



Freedom of Expression Situation in West Africa

March 2026 Overview

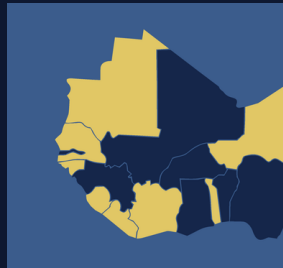


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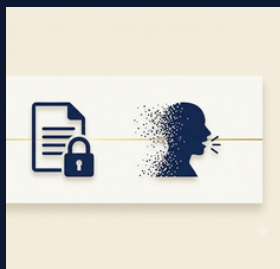
The Numbers. The Perpetrators. The Trends



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Introduction

The month of March 2026 revealed a growing trend of legal and physical pitfalls that continue to ensnare journalists and content creators. Across Ghana, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Benin, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso, journalists and content creators faced arrests, physical attacks, lengthy prison sentences, and suffered the impact of sweeping regulatory actions.

Journalists were arrested for their legitimate coverage, assaulted in their line of duty, and sentenced to years in prison for publications deemed offensive to state interests. In Burkina Faso, the trend of abduction of critical voices took a tragic turn after the passing of a citizen as he was being taken into custody.

Media outlets were also suspended by regulators, with bans extending to individual journalists. At the legislative level, a newly enacted law in Senegal and a proposed law in Liberia tolled alarm bells of criminal penalties for speech-related offences that could have dire consequences on the hard-won gains for press freedom in these countries. The civic space showed signs of further contraction, with the legal ordeal of an opposition flagbearer aspirant in Sierra Leone, Zainab Sheriff, who was denied bail nine times, raising questions of selective justice.



In total, March witnessed eight violations, with five targeting journalists, while the remaining three targeted a content creator, a news website and a citizen. The documented cases of freedom of expression violations were, however, a marginal decrease compared to the violations documented in the preceding month (February), which recorded 11 incidents of freedom of expression violations.

This March 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. 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

