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# Vietnam Convicts Prominent Dissidents

By JAMES HOOKWAY

Vietnam convicted and sentenced four prominent dissidents to lengthy jail terms Wednesday for attempting to overthrow the government, in a fresh demonstration of how the country's increasingly conservative Communist leaders are stifling dissent—and worrying some of their leading trading partners.

The best-known of the defendants, human-rights lawyer Le Cong Dinh, 41 years old, was handed down a comparatively mild five-year sentence in Ho Chi Minh City after admitting in court that he had broken the law by joining a banned political party. He testified he had been led astray by Western notions of democracy while studying law at Tulane University in the U.S. and hadn't intended to challenge Vietnam's leadership.

"From the bottom of my heart, I myself and these three other defendants had no intention to overthrow the government," the Associated Press reported Mr. Dinh as saying.

A co-defendant, Internet entrepreneur Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, 43 years old, was sentenced to 16 years in prison after testifying that he hadn't broken any laws and was solely interested in helping to stamp out corruption.

The trial was featured heavily in local, state-controlled Vietnamese media, and the wide disparity in the length of the jail-terms given to a contrite Mr. Dinh and the more combative Mr. Thuc appeared intended to send a message to other Vietnamese dissidents to stop criticizing the government, one foreign diplomat said.

Both men avoided a potential death penalty on the subversion charge, as did another defendant, Nguyen Tien Trung. A fourth defendant, Le Thang Long, was convicted as an accomplice.

Wednesday's trial came amid growing international concern about a worsening crackdown on political dissent in Vietnam, which until recently had been better known as one Asia's fastest-growing, most vibrant economies. Indeed, political analysts say the country's government gradually allowed increased space for political discussion and religious worship over the past decade, partly to ease Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2007.

That year, Vietnam saw a third more foreign investment than neighboring Thailand and established itself as an important cog in the global economy, exporting goods as diverse as fish, electronic goods and crude oil.

In 2008, however, Vietnam's boom suddenly ran out of steam as inflation reached a peak of 28% and the global financial crisis hobbled the country's exports. Wary of growing discontent and spreading wildcat strikes, Vietnam's leaders took a more conservative attack, silencing dissent wherever possible. Political analysts say jockeying within the ruling Communist Party ahead of its next congress in January 2011—with conservatives widely seen by diplomats and analysts as gaining the upper hand—is also contributing to the increasingly hostile environment in the country.

"Vietnam's hostility toward freedom of expression and peaceful dissent is becoming increasingly flagrant in the run-up to next year's party congress," said Brad Adams, Asia director of the New York-based Human Rights Watch lobby group.

Late last year, Vietnam began blocking access to social-networking Web site Facebook, which has helped mobilize political opposition movements in Iran and other countries. That prompted U.S. Ambassador Michael Michalak to warn in December that Vietnam's crackdown could have an adverse impact on businesses in the country, while the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington flagged its concerns over the Vietnamese government's tentative plans to impose price controls on goods manufactured or imported by foreign firms in the country.

The Australian government, meanwhile, is growing concerned about the fate of two senior [Qantas Airways Ltd.](#) employees who have been prevented from leaving Vietnam while authorities investigate loss-making fuel-hedging trades at partly state-owned Vietnamese airline Jetstar Pacific, which is 27%-owned by Qantas.

Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith on Tuesday said he had urged Vietnam to speed up the questioning of Jetstar chief operating officer Daniela Marsilli and chief financial officer Tristan Freeman so they can return home. The two haven't been detained.

Wednesday's convictions were the latest in a series of highly publicized trials in Vietnam, and 10 other pro-democracy activists have been jailed in the past three months. Mr. Dinh is by far the best known. A former vice chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City Bar Association, he studied in the U.S. on a Fulbright scholarship and was a significant player in Vietnam's legal defense against an unfair trade complaint brought by U.S. catfish farmers.

In 2007, he caught the attention of Vietnam's authorities when he made a public plea of freedom of expression while defending other dissidents. Prosecutors accuse him of traveling to Thailand to attend a course of political activism organized by pro-democracy exile group Viet Tan, which Vietnam considers to be a terrorist organization.

Vietnamese state media prior to the trial reported prosecutors as saying that Mr. Dinh's transgressions represent a "particularly serious violation of national security."

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