

Freedom of Expression Situation in West Africa

February 2026 Overview

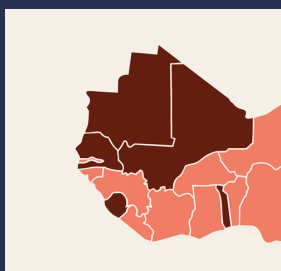


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Introduction

Freedom of expression and civic participation across West Africa remain under pressure in 2026. Over the past five years, this has been the stark reality, as the region has witnessed persistent violations of fundamental civic freedoms (both online and offline), with month-on-month fluctuations in violations. Sadly, restrictions on civic space are evident in both democratic and military-led countries and are characterised by attacks on journalists, restrictive laws, regulatory sanctions, selective enforcement of false publication laws, and increasing pressure on critical and dissenting voices.

The attacks on freedom of expression in West Africa spilt over into February 2026 with eleven (11) violations documented across five countries: Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Mauritania, and Mali. February witnessed a significant crackdown on civic and political expression as protests and rallies by students and opposition political parties were met with restrictive measures by governments and security agencies, curtailing the exercise of fundamental civic freedoms. Notable incidents included the arrests and detention of a flagbearer aspirant of Sierra Leone's

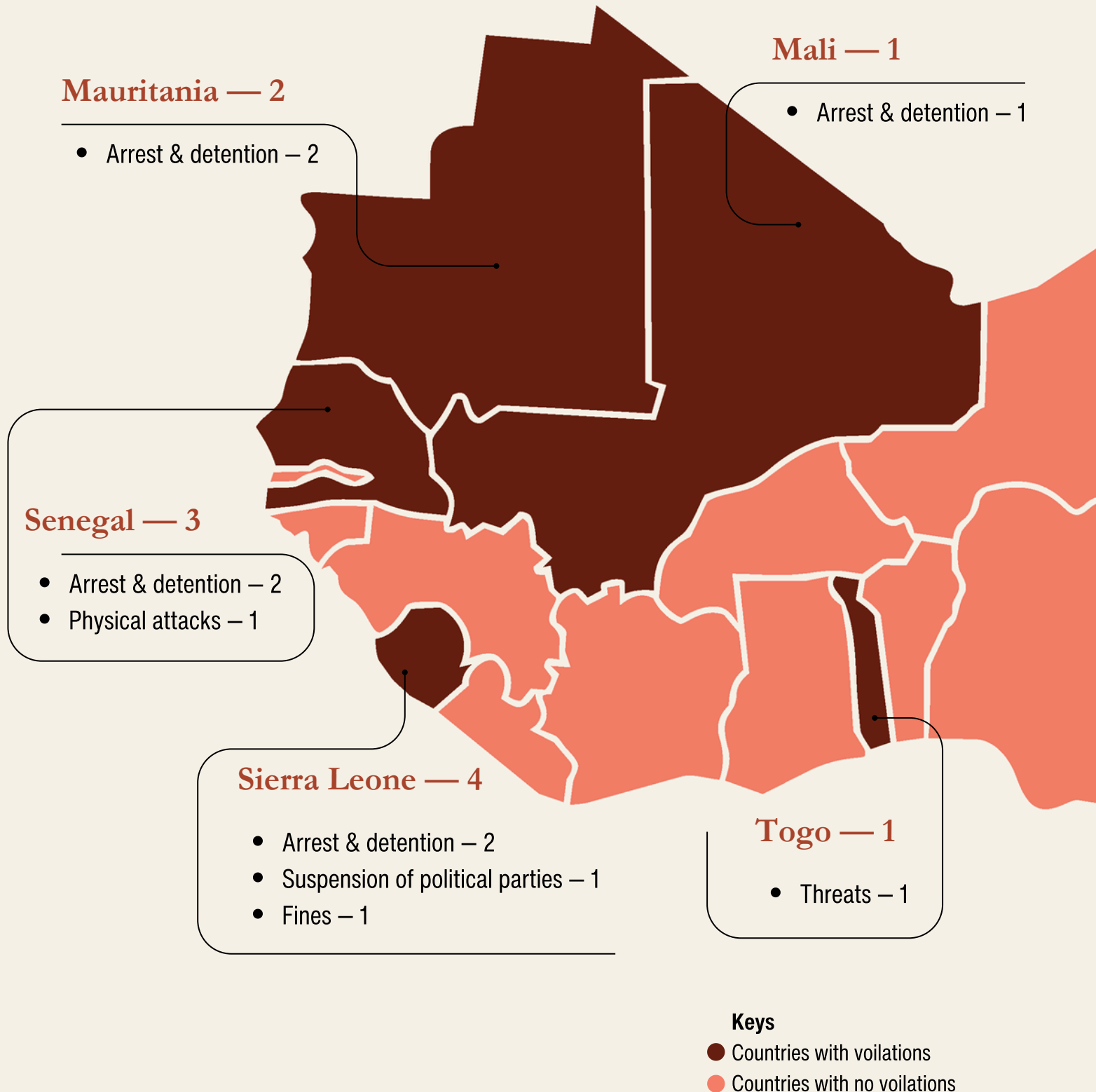


main opposition party, All Peoples Party (APC), Zainab Sheriff, and the arrest of editor in chief of the L'Alternance newspaper in Mali, Youssouf Sissoko; as well as threatening messages received by investigative journalist, Roger Amemavoh, in Togo after reporting on land and construction disputes in the Laté Kopé neighbourhood.

The documented cases of freedom of expression violations were a sharp increase over the frequency documented in the preceding month (10 violations recorded in January), with journalists, politicians, students, and media commentators facing fines, suspensions, arrests and detentions, and threats.

