

*Empowering Media and
Voices for Public Good*

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MONITOR - WEST AFRICA

Quarter 3
July - September 2025

Published by:

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Executive Summary

As part of its initiatives to promote press freedom and freedom of expression in West Africa, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) monitors and reports the incidents of violations (threats and abuses) against media freedom, civic expression, and civil liberties as evidence for advocacy and redress.

This report provides an overview of the press freedom and freedom of expression situation in the region for the third quarter of 2025 (July-September). The right to expression (including activism and protests) and media freedom in particular, continue to be under attack across the region marked by repression and widespread violations, even in countries considered to beacons of democracy. Ghana, in the period under review for instance, recorded eight violations alongside Nigeria. In the Sahelian country of Mali, attacks against media actors and activists persist. While it may seem a positive development that no freedom of expression violation was recorded in Burkina Faso, the situation does not necessarily mean that freedom of expression is genuinely respected. Rather it portends the deep-rooted climate of fear that discourages and silences dissenting and critical voices, further shrinking the civic space for expression and activism.

Overall, the leading incidents of violations recorded across the region were arrests and detentions, even though there were also physical assaults, threats, and suspensions of media outlets and the shutdown of an online platform. Journalists, news media organisations, dissidents, and activists were the main victims while state actors particularly, security agencies and state/public officials, emerged the main perpetrators of violations and abuses. In most cases these violations were meant to gag critical voices and control public discourse. The involvement of state actors in such abuses also signal the systemic nature of the repression in many countries across the region, where journalists, activists and critical voices are treated as adversaries.

Meanwhile, the monitoring cited the release of some detained journalists and activists. In particular, nine of the violations cited during the quarter under review (July-September 2025) and two cited in the previous year 2024 were redressed. This included the long-awaited release in September 2025 of Burkinabè journalists Adama Bayala and Alain Traore, who were abducted in June 28, 2024 and July 13, 2024 respectively.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations to relevant stakeholders, such as governments, state security agencies, news media organisations as well as ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. The report urges these stakeholders to create, expand and sustain an enabling environment for journalists, media organisations, activists, dissidents, environmentalists, and other civic actors to operate and express themselves without fear of reprisal.

Freedom of expression is a key prerequisite for a healthy democracy. It is an enabling right of all persons, including activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and citizens to hold and express opinion without fear of censorship or punishment. It fosters transparency and accountability in governance, enabling the public to scrutinise and hold power to account.

In recognition of the importance of this right, nearly every country in West Africa has enshrined it in national constitutions and ratified major international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These legal frameworks guarantee core civil liberties such as freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and access to information. They also serve as a solid foundation for a critical and vibrant media ecosystem.

Despite these formal commitments, the practical enjoyment of these rights remains fragile, especially during periods of national tension, such as elections and protests; and also in less democratic contexts. In a number of West African countries, journalists, activists and dissenting voices are attacked and repressed through intimidation, arbitrary arrests, exile, or excessive use of force against protesters. In extreme instances, journalists, activists and dissenting voices suffer deaths and unresolved cases of abductions and disappearances.

Between July and September 2025, for instance, widespread violations against journalists, activists and dissenting voices were cited in 13 out of the 16 countries in the region. The incidents ranged from multiple cases of arbitrary arrests and pretrial detentions to physical assaults, suspension of media outlets and sentencing of journalists and activists.

As a pushback mechanism against the incessant repression in the region, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) continuously monitors, documents and publishes incidents of violations of freedom of expression and other developments that impact FOE in the region. The organisation regularly publishes alerts, statements, and analytical reports to inform stakeholders and support advocacy, litigation, and policy interventions at both national and regional levels for accountability and reform.

This report, covering the third-quarter of 2025 (July–September), presents findings from MFWA's monitoring of freedom of expression, including environmental activism, across West Africa. The report, also known as the Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor), outlines the methodology used, the violations recorded, analyses of the trends and highlights of reparations or remedial actions in the period under review. Recommendations are also made to improve the overall environment for free expression, activism and media development in the region.

Introduction



This Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor) is compiled using data gathered from the MFWA's daily monitoring of freedom of expression across West Africa. The monitoring process is conducted by the organisation's country-based monitors, correspondents and selected staff, and complemented by reports from its national partner organisations in the various countries in the region.

