Media Foundation for West Africa

Empowering Media and Voices for Public Good

Freedom of Expression Situation in West Africa

December 2025 Overview

The right to freedom of expression is often abused in West African countries. Even though there are constitutional guarantees backing this right, expression (including activism and protests) is often attacked with the aim of cowing people into silence. In December 2025, however, the freedom of expression environment in the region was relatively better as attacks against expression were significantly less compared to the frequency of attacks recorded in preceding months. The relatively reduced incidents, however, did not minimise the impact on the freedom of expression landscape in the region.

Two incidents of freedom of expression violations were documented in December 2025, one in Nigeria, and the other in Senegal. The Nigerian incident involved the unfortunate arrest and detention of the wife and the nine-month-old baby of an investigative journalist as a manipulative strategy to apprehend her husband, Sodeeq Atanda, the journalist.

Adenike Atanda, wife of Sodeeq Atanda and her nine-month-old baby were arrested and detained for several hours by Nigerian police officers in Ikorodu, Lagos. The police used the detention to coerce Atanda's wife to call him and claim that their baby was ill. After delivering the false news to her husband, the police drove her and the baby to a street close to their home and released them after Atanda was arrested. Atanda's arrest in December was the second in 2025. He was first arrested in September following a petition by the Vice Chancellor of the Federal University Oye-Ekiti who had been cited for sexual misconduct in an investigative report by Atanda.

A similar case was recorded in Guinea in September 2025 where the father of exiled investigative journalist and activist, Mamoudou Babila Keita, was abducted as a 'bait' to get hold of Keita. Fortunately, Keita was not arrested. In a related incident, a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Sery, close associates of Ivorian activist, Pulchérie Édith Gbalet, were arrested and their residence ransacked in an attempt to reach Gbalet.

Although these are isolated incidents in three different countries, it may be an emerging trend that need to be pushed back forcefully before it becomes another weapon of suppression of expression. Beyond the fact that it may be an emerging trend, it is highly condemnable and unlawful for family members and associates to be harassed and used as baits in an attempt to reach targets and ultimately to silence dissent.

The other FOE violation recorded in December 2025 was cited in Senegal. It involved the detention, prosecution and sentencing of a journalist, Pape Sané of Walf TV. On December 10, 2025, Sané was sentenced to three months' suspended imprisonment and fined 250,000 CFA francs (about USD 450) for allegedly spreading false news, undermining military honour, and disturbing public order. The conviction stemmed from comments he made on the television programme Balance, in which he alleged that Sanna Manjang, a former member of the Junglers, a paramilitary unit under former Gambian President Yahya Jammeh accused of serious human rights violations, had been questioned by Senegalese security services over alleged political links with the President of Senegal. Sané was released following the court's verdict.

The Pape Sané case also exposes a growing trend of criminalisation of journalistic expression in Senegal, particularly in 2025. A total of six journalists have faced the law for comments and posts made offline and online respectively (Abdou Nguer, Bachir Fofana, Badara Gadiaga, Doudou Coulibaly, Soya Diagne, Papa Sane). In a related incident, the managing editor of Sen TV and Zik FM, Simon Faye, was on April 10, 2025, summoned by the Senegalese Criminal Investigations Division (DIC) and subsequently taken into custody on the charge of "disseminating false news" following an article published by a different media outlet that was shared on the social media handle of Zik FM. In addition to the journalists, a Former MP, Moustapha Diakhate, was also sentenced to two-month imprisonment for his comments about perceived informal conduct of President

Bassirou Diomaye Faye, Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko, and the President of the National Assembly at a state function.

In addition to the above concerning violations and emerging patterns, two other developments were observed in December that could have some implications for expression in the countries concerned. The transitional government in Niger adopted a draft executive order to reorganise and realign the country's resources to safeguard national security. The decision was taken during a Council of Ministers meeting chaired by transitional President, Abdourahmane Tiani. The intervention is aimed at realigning the countries resources, including people, goods and services to protect and preserve national interests and sovereignty, and to mitigate both internal and external threats. The measure is also intended to manage information flow around the planned interventions. There are, however, concerns that the broad provisions, particularly on information management and control, could threaten civil liberties and freedom of expression.

