

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Vietnam committed to net zero emissions by 2050. So why is it arresting climate change activists?

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Nov. 13, 2023



— Environmentalist Nguy Thi Khanh is serving a two-year prison sentence in Vietnam for tax evasion charges. Vietnam's government has arrested and jailed some of the country's leading climate change activists.
Lillian Suwanrumphe/AP/Getty Images 2023

This week leaders from around the world, including from seven Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries, are gathering in San Francisco for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit under the theme of “Creating a Resilient and Sustainable Future for All.”

But the smoggy gray skies of Jakarta, the worsening flooding in Malaysia and the Philippines, and the sweltering heat waves that have swept across Thailand and Vietnam remind us that this “sustainable future” is a distant reality in the Asia-Pacific region — especially in ASEAN countries, which are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change.

In Vietnam, though, the problem is compounded by an attack on environmental experts and human rights defenders who are trying to wean the country off coal.

In the past two years, six Vietnamese leaders have been detained and imprisoned for trying to move the country toward a sustainable future. They are environmental lawyer Dang Dinh Bach, Goldman Environmental Prize winner Nguy Thi Khanh, journalist Mai Phan Loi, lawyer Bach Hung Duong, climate activist Hoang Thi Minh Hong and, most recently, renewable energy thinktank director Ngo Thi To Nhien. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has called these arrests “arbitrary” and “repressive”.

The arrests, prosecution and imprisonment of these environmental human rights defenders show how Vietnam’s vague laws are being weaponized to silence those who are advocating for a clean energy transition. The arrests are part of a broader and systematic crackdown by the Vietnamese government against activists and dissenters. They represent a clear violation of the freedom of expression and assembly as well as an affront to the rule of law, creating a climate of fear that discourages any criticism of government policies.

What's even more striking is that the persecution of environmental advocates seems to fly in the face of the Vietnamese government's own recognition of the need for climate action. The country has committed to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and has also pledged not to develop any new coal power plants after 2030.

Vietnam is also one of four countries that have agreed to a Just Energy Transition Partnership, which would provide up to \$15.5 billion in funding during the next three to five years to support Vietnam's green transition. The political declaration establishing Vietnam's entry into the partnership explicitly states that "regular consultation is required, including with media, NGOs and other stakeholders so as to ensure a broad social consensus." The news release announcing the statement states that the partnership "must implement a just transition that involves and benefits civil society," and that it is "vital that the whole civil society is involved in the green transition at all stages."

How then can Vietnam's energy transition be "just" if its government silences environmental defenders through arbitrary arrests, judicial harassment and disproportionately harsh penalties? Environmental groups are facing threats and many have understandably shut down in reaction to the arrests.

These events are all the more concerning given that Vietnam is experiencing its hottest year on record, with temperatures reaching nearly 112 degrees in May. Experts also have said that there are high risks of severe drought and salinity if an extreme El Niño occurs through 2024, which would threaten Vietnam's rice production and food security.

Sadly, this alarming trend of silencing critical voices on the environment during a worsening climate crisis is not unique to Vietnam. Cambodia, which has one of the highest levels of deforestation in the world, has been continually persecuting environmental and climate activists, with at least six being charged under vague laws for "plotting" and "lèse-majesté" in 2020 and 2021. The environmental group Global Witness has found that the Philippines — one of the most disaster-prone and climate-change-impacted countries in the world — is the most dangerous country in Asia for environmental and land rights activists, with 281 killed since 2012. And in my own country of Indonesia — which has also recently agreed to a Just Energy Transition Partnership — environmental activist Heri Budiawan, also known as Budi Pego, was jailed earlier this year for alleged "crimes against state security" related to his involvement in a peaceful protest against gold mining activities on Salakan mountain in East Java.

If APEC leaders really want to "create a resilient and sustainable future for all," they must insist that Vietnam's — and ASEAN countries' — just energy transition must start with the immediate and unconditional release of all environmental and human rights defenders who have been arbitrarily arrested merely for peacefully expressing their opinions, starting with those wrongfully imprisoned in Vietnam. If APEC and ASEAN leaders truly mean what they say about addressing the climate crisis, surely one of the first things they should do is ensure that civil society efforts to protect the environment don't carry the risk of jail time.

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