

Prominent civil society activist Mai Phan Lợi condemned to four years in prison in Vietnam



Mai Phan Lợi

PARIS, 12 January 2022 (VCHR) – The Vietnam Committee on Human Rights (VCHR) protests the arbitrary conviction of civil society activist **Mai Phan Lợi** to four years in prison by the Hanoi People’s Court at a one-day trial on 11 January 2022. Lợi was accused of “tax evasion” along with a colleague, **Bạch Hùng Dương**, who received a 30-month sentence. VCHR deplors the frequent use of tax-related charges as a pretext to detain and silence bloggers, human rights defenders civil society activists and [other government critics](#) in Vietnam.

“Mai

Phan Lợi’s real “crime” is that of advocating greater independence for civil society in Vietnam” said VCHR President Võ Văn Ái. **“As part of the EU-Vietnam Free**

Trade Agreement (EVFTA), Hanoi pledged to establish a Domestic Advisory Group

composed of independent CSOs to monitor the trade agreement and make recommendations on issues of land rights, worker rights and the environment.

Mai Phan Lợi is sent to prison simply for urging Vietnam to uphold its binding obligations to the EU and the Vietnamese people”.

Mai Phan Lợi, 51, is founder and chair of the Scientific Board of the [Centre for Media in Educating Community \(MEC\)](#), a government-registered non-profit organisation established in 2012. He is also a journalist, former Hanoi Bureau chief of the law magazine *Pháp Luật*. He was arrested on [24 June 2021](#) along with another prominent civil society activist, lawyer **Đặng Đình Bách**, director of the [Law and Policy for Sustainable Development \(LPSD\)](#). Both men were accused of “tax evasion” under Article 200 of Vietnam’s Criminal Code. No information has been made public so far on the situation of Đặng Đình Bách.

Lợi and Bách were both Executive Board members of VNGO-EVFTA Network, a group of development and environmental CSOs established in 2020 to raise awareness about EVFTA and its civil society component in Vietnam, the Vietnam Domestic Advisory Group (DAG). Lợi’s role was to organize chat-shows and workshops on MEC’s communications channel GTV to highlight the role of civil society in monitoring the implementation of EVFTA in Vietnam.

The Court ruled that Mai Phan Lợi had “ordered his subordinates not to keep accounting records” and “not to declare and pay tax”. According to reports of the trial in the [State-controlled press](#), Lợi and his accomplice had evaded taxes of almost 2 billion dong (77,500 Euros) from subventions and donations worth over 19 billion dong received by his organisation over the past 10 years.

The arrests of these civil society activists and the lack of independence of the Vietnamese DAG has been [strongly denounced](#) by its EU counterpart, the EU DAG, most recently in a [statement](#) issued at the first meeting of the Vietnam-EU Joint Civil Society Dialogue Forum in November 2021: *“The EU DAG has consistently raised the cases of several civil society representatives in Vietnam arrested and imprisoned in recent months directly with both parties to the EVFTA. We are concerned by the limited number of participants in the Vietnamese DAG and therefore ask that a defined process for further civil society engagement and participation be clarified. This is all the more urgent as we understand that a number of civil society organisations have had their applications for participation [in the DAG] rejected on unclear grounds”.*

Stressing

that EVFTA *“explicitly calls for DAGs to be composed of “independent representative organisations”* (Article 13.14.15 of the Trade and Sustainable Development Chapter), the EU DAG recalled that the civil society component was *“the bedrock on which it can be ensured that the commitments undertaken are implemented in practice by both Parties”.*

To obtain ratification of EVFTA, Vietnam adhered to all these provisions, but has failed to live up to its promises. Whereas the EU DAG, which was established in 2020 and consists of over 20 members including human rights NGOs, worker and employers organisations, business groups and environmental organisations, the Vietnamese DAG was not established until August 2021 – one year after EVFTA came into force. It has only three members, the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Institute for Workers and Trade Unions (an affiliate of the State-sponsored Vietnam General Confederation of Labour), and the Centre for Sustainable Rural Development (SRD). The criteria of independence specified for DAGs under EVFTA are clearly not applied in Vietnam.

VCHR calls on Vietnam to immediately release Mai Phan Lợi, Đặng Đình Bách, Bạch Hùng Dương and all other civil society activists detained for the legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of expression, association, assembly and freedom of religion or belief. ---