassador Pham Quang Vinh
Embassy of Vietnam
1233 20th St. NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

You may want to use this [sample letter](#).

Email: info@vietnamembassy.us
Fax: (202) 861-0917

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