This February 2026 report is produced with support from the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation to draw attention to the freedom of expression situation in West Africa and seeks to draw attention to the freedom of expression situation in West Africa. The report is compiled from data gathered through daily monitoring of the freedom of expression environment in the 16 countries by MFWA's monitors, correspondents, and national partners.

The Numbers. The Perpetrators. The Trends



Country	Arrest & detention	Physical Attacks	Suspension of Political Parties	Fines	Threats	TOTAL
Sierra Leone	2		1	1		4
Senegal	2	1				3
Mauritania	2					2
Togo					1	1
Mali	1					1
Total	7	1	1	1	1	11

In February 2026, Sierra Leone topped the number of countries cited for freedom of expression violations, with four (4) documented incidents out of the 11 recorded. There were three (3) violations recorded in Senegal, two (2) in Mauritania, while Togo and Mali recorded one (1) violation each. These violations were mostly perpetrated by government authorities in Sierra Leone and the police in Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali. The victims of the freedom of expression violations recorded were a journalist, opposition political parties/figures, protesters, and students.



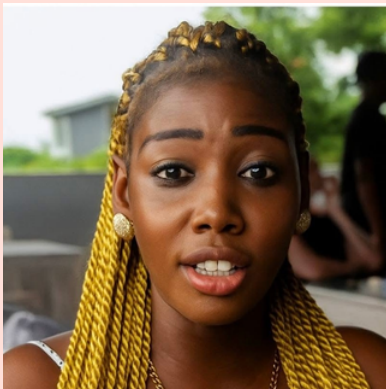
Country Cases

Sierra Leone: Where an opposition party rally triggered multiple FoE-related violations



Zainab Sheriff

APC flagbearer aspirant. The PPRC fined the APC over her comments; police declared her wanted (Feb 13) and arrested her (Feb 20) for alleging that election riggers commit treason and calling the president "a rigger."



Edwina Hawa Jamiru

Law student at Fourah Bay College. Detained for a week at the Cybercrime Unit, allegedly over her response to the First Lady's media interview; raised concerns about misuse of the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021.



