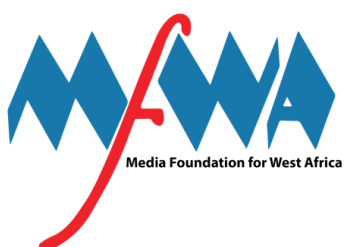


POLICY PAPER

Protecting Press Freedom and Supporting West African Journalists in Exile



*Empowering Media and
Voices for Public Good*

Table of Content

Executive Summary	I
1. Introduction	1
2. Background and Context	2
3. The Lived Realities of Exiled Journalists	3
4. Legal and Institutional Gaps	4
5. Implications for Democracy and Governance	5
6. Conclusion and Recommendations	7

Executive Summary

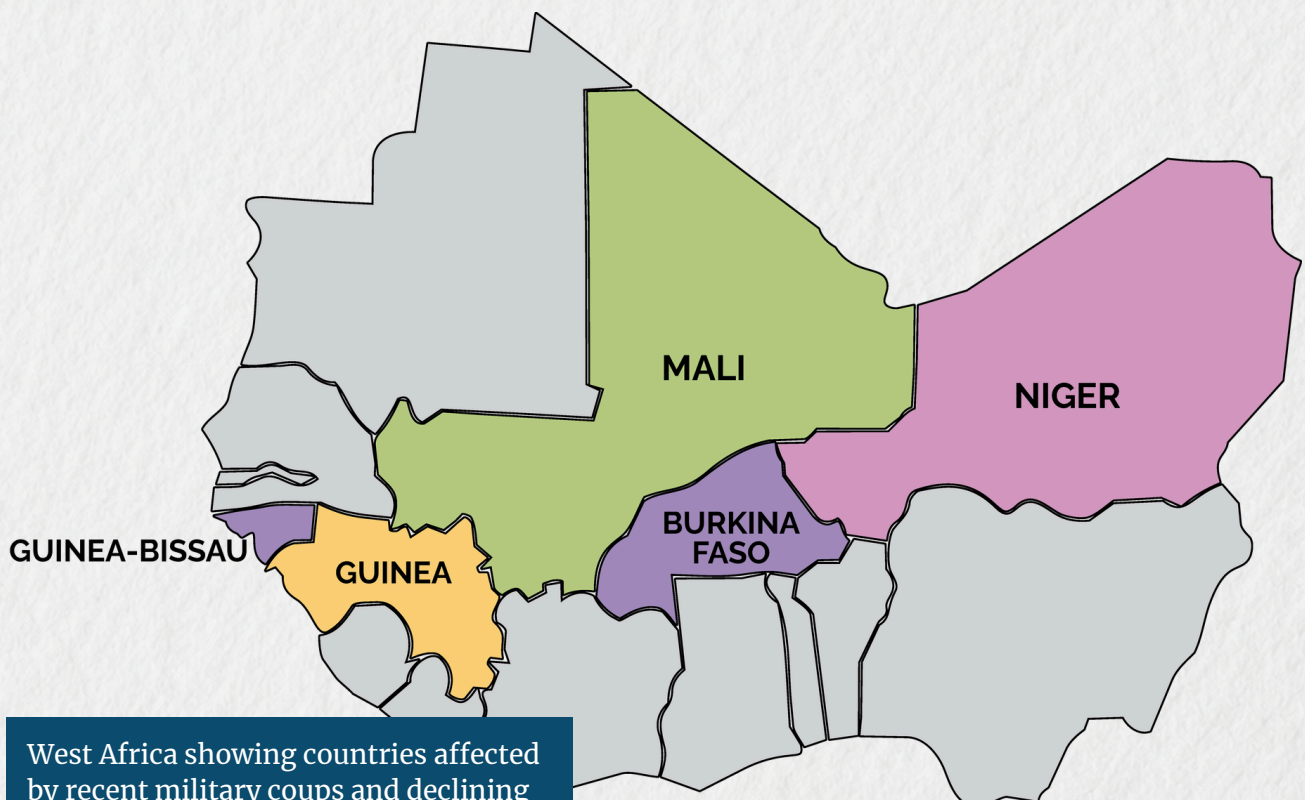
West Africa is undergoing a period of democratic regression driven by military coups in countries like Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea-Bissau. This has led to an increased repression of press freedom, freedom of expression, accountability journalism, and attacks on journalists. As a result, a growing number of journalists have fled from their countries of origin, causing them to operate in exile.

This policy paper examines the drivers and consequences of journalists in exile. It also highlights insights from a webinar convened by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) in March 2026, titled “Voices from Exile”. The paper concludes with a proposal of actionable recommendations to safeguard press freedom, democratic governance, and the safety of journalists.

1. Introduction

In recent years, democratic governance in West Africa has deteriorated sharply. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau have witnessed military takeovers. This is accompanied by systematic violations of press freedom, freedom of expression, and attacks on journalists. These developments have forced dissent voices, including those of journalists, media practitioners, and civil society actors, into hiding.

While military regimes play a central role in driving repression, non-state actors, such as political and economic elites, also contribute to the silencing of investigative journalism. The result is a growing population of exiled journalists operating under precarious conditions, often without legal protection and/or sustainable livelihoods.



West Africa showing countries affected by recent military coups and declining democratic governance, contributing to increased restrictions on press freedom.

