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Vietnam arrests Protestant pastor for 'anti-state propaganda'

Nguyen Manh Hung is known for criticizing the government on Facebook.

[Radio Free Asia](#) (21.01.2025) - Vietnamese authorities have arrested a Protestant pastor known for his criticism of the government on Facebook on charges of "anti-state propaganda," according to his son.

Pastor Nguyen Manh Hung, 71, is the first person to be arrested on the charges since the beginning of the year, and the second since former Minister of Public Security To Lam became Vietnam's general secretary in August 2024. The charges carry a sentence of up to 20 years in prison.

Nguyen Manh Hung was at his home in Ho Chi Minh City on Jan. 16 when the electricity was suddenly cut off, his son, Nguyen Tran Hien, told RFA Vietnamese.

Around 10 minutes later, someone knocked on the door, asking that the pastor let him in to "check for fire risks." When Nguyen Manh Hung opened the door, police rushed in and handcuffed him, his son said.

Nguyen Tran Hien said the police showed him an arrest warrant for "anti-state propaganda" under Article 117 of Vietnam's Penal Code, which also stated that his father would be "temporarily detained for four months."

"They then read a house search warrant and confiscated some of my father's documents, two mobile phones, and a laptop," he said. "They also took my mobile phone and laptop."

Police then told Nguyen Tran Hien to go to the Ministry of Public Security's Institute for Criminal Sciences, where authorities interrogated him "for hours" about his father's activities, including bank transactions.

He said he was released at midnight after assuring police that he didn't know anything about his father's activities.

Soldier-turned-pastor

Nguyen Manh Hung, whose hometown is Hai Phong City, is a former soldier of the Northern Vietnam Army who fought in the Vietnam War. After his military service, he briefly worked as a manager before entering a monastery.

He became a pastor in 2011 and formerly served as administrator of Chuong Bo Protestant Church under the independent Mennonite Church. He is currently a member of the Interfaith Council of Vietnam, which advocates for religious freedom.

He has been repeatedly harassed by Vietnamese authorities, including in an incident in 2014 when police forcibly entered his home and beat him up.

In 2015, he participated in a hearing before the Human Rights Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee.

The hearing was about Vietnam's crackdowns on independent religious groups, including the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, some independent Protestant churches, the Cao Dai Chon Truyen sect and the Pure Hoa Hao Buddhist Church.

Nguyen Manh Hung was also highly active and vocal on Facebook, where he condemned Vietnam's government over human rights violations, corruption, and the confiscation of land from residents without fair compensation. He also voiced strong support for political dissidents and prisoners of conscience.

His most recent post, dated Jan. 14, noted that Vietnam's Communist Party once referred to those who bought land as "cruel landlords," while these days, "those who abuse power to acquire land are called 'outstanding cadres.'"

"Interest groups that exploit residents must be eradicated," he wrote. "The fight for democracy will be passed on to [and inspire] future generations."

Lam Dong connection

Nguyen Tran Hien said that the police who arrested his father were from Lam Dong province, where Nguyen Manh Hung had been living for the past two years with a woman known as N.T.T.

The police officers didn't leave any documents related to the arrest and house search, he said.

Nguyen Tran Hien told RFA that he had since tried unsuccessfully to contact N.T.T. and suspects that she may have also been arrested.

RFA called the Lam Dong Provincial Police to verify information about Nguyen Manh Hung's arrest, but staff who answered the phone refused to comment.

To date, state media have not reported the pastor's arrest.

Human Rights Council membership

Josef Benedict, advocacy expert for civil space in Asia-Pacific for the global civil society alliance CIVICUS, said that Nguyen Manh Hung's arrest "highlights the repressive environment in Vietnam, including for those belonging to the religious community."

"He has been targeted for bravely speaking out in a country where freedom of expression is under systematic attack and his arrest makes a mockery of Vietnam's [membership of the UN Human Rights Council](#)," Benedict said.

He also called on the Vietnamese government to drop all charges against Nguyen Manh Hung and release him immediately and unconditionally.

Just one day after Nguyen Manh Hung's arrest, Dong Nai Provincial Police detained Pham Xuan Thoi and Dao Cong Hieu on charges of "abusing democratic freedoms" under Article 331 of Vietnam's Penal Code.

The two allegedly posted information on Facebook that “distorted the Party’s policies and the State’s laws” and “abused their rights to file complaints and denunciations to distort, defame, and undermine the reputation of the Party, the State, and officials at all levels,” according to state media.

In its 2025 annual global report, released just hours after the pastor’s arrest, Human Rights Watch said that Vietnam’s new leadership had intensified repression since former Minister of Public Security To Lam assumed the role of General Secretary, the highest position in the one-party state.

In early December 2024, the group claimed that Vietnam was holding more than 170 political prisoners, which Hanoi denies.

Translated by Anna Vu. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.