The majority of violations recorded in Sierra Leone in February were linked to the National Mammoth rally held by the country's main opposition party, the All People's Congress (APC), on January 31, 2026. The gathering at the Atouga Stadium in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, even though intended for political mobilisation and discussion, turned out to be a catalyst for arrests and sanctions against party officials.

Consequently, on February 4, 2026, the National Secretary of APC, Lansana Dumbuya, was arrested and detained by the Sierra Leonean Police for reiterating the party's longstanding concerns about the conduct and outcome of the 2023 general elections, particularly the failure to publish disaggregated polling-station results. After a parliamentary walkout by APC lawyers, Dumbuya was released but subsequently charged with incitement and remanded on February 12, 2026, after the party missed a NLe 350,000 PPRC (US\$14,300) fine deadline.

Subsequent to this development, the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC) fined the APC NLe 350,000 (US\$14,300) over comments made by one of the party's aspiring flagbearers, Zainab Sheriff, and directed the party to pay the fine by February 10, 2026. When the party failed to make payment by the stipulated deadline, the PPRC proceeded to suspend the party, forcing the party to make payment the following day.

In a related development, the Sierra Leonean Police on February 13, 2026, declared Zainab Sheriff wanted. She was subsequently arrested on February 20, 2026, for alleging that anyone who rigs an election has stolen the people's vote and should be killed because such an act constitutes treason. She also alleged that the president "is a rigger." She was sent to Court on February 23, 2026, and has since been denied bail twice.

Sierra Leone also witnessed the arrest and detention of a law student at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Edwina Hawa Jamiru, at the Cybercrime Unit of the Criminal Investigation Department in Freetown. Her one-week detention is alleged to be in connection with her response to the First Lady of Sierra Leone's media interview. Although no formal charges have been disclosed, her detention has raised concerns over the misuse of the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021.

Given that political gatherings are a normal feature of democratic participation and are protected under the rights of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, multiple incidents of freedom of expression-related violations arising from a single opposition party event signal the height of government intolerance to criticism, dissent, or public mobilisation, further shrinking the space for political expression. The continuous denial of bail for the APC's aspiring flagbearer, Zainab Sheriff, may further deter women's political participation.



Lansana Dumbuya

APC National Secretary. Arrested Feb 4 for restating the party's concerns about the 2023 elections. Released after a parliamentary walkout, then charged with incitement and remanded Feb 12 after the party missed a fine deadline.



Umu Thoronka

Former SLBC journalist dismissed in July 2024 after a TikTok video about cost-of-living.

Senegal: Students protest escalates into clashes with police, triggering multiple violations



Modou Fall

Sen TV commentator. Arrested Feb 11 after accusing the government of blaming the opposition for the unrest. Charged with spreading false news; sentenced Feb 23 to six months (one to be served) plus a fine.



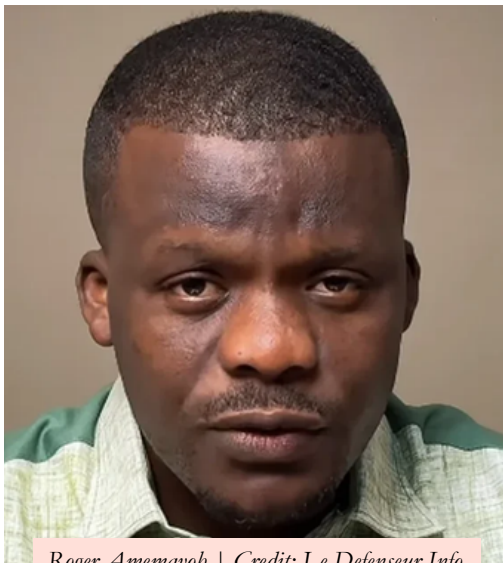
A brother of Abdoulaye Ba, a student who, according to other students, was killed at the Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) campus during protests over financial aid that turned violent, shows Abdoulaye's photo on his mobile phone at their house in Dakar, Senegal, February 12, 2026. REUTERS/Zobra Bensemra

The three violations recorded in Senegal were in connection with the protest by students of the Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) on the university campus in Dakar, over delayed financial aid/stipends. The protest, unfortunately, escalated into violent clashes between students and law enforcement officers. On February 9, 2026, Abdoulaye Ba, a second-year dental surgery student, subsequently died after sustaining multiple injuries from the confrontations.