Mali — 1

- Sentencing: 1

Burkina Faso — 1

- Arrest & Detention: 1

The Gambia — 1

- Arrest & Detention: 1

Guinea — 1

- Media Suspension: 1

Ghana — 1

- Arrest & Detention: 1

Benin — 1

- Arrest & detention — 2

Nigeria — 2

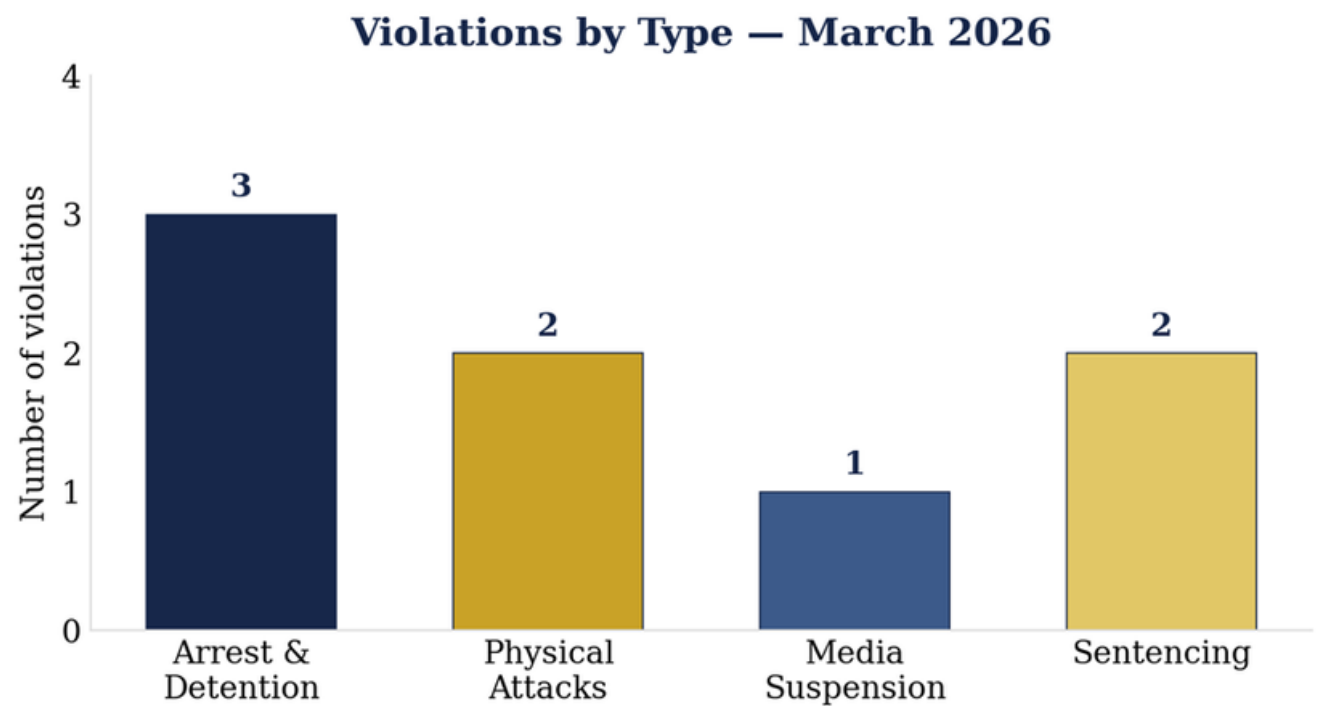
- Physical Attacks: 2

Keys

- Countries with violations
- Countries with no violations

Country	Arrest & Detention	Physical Attacks	Media Suspension	Sentencing
Ghana	1			
The Gambia	1			
Guinea			1	
Mali				1
Benin				1
Burkina Faso	1			
Nigeria		2		
Total	3	2	1	2

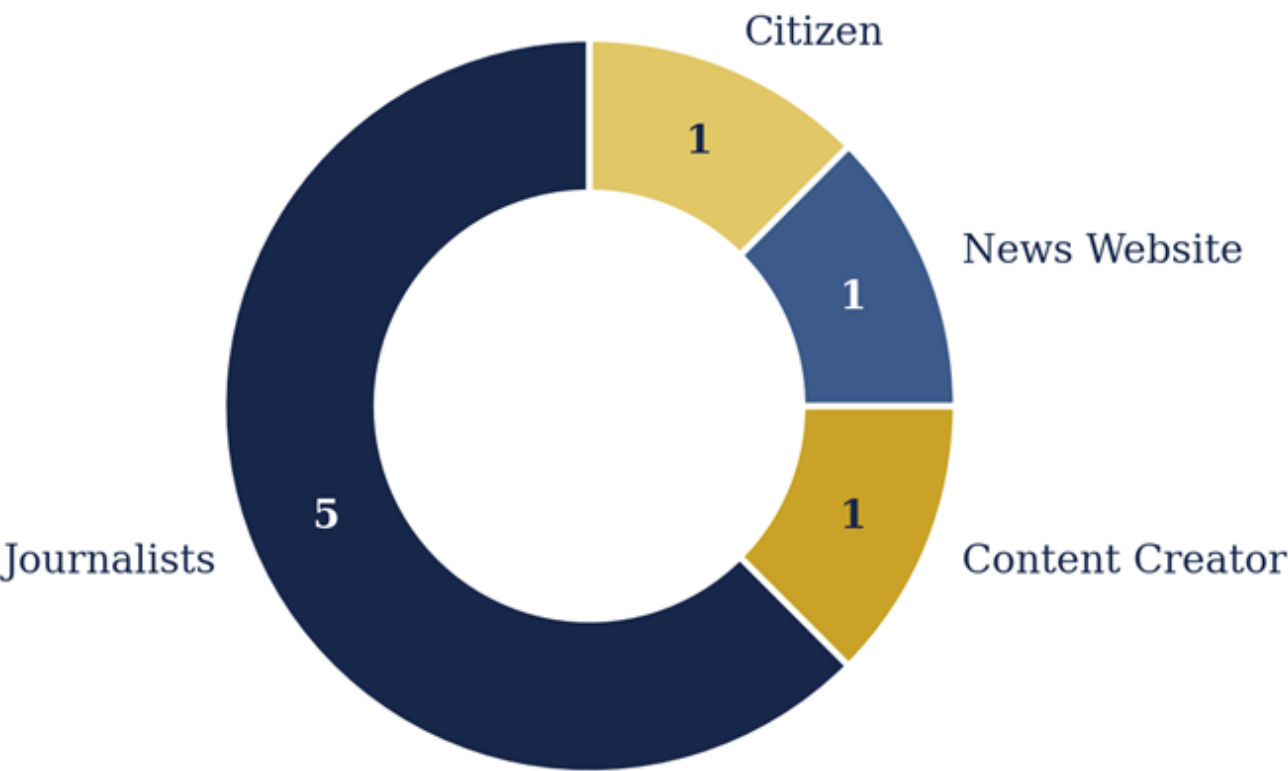
Nigeria recorded two (2) incidents of violation, with one (1) violation each recorded in Ghana, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Benin, and Burkina Faso. These violations were mostly perpetrated by government authorities and security agents.