To ensure a comprehensive and reliable dataset, the monitoring draws from multiple sources. These include firsthand reports from MFWA's national correspondents and monitors; verified media accounts and reports from MFWA's national partners; and information shared by local and international human rights organisations working in the region. When validated, the daily reported incidents are published as Alerts to draw attention to the issues identified for remedial action on an as-and-when basis. The Alerts provide detailed and timely documentation of violations, including information on the nature of the incident, identity of the victims and perpetrators, and any follow-up or redress actions taken or needed.

The Monitor also highlights other significant developments that affect media freedom and civic space in the region, including legal reforms, court rulings, policy interventions, or advocacy actions recorded in the region during the period of the report. The Monitor serves as an advocacy tool for the promotion of free speech, defence of civil liberties and the protection of media and freedom of expression rights (offline & online). It is further intended to inform efforts by actors (civil society, policymakers, international bodies, academics, etc.) that are aimed at creating a more open, free and safe environment for expression and activism to foster good governance in West Africa.

This edition of the Monitor shares the findings of the daily monitoring undertaken during the third quarter of 2025 (July-September 2025). It proffers a set of recommendations towards addressing the violations reported and improving the freedom of expression situation in the region.

Findings

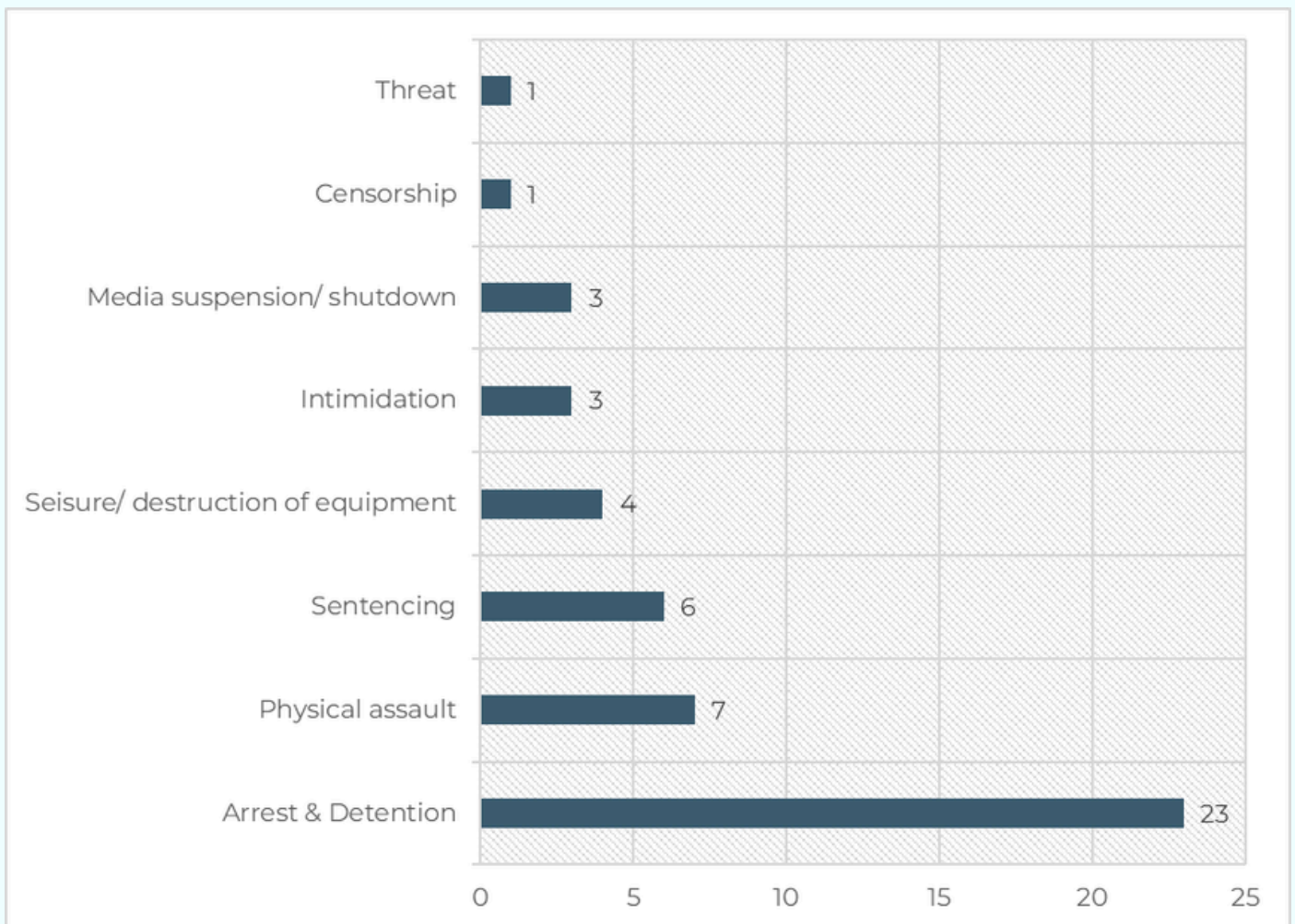


The findings of the monitoring of freedom of expression (FOE) situation in West Africa (including environmental activism and expression through protests) over the third quarter of 2025 are reported below. The report highlights incidents of FOE violations recorded during the quarter, offering insights into the frequency and nature of these occurrences. It further examines the specific countries where these violations took place, along with a breakdown of the incidents reported in each country. It also identifies the perpetrators of the abuses recorded and sheds light on the actors responsible for suppressing expression. The targets and victims of the violations reported for the quarter are also highlighted as well as redress actions and some significant developments that happened during the quarter.

Incidents of FOE Violations

During the period under review (July – September 2025), a total of 48 incidents of FOE violations were recorded. The 48 incidents consisted of eight categories of FOE violations. Arrests and detentions were the most common violations cited, accounting for 23 cases. The frequency of incidents cited under each of the eight categories is presented below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Frequency and category of violations recorded