Following his death, two media commentators were arrested and charged for disputing official comments on the unrest. Modou Fall, a commentator for Sen TV, was arrested and taken into custody on February 11, 2026, by the Dakar High Court after he accused the government of trying to blame the opposition for the unrest, adding that the government claims the opposition financed the protesters. He appeared before the criminal court on February 16, 2026, on charges of spreading false news. The prosecutor requested a six-month prison sentence, which the court granted. On February 23, 2026, Modou Fall received a six-month prison sentence, with one month to be served, and a fine of 200,000 CFA (USD 350).

Another Sen TV columnist, Abdou Nguer, was also taken into custody on February 17, 2026, after responding to a summons from the Colobane Investigation Office in Dakar. Abdou earlier contested a press release issued by Senegal's Ministry of Justice concerning the death of Abdoulaye Ba. On a programme broadcast on the YouTube channel of Dakar TV, Nguer challenged the Ministry's denial of any physical assault on the deceased student. He referenced subsequent comments and calls from medics, which dispute the account presented by the prosecutor and called for further clarification regarding the circumstances surrounding the student's death. On February 18, 2026, Nguer was brought before the public prosecutor and charged with spreading false information.

Togo: Investigative journalist threatened



Roger Amemavoh | Credit: Le Défenseur Info

After reporting on land and construction disputes in the Laté Kopé neighbourhood of Agoè-Nyivé, in Togo, investigative journalist Roger Amemavoh received messages warning him of imminent danger. On the same day he was threatened, Roger disclosed in an interview that he had been summoned by Togo's media regulatory body, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC), which criticised his report for presenting a testimony from only one side of the dispute. The intensity of the threats alarmed friends and family who urged him to leave the country. The government, however, said on February 17 that the case was being closely monitored and reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring safety and civil liberties.

Mauritania: A domestic worker's quest for justice draws a police crackdown



AI Generated Image

In Mauritania, a peaceful protest on February 6, 2026, in the quest for justice for an 11-year-old domestic worker in Toujounine was violently dispersed with tear gas, batons, and tasers by the police. The protest, which was held near the Dar Naïm juvenile police station in Nouakchott, was organised by the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA) to demand action in a reported case of child exploitation. About ten protesters were arrested, including several who had been hospitalized for injuries suffered during the protest crackdown and were later discharged.

Nearly a week later, the Mauritanian government, on February 11, 2026, blocked a planned rally by the country's opposition party, the Alliance for Justice and Democracy (AJD). Despite the party initially obtaining authorisation, it was withdrawn just hours before the event by the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development, thereby violating the rights of supporters and citizens to express themselves. The two incidents of crackdown on protest and political rally in Mauritania reflect the challenging state of civic and political expression in that country.

Mali: Editor-in-Chief arrested over publication



Youssouf Sissoko

Editor-in-chief of L'Alternance. Arrested Feb 5 by the Cybercrime Unit over an article referencing statements by Niger's President Tiani about the Niamey airport attack. Prosecuted as publication director for spreading false information, undermining state credibility, and insulting a foreign head of state.