Violations by Country – March 2026



Victims by Category – March 2026



Country Cases

Arrest & detention of a content creator in Ghana and a journalist in The Gambia

Two significant cases of arrests and detentions were recorded this month, one in Ghana and the other in The Gambia. This incident occurred on March 1, 2026, when Isaac Boafo, a Ghanaian content creator also known as “Duabo King,” was arrested in the Ashanti regional capital, Kumasi. He had posted a viral TikTok video falsely alleging that police officers at the Central Command Police Station in Kumasi engaged in sexual misconduct with commercial sex workers while on duty. During interrogation, however, Isaac admitted to fabricating the claims to gain online attention. He could not defend the additional remarks he made about the President of the Republic. He has been charged with the publication and circulation of false information and remains in custody as investigations continue. The case once again highlights Ghanaian authorities’ use of Section 208 of the Criminal Offences Act, 1960, and the Electronic Communications Act, 2008 (Act 775) to address misinformation and maintain public order.

In The Gambia, journalist Momodou Justice Darboe, editor of Jollof News Online, was arrested on March 11, 2026, after photographing two Austrian nationals outside the Banjul Magistrates Court, where they were standing trial for refusing to provide access to their cryptocurrency accounts. Darboe reported being assaulted from behind by police, including having his phone forcibly taken by the Commissioner for Police Prosecutions, Abdoulie Sanneh. Darboe was subsequently charged with “common assault” for allegedly attacking an officer, a claim he denied. He was detained from 1 pm to 7 pm, released on self-bail, and required to report to the police multiple times.



Isaac Boafo ("Duabo King")

content creator — arrested in Kumasi over a viral TikTok alleging police misconduct; charged with publishing false information and held in custody



Momodou Justice Darboe

editor of Jollof News Online — arrested and assaulted by police after photographing defendants outside the Banjul court; charged with common assault, released on self-bail

Conviction of two journalists by a Court of law in Mali and Benin



Youssouf Sissoko

editor-in-chief of L'Alternance — convicted over a contributor's article citing President Tiani; sentenced to 2 years and 1m CFA by the National Cybercrime Court



Pascal Mitowadé

journalist at La Tribune — sentenced to 5 years and 10m CFA by CRIET over a Dec 2025 social-media post about an attempted coup