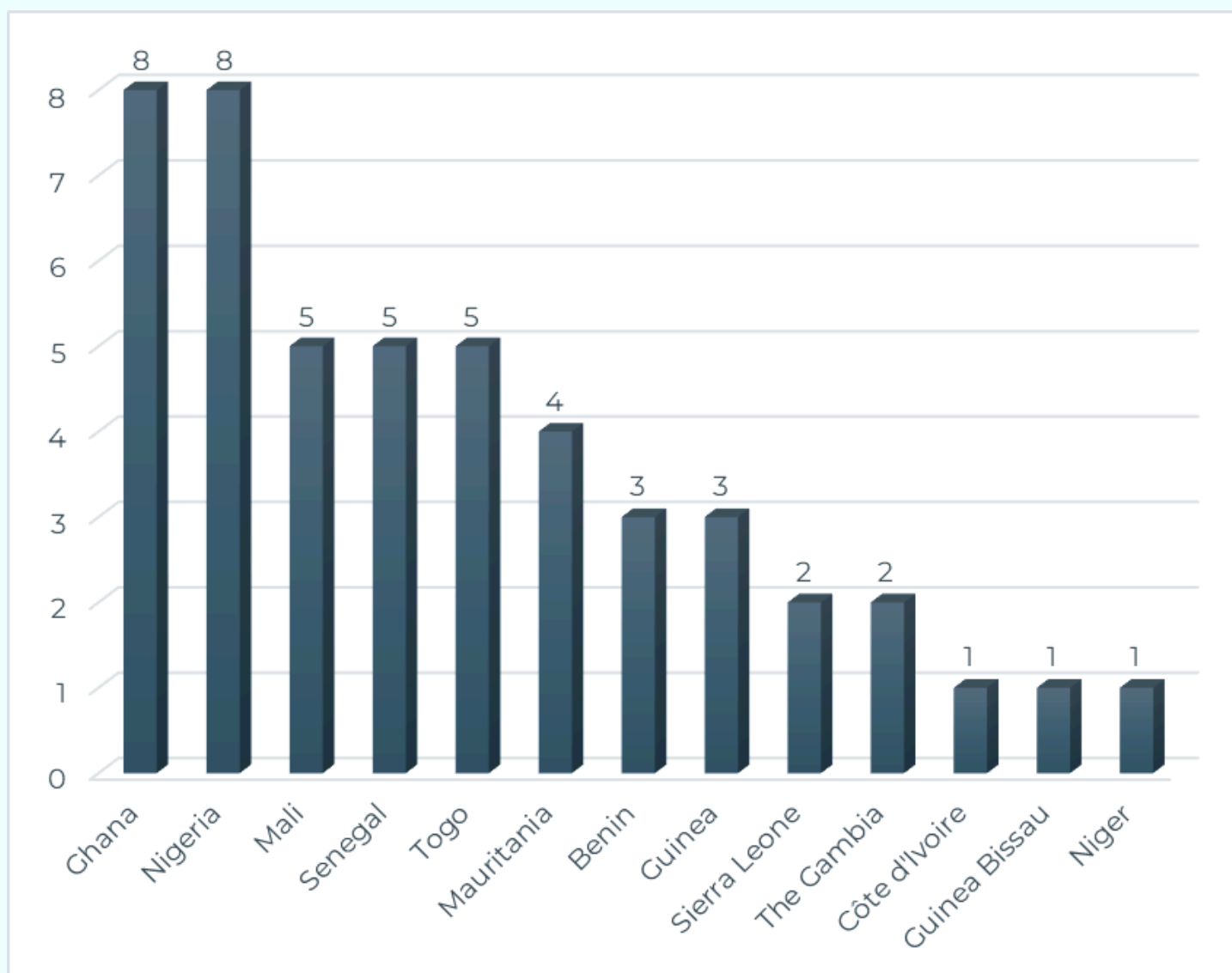


A summary narrative of all recorded violations in the course of the third quarter of 2025 is available [here](#). It must, however, be noted that an incident could consist of more than one violation and/or category of violation.

Countries and Incidents of FOE Violations

The 48 FOE violations were recorded in 13 countries. Ghana and Nigeria recorded more cases of violations with eight incidents each. Mali and Senegal followed with five incidents each. In Figure 2 below, the frequency of violations recorded in each of the 13 countries is presented.

Figure 2: Countries and Incidents of FOE Violations



Perpetrators of FOE Violations

The 48 FOE violations recorded over the three months period were carried out by four categories of perpetrators. Security agents accounted for 29 of the violations. The other individuals and institutions who carried out the remaining 19 violations were: State/Public Officials (9); Courts (6) and other individuals (4). Table 1 below presents a disaggregation of the violations carried out by the four categories of perpetrators as cited in the respective countries.

Table 1: Countries and Perpetrators of FOE Violations

Country	Type of Perpetrator			
	Security Agent	State/ Public Official	Court	Individual
Ghana	4	2		2
Nigeria	5	3		
Mali	2		3	
Senegal	2		3	
Togo	5			
Mauritania	3	1		
Benin	2	1		
Guinea	2			1
Sierra Leone	1			1
The Gambia	2			
Côte d'Ivoire	1			
Guinea Bissau		1		
Niger		1		
Total	29	9	6	4

Targets/Victims of Violations

A total of 33 journalists; 22 activists, 6 media outlets, one media worker and an individual directedly suffered the 48 violations recorded during the third quarter of 2025, bringing the number of victims to 63.

Table 2 below presents a breakdown of the number of victims of the violations recorded and the respective countries.

Table 2: Targets of Violations Suffered Per Country

Country	Victims of FOE Violations recorded				
	Journalists	Activists	Media Outlets	Individual	Other Media Worker
Chana	7		1	1	1
Nigeria	4	2	1		
Mali	4	2			