Youssouf Sissoko, editor-in-chief of L'Alternance, was arrested at his home in Bamako on February 5, 2026, and detained by Mali's National Cybercrime Unit. The arrest followed the publication of an article referencing statements attributed to Niger's President, General Abdourahamane Tiani, after an attack on Niamey airport in late January 2026. In those remarks, President Tiani allegedly accused foreign leaders, including Emmanuel Macron of France, Patrice Talon of Benin, and Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, of involvement in the attack. Although the article was written by an exiled political analyst, Sissoko is being prosecuted as the publication director on charges including spreading false information, undermining state credibility, and insulting a foreign head of state. The arrest has drawn condemnation from media organisations, such as the Association of Private Press Publishers and the Maison de la Presse, which argued that the detention violated Mali's press law and raised renewed concerns about press freedom and the criminal liability of editors for externally contributed content.

Key Trends and Implications

Rising Intolerance and Restrictions on Political Expression

A notable trend observed in the period under review is the apparent intolerance and sensitivity of government authorities and state security apparatus towards political expression by citizens and opposition political parties. Democratic activities, such as political rallies, political mobilisation, and protests,

were significantly met with restrictive measures, including arrests, detentions, fines, and threats, resulting in death in some cases. As observed in February, officials of Sierra Leone's main opposition party, APC, were subjected to multiple freedom of expression-related violations following the party's mammoth rally.

The period under review further emphasised the increasing apparent weaponisation of false publication laws to suppress legitimate expression, silence government critics, or gag dissenting voices. Across West Africa, legal mechanisms, such

The Weaponisation of False Publication Laws

as cybercrime laws, national security legislation, public order laws, and false publication provisions, have been used to regulate online and offline speech. The broadly-worded definitions of such provisions and the selective application of the same by state authorities foster self-censorship, thereby further shrinking the civic space. It is very disturbing that the two recorded violations involving the “spread of false news” occurred in Senegal, a poster child of democracy in the region. With the increase in social media usage and internet accessibility, such a development also means expansion in the target list for intolerable governments who would seek to wantonly pursue bloggers, content creators, and ordinary citizens who criticise their work.

Unabating attacks on Investigative (Critical) Journalists

We also observed the persistent trend of targeting investigative journalists, who often report on issues such as corruption, abuse of power, government failures, and sensitive security issues, especially in the Sahel countries. Critical journalists still

traditionally constitute the most targeted group in the region by intolerant governments. Such journalists face arrests, threats, harassment, detention, physical assault, and strategic lawsuits aimed at silencing their work. This trend is particularly concerning as it creates a chilling effect on media practice, discourages critical reporting, and curtails public access to information on matters of public interest.

Positive freedom of expression-related developments in February



Umu Thoronka

Photo credit: <https://forumnews-sl.com/speakup-movement-backs-journalist-umu-thoronka-in-econas-court-case/>

Sierra Leone: Media regulator directs state broadcaster to compensate dismissed staff

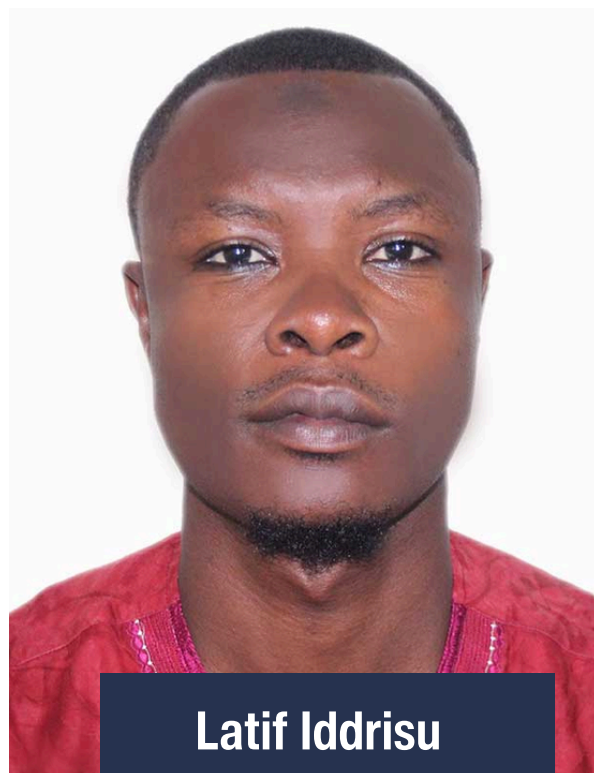
In February 2026, Sierra Leone's Independent Media Commission (IMC), after more than 15 months, finally directed the state broadcaster, Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), to compensate a former journalist of the organisation, Umu Thoronka, who was dismissed in July 2024. Ms. Thoronka, in July 2024, shared a TikTok video highlighting the difficulties faced by a woman who asked President Julius Maada Bio about the rising cost of living during a Presidential Town Hall meeting. The IMC's ruling reinforces protections for journalists' rights and freedom of expression and further signals that employers, including state-owned media, should not arbitrarily dismiss journalists for content that falls within the realm of legitimate public discourse. Such effective remedies for journalists who suffer unjust treatment help to build confidence and encourage professional independence.