The other development took place in Senegal where students' protest to express concern about unpaid scholarships ended up in injuries and arrests. Students from two universities, Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) and Gaston-Berger University (UGB) staged protests from late November 2025 over delays in scholarship payments, which they claimed had been outstanding for close to 13 months. Tensions escalated on December 2 after university authorities called for police intervention on campus. This led to violent clashes involving the use of tear gas, stone-throwing, and barricades, leaving at least 16 students injured as well as four to eleven police officers. The clash also resulted in the arrest of ten students. The incident calls into question the handling of protests by authorities and security officers. If such situations are not well managed and perpetrators called to book, it may instill some fear and apprehension in students expressing their concerns through protest thereby suppressing student expression on campuses.

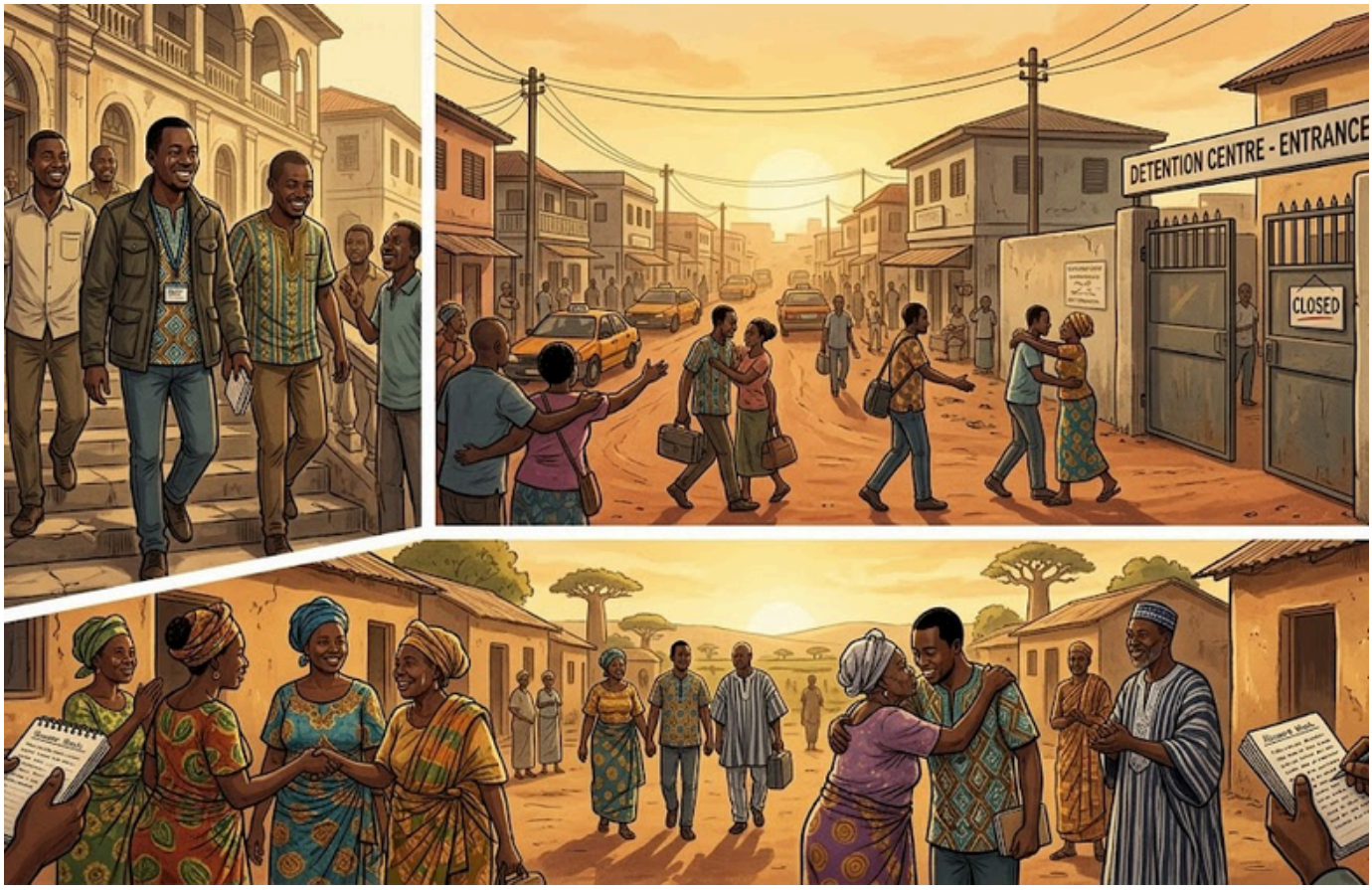
While the violations reported and the developments observed negatively impact the freedom of expression space in the respective countries and the region at last, reparation and justice for violations bolster confidence for expression and ensures an engaging civic space. In December 2025, five remedial actions were recorded.