Senegal	5	1			
Togo		11			
Mauritania	3	1	1		
Benin	3				
Guinea	2				
Sierra Leone	2				
The Gambia	2	4			
Côte d'Ivoire		1			
Guinea Bissau			3		
Niger	1				
Total	33	22	6	1	1

Redress for FOE Violations

The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists underscores the crucial role of preventive measures in ensuring journalists' protection. Equally important is the seriousness with which state authorities respond to violations of freedom of expression (FOE), as it reflects their genuine commitment to defending press freedom and the right to free expression. Unfortunately, FOE violations often remain unaddressed, with minimal or no accountability or reparations provided to victims. During the period under review, for instance, only nine out of the 48 FOE violations captured in this report received some form of redress. In addition, two violations cited in 2024 were also resolved. Below are excerpts of the redress actions cited.

A Malian journalist and activist, El Bachir Thiam, who was kidnapped on May 8, 2025, in Kati-Koko near Bamako, was released on September 26, 2025 after more than four months in secret detention. Known for his work with MaliActu and his civic activism, Thiam’s disappearance, reportedly linked to Malian security forces, provoked national and international outrage, with his family, UN experts, and rights groups demanding his release. His ordeal highlights the worsening repression in Mali, where the transitional authorities have dissolved political parties, silenced the media, and arbitrarily detained critics, deepening fears over shrinking civic space and eroding democratic freedoms.

Mauritanian environmental activist and blogger, Ali Ould Bakkar was released unconditionally on September 18, 2025, after spending two months in detention. He was arrested by the gendarmerie on July 22, 2025 for allegedly spreading false information harmful to the state. His arrest stemmed from reports he published about illegal fishing by Turkish vessels in Mauritanian waters—claims authorities dismissed as baseless.