Ghana: Redress for the embattled broadcast journalist

After eight years of litigation, postponements, and delays, including the absence of witnesses and changes in judges, Ghana's Attorney-General and the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) in February 2026, finally initiated steps to compensate JoyNews journalist Latif Iddrisu. Latif was assaulted by the police in March 2018 while covering a protest outside the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) headquarters in Accra. Presiding judge Her Ladyship Eudora Christina Dadson granted a one-month adjournment to enable the parties to present settlement terms.

In a related development, an Accra Circuit Court on February 18, 2026, commenced criminal proceedings against a suspect accused of assaulting broadcast journalist Latif Iddrisu in May 2025. Latif had been assaulted by police officers and supporters of the main opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) while reporting from the Economic and Organised Crime Office (EOCO) in Accra, during a protest by supporters of the opposition NPP. He was physically attacked, his phone seized, and the footage deleted.

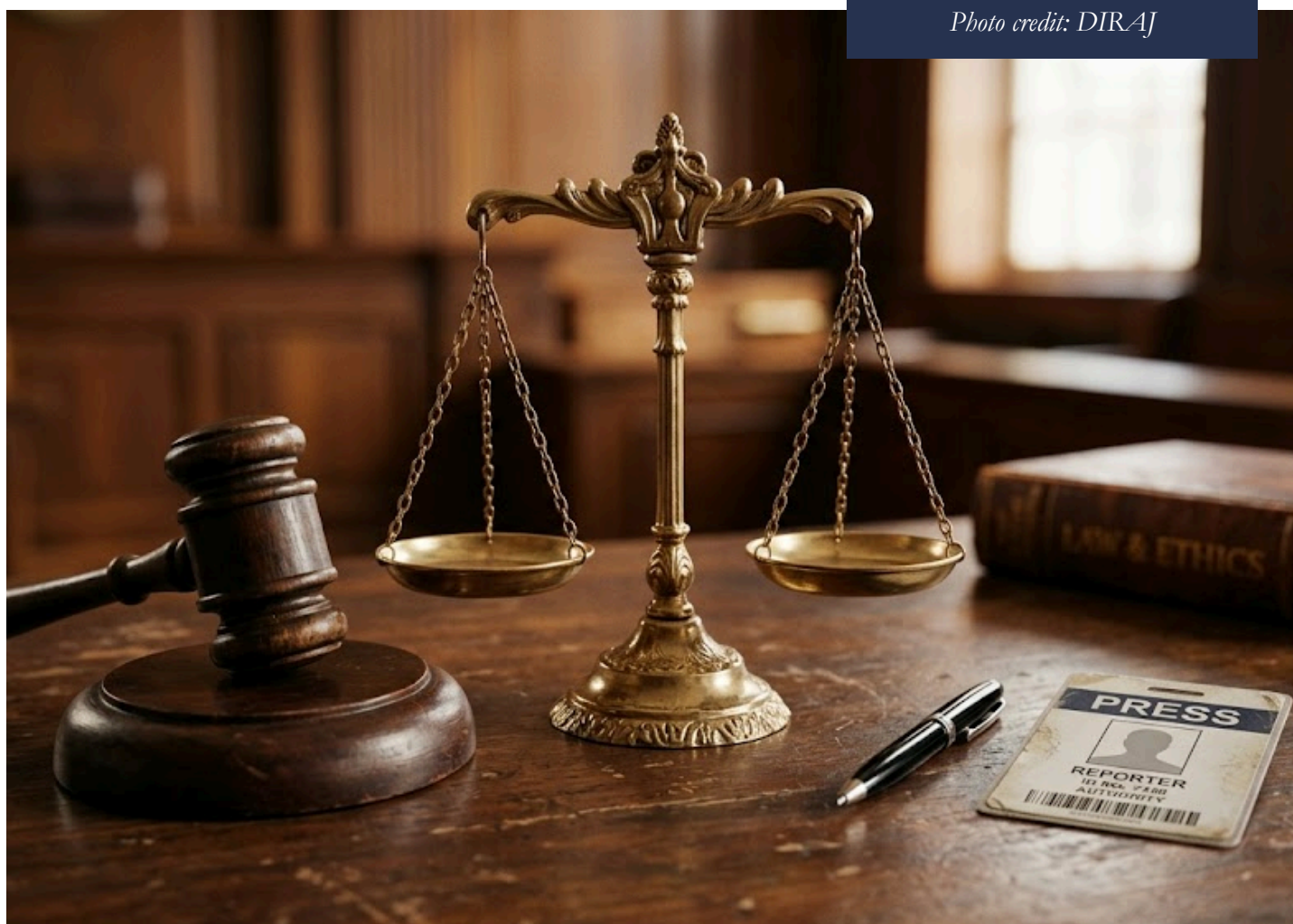
As impunity remains one of the most persistent challenges against press freedom, this development marks a positive progress towards accountability for attacks against journalists and reinforces press freedom protections. The decision by the courts acknowledges the journalist's right to report, further signaling that attacks on journalists can be subject to judicial scrutiny.



Latif Iddrisu

JoyNews journalist

Photo credit: DIRAJ



Conclusion and Recommendations



When democratic activities, such as peaceful protests and political rallies, are restricted, people have fewer opportunities to make their voices heard, influence public debate, and hold power to account. When investigative journalists, critical and dissenting voices, are subjected to harassment, threats, arrests, and detentions, it limits public access to information, fosters self-censorship, weakens democratic participation, and creates a chilling effect on speech.

