Australia's first "foreign interference" arrest targets Liberal Party figure accused of links to China

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This week, a prominent Vietnamese-Chinese member of Australia's ruling Liberal Party became the first person to be charged under the "foreign interference" laws, introduced in 2018 as part of the intensifying US-led confrontation against China.

In a Melbourne magistrate's court on Thursday, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) charged 65-year-old Duong Di Sanh, also known as Sunny Duong, on the vague charge of "preparing to commit foreign interference." Duong, a former Liberal Party election candidate, could face 10 years in prison as a result, although he was released on bail until his next court appearance in March.

The AFP issued a brief statement declaring that the charge followed a year-long joint investigation with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). No details whatever were provided, nor was China named as the alleged source of the supposed foreign interference.

Nevertheless, all the circumstances point to a high-level decision, by the US-linked security agencies, to step up the official and media accusations against China, amid rising trade tensions fuelled by the US conflict with China. By targeting a prominent figure within the Liberal-National Coalition of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the arrest also sends a threatening message to anyone, even within the political elite, who does not line up sufficiently with Washington.

Duong's prosecution is regarded by the corporate media, in both Australia and the United States, as a test case for the "anti-influence" legislation, which Washington sees as a model for its drive to economically and militarily prevent China from challenging the post-World War II hegemony of the US, across the Asia-Pacific and globally.

The Melbourne *Age* reported: "The arrest will have international reverberations, after other countries have eagerly awaited to see how Australian authorities would prosecute the nation's foreign interference laws passed in 2018."

Despite the arrest occurring amid the political crisis in the United States, triggered by the presidential election, key US media outlets closely followed the news. The *New York Times*, in particular, gave favourable coverage to Duong's arrest, saying it "follows a breakdown in the relationship between China and Australia."

The *New York Times* claimed to be well informed about the arrest, saying it related to alleged attempted influence of a federal government minister. Citing an anonymous source, it reported: "A person familiar with the details of those raids said the police were investigating whether Mr. Duong had sought to influence the acting federal immigration minister, Alan Tudge, and whether the conduct was on behalf of or in collaboration with the Chinese Communist Party."

Duong, a business owner, is a high-profile member of the Southeast Asian Chinese community in the state of Victoria. He is the deputy chairperson of the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne, and president of the Oceania Federation of Chinese Organisations from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos Inc.

Duong has long been publicly identified with the Liberal Party, and stood as the party's candidate for the inner-Melbourne electorate of Richmond in a state election in 1996. He wrote in an autobiography last year, that he had been a member of the party since 1992 and had helped establish a local branch, of which he had been chairman.

Duong's most recent public appearance was in June. He stood next to Acting Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Minister Tudge at a media conference, where Duong handed over a cheque for more than $37,000 to the Royal Melbourne Hospital to help with coronavirus research and preparation.

In front of reporters and cameras, Tudge said at the event: "I would give you a big hug, but I'm not allowed to in these pandemic days, Sunny." Tudge continued: "I want to say a very big thank you to you directly, Sunny Duong and your organisation."

Whether or not Duong's supposed connection to Tudge is the alleged offence, it is clear that any and all such relations are now under close surveillance by the AFP and ASIO—Australia's political spy agency—and their US counterparts.

AFP commissioner Reece Kershaw recently revealed, for the first time, that a 65-strong specialist AFP unit, established last

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December to counter “foreign interference,” has been trained by officials from the American Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI).

Little is being said by the AFP, the Morrison government or the media about Duong’s arrest, although it is part of an anti-China witchhunt.

Last month, ASIO’s annual report declared that Australia was under threat from “espionage and foreign interference.” Without providing any evidence, or naming China, it claimed it had foiled a far-reaching operation by a foreign intelligence service.

In its statement on Duong’s arrest, the AFP used similar language. “Foreign interference is contrary to Australia’s national interest, it goes to the heart of our democracy,” it said. “It is corrupting and deceptive, and goes beyond routine diplomatic influence practiced by governments.”

These assertions serve also to blacken Duong’s name, and prejudice his chances of a fair trial, despite the lack of any information about the allegations against him. Moreover, according to the police, his alleged conduct was only “preparatory.” AFP Deputy Commissioner Ian McCartney said: “The CFI [Counter Foreign Interference] Taskforce has taken preventative action to disrupt this individual at an early stage.”

McCartney’s comment underscores how far the foreign interference laws can extend into so-called “early stage” conduct. Offences such as “preparing,” “attempting” and “conspiring” can be used to incriminate people for supposedly intending to do something, not for any actual activities or links to “foreign” entities.

As the WSWS has documented and explained, the “foreign interference” laws do not only target China and its alleged local sympathisers. They can be used to outlaw political opposition, anti-war dissent and social protests by alleging that these are connected to “foreign” or international campaigns.

For the first time, criminal offences, which carry up to 20 years’ imprisonment, now apply to simply undertaking political activity in partnership with an overseas organisation. The outlawed activities could extend to anyone opposing Australian involvement in a US-led military conflict with China.

The aggressive police methods used against Duong—despite his long-time establishment credentials—are also a warning of the type of police-state measures that can and will be used against targeted opponents of the US-led war drive.

The AFP said it had raided several Melbourne properties in relation to the alleged offences on October 16. Huong’s neighbours told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that police were at his house for seven hours on that day. They said multiple AFP cars and officers descended on the house, at around 7 a.m.

“At least 12 officers minimum went in,” they said. “They came in with equipment for asking questions, they were checking computers, coming and going for hours.” On the day of Duong’s arrest last Thursday, two police cars and a number of officers spent around one hour at the house.

Similar AFP-ASIO raids were conducted against the home and parliamentary office of New South Wales state Labor Party parliamentarian Shaoquett Moselmane in June, accompanied by lurid media headlines accusing him of being a Chinese Communist Party agent.

Labor’s state and federal leadership immediately supported the raids and forced Moselmane to take indefinite leave from parliament. Yet no charges have been laid. The only publicly-released evidence against Moselmane was that he had visited China, and had made statements praising the Chinese response to the coronavirus, and criticising US provocations targeting Beijing.

It later emerged that this ongoing AFP investigation is aimed at John Zhang, who worked as a part-time staffer in Moselmane’s office. This is also on the basis of threadbare accusations of associations with Chinese community organisations, and membership of a private WeChat group with Moselmane. Zhang has launched a Supreme Court challenge, maintaining that the accusations against him are an attack on the implied right to freedom of political communication in the Australian Constitution.

In September, it was belatedly revealed that, on the same day that Moselmane was raided, so were four journalists employed by Chinese state media in Australia. Their laptops and devices were taken, reportedly in order to seize Chinese consular correspondence, in violation of international diplomatic law. The journalists felt compelled to leave Australia, a fact that was not reported by the corporate media until the Australian embassy in Beijing advised two Australian journalists to leave China.

Under pressure from the Trump administration, the Morrison government has ramped up its provocations against China, including by joining the US and Japan in sending warships close to Chinese-occupied islets in the South China Sea. But the Duong arrest is another signal that Washington is demanding much more, and wants to silence anyone, including within the Coalition and Labor parties, who is not unconditionally committed to taking a frontline role in the US preparations for a war against China. Regardless of whether Donald Trump or Joe Biden is in the White House, this US “interference” will only intensify.

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