2. Background and Context



On 27 February, 2026, the MFWA, under its project: *Mobilising Stakeholders and Action for Enhancing Freedom of Expression and Democratic Values in West Africa*, hosted a webinar with the title “*Voices from Exile.*” It convened exiled journalists, legal experts, and civil society actors. The webinar was funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). It sought to:

- Examine the state of press freedom in West Africa
- Share the lived experiences of exiled journalists
- Identify legal and institutional responses to the crisis
- Proffer recommendations

The discussions underscored a worsening security environment for journalists, particularly in the Sahel, and highlighted the broader implications for democratic governance and accountability.

3. The Lived Realities of Exiled Journalists

Fundamentally, exile transforms the family, social, psychological, and professional lives of those affected. In West Africa, journalists in exile have experienced complex and harsh conditions, shaped by political repression, insecurity, and weak support systems. The experiences go beyond “leaving home” to finding a “safe-haven”. For many journalists and activists, exile is a last resort after all options are exhausted. As one journalist noted during the webinar: exile *“is not a choice, but a survival measure.”*

In exile, journalists face numerous challenges: from a lack of legal recognition or refugee status, to expired or invalid identity documents. They are also unable to access financial systems, support, or receive income. This is coupled with limited employment opportunities in foreign countries. These challenges add to the psychological, social, and emotional stress and trauma journalists face. According to one victim, “you are forced to *‘improvise a life’* under unstable and uncertain conditions.”

Journalists also face threats from cross-border surveillance and intimidation. Their families become targets for harassment and arbitrary detention. These dynamics extend repression beyond national borders, creating a transnational threat environment for victims.

4. Legal and Institutional Gaps

Although there are several legal and institutional frameworks to support journalists and other activists in exile, they are either unaware of their existence or do not understand their operations or even how to navigate them. For instance, the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protect citizens/victims, including journalists. Unfortunately, a lot of journalists, especially those in exile, do not know their existence. Others who may be aware of these instruments do not know how to evoke them to their advantage to secure protection and rebuild their lives when they are in exile.

Another challenging experience is the inability of victims to leverage regional institutions. The ECOWAS Court of Justice offers potential avenues for redress. But it is rarely accessed. The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights remains underutilised as well. Particularly, regarding cases involving indirect violations, such as press repression. While several organisations, such as the MFWA, support exiled journalists, they struggle to keep up with the growing demand. This results in slow response times, leaving many journalists in exile vulnerable for extended periods.

5. Implications for Democracy and Governance

Journalism is a cornerstone of democratic oversight, investigation, and the exposure of abuse of power. Whenever journalism is attacked, it affects the quality of democratic governance. For example, a repressive press freedom environment affects accountability journalism and the effective functioning of governance. Such posturing is noticeable in several countries in West Africa, especially Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea-Bissau, due to coups d'état.

Many journalists have been displaced in these countries. When journalists are displaced, it constrains public access to reliable information. It results in disruptions of the information ecosystems. Additionally, the capacity of journalists in exile to sustain in-country investigative reporting diminishes, particularly on pertinent national and politically sensitive issues. This weakens institutional accountability.

Again, when journalists are forced into exile and operate from abroad, their access to sources is significantly restricted. This limitation hampers investigations as they cannot fully obtain or verify critical information. They also

face diminished legal protection, along with constrained financial resources. Collectively, these challenges reduce their effectiveness, creating accountability gaps and weakening scrutiny, which in turn allows corruption, impunity, and maladministration to persist.

The systematic targeting of journalists, which forced them into exile, is also an indication of authoritarian governance, suppression of dissenting voices, and independent reporting. Such posturing normalises restrictions on press freedom and diminishes resistance to broader democratic backsliding.

The growing number of journalists in exile risks transforming it from an emergency response to repression into a normalised and enduring feature of the global media landscape. This shift has long-term implications for the sustainability of independent journalism. It also externalises the costs of repression and places the burden on journalists and host countries. Moreover, it risks deterring future generations from entering the profession, further weakening media ecosystems in affected countries.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Forced displacement of journalists is not solely a media issue. It represents a systemic threat to civic participation, institutional accountability, and democratic resilience. The experiences shared by the victims during the webinar highlight the deepening press freedom crisis in the region, particularly in the Sahel. It reiterates that journalists in exile are no longer an isolated phenomenon, but an existential threat to democratic governance. One that requires coordinated action by governments, regional institutions, civil society, and other international partners to reverse it. Below are some recommendations:

To member states, regional and global intergovernmental organisations:

- Strengthen protection mechanisms for journalists. For instance, governments must uphold constitutional and international commitments to press freedom.
- Government and international bodies are encouraged to provide accessible legal guidance on asylum and refugee processes to journalists
- Regional bodies, such as the ECOWAS and the African Union, are enjoined to establish rapid-response mechanisms for journalists at risk. These regional organisations must integrate press freedom concerns into the regional security and governance framework.

- The ECOWAS Court of Justice and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights are enjoined to render judgments on cases involving journalists whose rights have been violated.
- International human rights bodies must address cross-border repression.

Civil Society, Donors and Funding Organisations:

- Living in exile is expensive. Donors are enjoined to scale up funding for emergency assistance and long-term support. They are also encouraged to develop sustainable livelihood programmes for exiled journalists.
- MFWA should strengthen networks such as the West Africa Network of Activists and Media Defence Lawyers (WANAMDEL) to provide legal support to victims and at-risk journalists.
- Families of exiled journalists become targets. It is important to establish monitoring and advocacy mechanisms to prevent reprisals against relatives.
- Provide a safe space for victims to share and learn from each other
- Provide mental health and community support to journalists in exile.



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