From restrictions on political rallies, threats on an investigative journalist, and the arrest of media commentators for “spreading false news”, the Media Foundation for West Africa’s documented freedom of expression violations for February 2026 demonstrate how quickly state authorities are willing to silence critical voices and suppress non-aligned political viewpoints.

Given that freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly are closely related rights recognised in many constitutions and international human rights frameworks, the MFWA urges the government in Senegal to desist from the use of criminal sanctions in response to commentary on matters of public interest. The Senegalese authorities should ensure that journalists and media commentators are not subjected to criminal prosecution and custodial sentencing for expressing opinions or raising questions about public issues.

We also call on the Sierra Leone government, police force, and the courts to seriously consider granting bail to Zainab Sheriff, as her continuous bail denials could have a chilling effect on political speech and dissent.

The MFWA also calls on the Mauritanian authorities to respect the right to peaceful assembly and immediately release all arrested protestors, and ensure accountability for the use of force against protesters. Authorities in Togo should also ensure the safety of investigative journalist, Roger Amemavoh.



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Voices for Public Good*

Media Foundation for West Africa
Aar-Bakor Street, Ogbojo

 +233 (0) 302 555 327

 Media Foundation for West Africa

 @TheMFWA

 Media Foundation for West Africa(MFWA)

 info@mfw.org

 www.mfw.org