Notably, a group of Mauritanian activists arrested on November 28, 2025 during a peaceful demonstration marking the 35th anniversary of the Inal massacre was released on Tuesday, December 2. Although those protestors were released, six activists were summoned before the court. The judge ordered the women to be released on bail while the men were placed under judicial supervision, restricting them from leaving Nouakchott and remain subject to court-imposed conditions pending further proceedings.

In Nigeria, Friday James Alefia, publisher of the online outlet Naija News Today (formerly Asiwaju Media), was released after 87 days in detention for his publication of investigative reports that examined allegations of land-grabbing, extortion, and intimidation involving Chinedu Ogah, a member of Nigeria's House of Representatives. Alefia was charged alongside his media outlet with five counts of publishing "false" statements on a website and social media, including Facebook, under Sections 24 and 27 of Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act 2015. Although he was granted bail by the Federal High Court in Abuja in November 2025, he remained in police custody until December 19, 2025 when he was able to meet the stringent bail conditions.

Senegal's media industry welcomed a landmark ruling by the country's Supreme Court that reversed ministerial orders that had led to the suspension of more than half of the media outlets in the country. On December 11, 2025, Senegal's Supreme Court annulled two ministerial orders by the Minister of Communication that had required media outlets to register on a new digital platform to gain media enterprise status recognition. The orders, issued in 2024, led to the suspension of 381 media outlets. The Court ruled that the Minister had exceeded his authority, as recognition of media enterprise status is already governed by the Press Code and cannot be subjected to additional procedures. Consequently, the registration platform, the commission in charge, and all sanctions against unregistered outlets were declared unlawful.

Also in Senegal, Badara Gadiaga, a columnist for the television channel Télé Futurs Médias (TFM) was released on December 12, 2025. Gadiaga was arrested on July 9, 2025 following remarks he made against Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko during the televised program Jakaarlo that was aired on July 4, 2025.



In Togo, the President of the Council of Ministers, Faure Gnassingbe, during his State of the Nation address on December 3, 2025, announced presidential clemency for 1,151 detainees and prisoners. The announcement was subsequently backed by a decree adopted by the Council of Ministers on December 30, 2025. Nine activists and dissidents who had been detained/imprisoned at different times for their expression are set to be released as a result of the presidential pardon. However, other critical voices such as former Minister Essissomna Marguerite Gnakadé remain in detention.

Although the five remedial actions recorded in the month under review are commendable and urgently needed, more sustained and systemic efforts aimed at expanding the frontiers of expression and punishing perpetrators of violations against the right to freedom of expression will make the civic space in West Africa freer, safer and engaging across the region. Governments, media regulators, media owners and manager, and journalists and other media workers must each play their part to make this possible.

This report is compiled by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) as part of efforts to promote the respect of the right to expression (including activism and protests); defend victims of expression violations; obtain redress for violations committed; and ultimately contribute to keeping civic spaces in West Africa open and safe. The MFWA conducts daily monitoring and documents actions and inactions that discourage journalists and activists from speaking, reporting or denouncing mismanagement of state resources, including the environment. This monthly monitoring report is made possible with funding support by the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation .

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