On July 25, 2025, the Kwara State Magistrate Court, Nigeria granted bail to journalist Buhari Ahmed Olanrewaju and activist Saidu Musa Tsaragi, who had been detained since July 10, 2025 on defamation and cyberstalking charges filed by Abubakar Sadiq Buhari, the Governor’s Special Adviser. Their arrest came a day after thugs, allegedly backed by senior state officials and police, violently dispersed a protest against insecurity.

The Kanifing High Court granted bailed to four anti-corruption activists. Omar Saibo Camara, Public Relations Officer of the civil society organisation combatting corruption “Gambians Against Looted Assets” (GALA) alongside three GALA member; Kemo Fatty, Alieu Bah and Mamadou Camara, were arrested on September 15, outside the National Audit Office for “unlawful assembly”. Their protest was meant to express their discontent regarding the deployment of police forces to forcibly remove Auditor General Momodou Ceesay after the latter rejected his appointment as Minister of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment. The four activists were bailed in the sum of D50,000 (USD 680).

A police officer who assaulted a journalist during a parliamentary election re-run at Ablekuma North, a constituency in Ghana's capital, Accra, was withdrawn from the ongoing election duty. The officer was also interdicted and referred to the Police Professional Standards Bureau (PPSB) for investigation.

Togolese artist and activist known as Aamron (actual name Tchala Essowè Narcisse) was released under judicial supervision two days after his arrest (September 20, 2025) with his passport confiscated as a condition for his release.

Malian blogger and photographer Alhousseiny Traoré, arrested on September 12, 2025, in Timbuktu after posting a Facebook message denouncing corruption and negligence in the surgical department of the Timbuktu Regional Hospital, was released on September 15.

Two of the Malian journalists initially charged for defamation, following their social media posts about an alleged altercation involving a magistrate and a public prosecutor, were acquitted by the Bamako court.

The reporting period also recorded the release of two Burkinabé journalists who went missing in 2024. Journalists Adama Bayala and Alain Traoré ("Alain Alain") were released on September 16, 2025, after going missing for over a year under unexplained circumstances. Bayala, a commentator for BFI, disappeared on June 28, 2024, and Traoré, host of Le Défouloir on Radio Oméga, was abducted by men who claimed to be agents of the National Intelligence Agency two weeks after Bayala's disappearance. Their disappearances occurred amid a wave of abductions and arrests targeting journalists, including that of Serge Atiana Oulon, publisher of L'Événement, who remains detained without charge. Authorities have remained silent about the reasons for the abductions, conditions of the detention, and the circumstances of their release, fueling ongoing concerns about press freedom and human rights situation in the country.

Other FOE Developments

Apart from the specific incidents of violations against FOE rights reported above, other significant developments that took place during the third quarter of 2025 that have a bearing on the FOE and media development space in West Africa are highlighted in this section. The presentation of such issues in the report ensures that a more holistic situation in the region is presented.

In Ghana, an emerging issue observed through our monitoring is the increasing abuse of social media platforms for reprehensible expressions. Three people were arrested for using live TikTok sessions to make death threats and other condemnable remarks. In particular, the Ghana Police Service, on September 13, 2025 announced the arrest of popular TikToker David Kwodwo Prah Afful, known as Kwame Nkrumah the Second, for making death threats against some

government officials, and civil servants during a TikTok live session. In court, Afful pleaded guilty to charges of threatening death and offensive conduct, and was handed a seven-month prison sentence. A month earlier, content creators, Prince Ofori and Yayra Abiwu, were also arrested for similar threats during a live TikTok session.

The other two noteworthy incidents recorded in the quarter under review were the pursuit of justice through legal redress by the Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL) and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and a Nigerian journalist, Ayomide Eweje, of BONews. The WIMSAL and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights filed a case before the ECOWAS Court of Justice on behalf of journalist Umu Thoronka challenging her July 2024 dismissal from the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). Thoronka was dismissed from the SLBC after posting a TikTok video in which a woman was being humiliated for questioning President Julius Maada Bio. Thoronka alleges that her firing was retaliation for years of gender-based harassment and discrimination at SLBC, where she was repeatedly denied a contract after rejecting sexual advances from senior staff. Following her dismissal, she faced threats and online abuse that forced her into exile.

In the Nigerian case, journalist Ayomide Eweje of BONews sued Ikorodu General Hospital and its Medical Director for unlawfully refusing to release information about the death of Pelumi Onifade, a 20-year-old intern reporter killed during the 2020 #EndSARS protests. After filing a Freedom of Information request on July 31, 2025, seeking documents on the handling of Onifade's remains, the hospital failed to respond or justify its denial, violating the FOI Act 2011. The lawsuit follows a Lagos coroner's order on August 8[DM1] , 2025, for the hospital to release the same documents and seeks a judicial review affirming Eweje's legal right to access public information and declaring the hospital's non-compliance unlawful. [DM1]2025?

Under unclear circumstances, Burkinabè activist, Alain Christophe Traoré, widely known as Alino Faso, was found dead in an Ivorian civil prison. Alino Faso was arrested in Côte d'Ivoire on January 10, 2025 and held at the Agboville civil prison. On July 24, 2025, he was found dead in his cell. According to media reports, the Ivorian authorities alleged that he hanged himself. His family is, however, questioning the official account from the Ivorian authorities and has filed a complaint, demanding judicial investigation into the matter.

On September 16, 2025, a campus protest at Tamale Technical University in Ghana left three students and three police officers injured. The demonstration, organised by Graduate Students' Association of Ghana (GRASAG) and the Students Representative C[DM1] ouncil (SRC), raised grievances over student welfare, mismanagement of funds, unjustified fee hikes, and withheld certificates. What began peacefully escalated when police fired warning shots, tear gas, and hot water after students allegedly became hostile. The incident underscores ongoing concerns about heavy-handed policing and the challenge of balancing public order with the right to peaceful assembly.

Conclusion



The findings from the three months (July to September 2025) monitoring of the freedom of expression situation in West Africa point to a worrying and sustained contraction of the civic space across the region. This trend is underscored by the widespread nature of violations, with 13 of the 16 countries in the region recording at least one freedom of expression (FOE) incident. Notably, state security agents remain the leading perpetrators, accounting for 54% of all recorded violations during the quarter. This persistent pattern suggests that restrictions on expression—including activism and protest—are not incidental, but increasingly systemic.

Compounding this concern is the limited accountability for such violations, which continues to entrench a culture of impunity. This environment fosters ongoing harassment, arbitrary arrests, physical assaults, and self-censorship among citizens and media actors.

Of the 48 FOE violations documented during the period, only nine resulted in partial or full redress, including the release of some detained journalists and activists. However, these responses were largely reactive and do not reflect a consistent or institutional commitment to protecting rights. In several cases, redress remains incomplete; for example, some of the released victims, including Togolese artist and activist Aamron, remain under legal restrictions and/or surveillance.

Without stronger safeguards, accountability structures, and political commitment to democratic freedoms, FOE violations are likely to persist. Thus, journalists and activists will continue to operate in an environment characterized by pressure, harassment, and the risk of retaliation, particularly when exposing bad governance, environmental degradation, state violence, or abuses of power unless coordinated action is taken to reverse the trend. The following recommendations are, thus, made to improve the FOE environment in the region.

Recommendations

Without urgent corrective measures, the cycle of repression risks deepening self-censorship, eroding democratic norms, and ultimately undermining regional stability. In consideration of the findings in this report, therefore, the MFWA makes the following recommendations for the improvement of the freedom of expression environment in the region.

To Governments in West Africa

- Uphold constitutional and international commitments to press freedom and freedom of expression.
- Direct state security agents to end arbitrary arrests, detentions, and attacks against activists and media professionals; and hold perpetrators accountable.
- Provide specialised training workshops for law enforcement officers on press freedom and human rights.
- Ensure the independence of media regulatory bodies and prevent conflict of interest and politically motivated sanctions against media outlets.

To State Security Agencies

- Respect the right to freedom of expression as enshrined in the respective constitutions in the respective countries.
- Exercise professionalism at all times when managing protests and dealing with journalists and other activists.
- Investigate and prosecute security officers responsible for attacks and unlawful arrests of activists and journalists.

To ECOWAS

- Encourage Member States to uphold their commitments under Article 66 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty, which requires them to “ensure respect for the rights of journalists.”
- Help address impunity regarding FOE violations by engaging and demanding accountability from Member States that repeatedly violate statutory obligations to protect press freedom, freedom of expression and democratic norms in their countries.

To the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa at the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR)

- Increase diplomatic pressure on governments, to uphold press freedom, FOE and human rights commitments
- Undertake missions to countries often cited for freedom of expression violations to engage authorities about the violations and the need to end impunity.


To Media Organisations and Journalists

- Uphold the highest standards of professionalism.
 - Utilise all legal mechanisms available to secure justice for abused journalists and other media workers.
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