March also witnessed the disquieting conviction of an editor-in-chief and a journalist for conduct relating to the publication of information in the public interest, raising grave concerns about the potential chilling effect of such judicial restrictions on free speech. Malian journalist Youssouf Sissoko, editor-in-chief of L'Alternance, appeared in a Bamako court on March 9, 2026, following his arrest on February 5, 2026, over an article published in the newspaper. The article, authored by exiled analyst Sambou Sissoko, cited statements by Niger's President, Abdourahamane Tiani, accusing foreign leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron, Benin President Patrice Talon, and Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara, of their involvement in an attack on Niamey airport. Prosecutors sought a five-year prison sentence for Sissoko and a ten-year suspension of the newspaper. He was charged with spreading false information, undermining state credibility, and insulting a foreign head of state, even though the article was written by an external contributor. Sissoko's defense maintained that the publication addressed a matter of public interest and fell within legitimate journalistic practice. Sissoko was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and ordered to pay 1 million CFA francs (about USD 1,600) in damages on March 23, 2026, by the National Cybercrime Court.

In a similar development, Beninese journalist Pascal Mitowadé of La Tribune was, on March 24, 2026, sentenced to five years in prison with a 10 million CFA franc (about USD 17,632) fine by Benin's Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism (CRIET). Pascal's arrest and detention followed a social media post he made in December 2025 during tensions that followed an attempted coup. He is said to have relayed information already broadcast on national television about the military claiming to have seized power. Prosecutors argued that Pascal's publication undermined public order and constituted support for threats to state security. Meanwhile, Pascal maintained he was reporting publicly available information and later shared official clarifications, denying any intent to support the coup.

The arrest, detention, and conviction of journalists reporting on an issue represent a significant setback for press freedom. While countries may have legitimate reasons for enforcing the law, criminal sanctions against journalists directly affect the media's ability to produce and publish information without fear of reprisal, which may further undermine the media's watchdog role and also interfere with the public's right to receive information.

Physical assault on two journalists in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Lagos-based reporter Habeeb Adejobi, on March 11, 2026, accused Kosofe Local Government Chairman Moyosore Ogunlewe of orchestrating an assault against him while covering a political screening exercise at the Kosofe Secretariat. Adejobi alleged that after being asked to leave for not presenting his official ID as a journalist, he was attacked with a plank by individuals reportedly acting under the chairman's instructions, including personnel from the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps "Special Task Force." He claimed his camera was seized, footage deleted, and phone confiscated before being taken to a police station, where he was later released and sought medical attention. Meanwhile, the Kosofe Local Government Chairman, Ogunlewe, denied the allegations, stating Adejobi was taken to the station solely for failing to provide his ID.

Also in Nigeria, Mohammed Adamu, a journalist with Albarka Radio, was assaulted on March 21, 2026, by police officers while covering the Eid Durbar celebration in Bununu, Bauchi State. This was after a Divisional Police Officer (DPO), SP Jamilu Kabir, allegedly ordered him to leave despite identifying himself as a reporter. When Adamu insisted on his right to work, the DPO reportedly verbally abused and physically attacked him, with other officers joining in. The incident drew condemnation from media rights organisations as well as the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), which called for an investigation. In response, the Commissioner of Police, Sani-Omolori Aliyu, condemned the incident as unacceptable and assured that a thorough investigation would be conducted and any officers found culpable would face disciplinary action.



Habeeb Adejobi

Lagos reporter — assaulted with a plank while covering a political screening at the Kosofe Secretariat; camera seized, footage deleted



Mohammed Adamu

journalist at Albarka Radio — assaulted by police while covering the Eid Durbar in Bununu, Bauchi State; the police commissioner ordered an investigation

Guinea: Two news websites suspended for three months



Africaturemedia.com and Guineesource.com (plus two staff, Saa Edouard Tinguiano and Foromo Lamah) — suspended for three months by the HAC over coverage of Guinea–Liberia clashes; the two staff suspended for six months

On March 12, 2026, Guinea's High Authority for Communication (HAC) suspended two news websites, Africaturemedia.com and Guineesource.com, along with their content-sharing platforms, for three months. This followed their coverage of the violent clashes between Guinean and Liberian youths in Kiéssènèye, a village in the Guéckédou prefecture located in southern Guinea. The HAC deemed the publication of images and live footage by the two websites as sensational, which could exacerbate cross-border tensions. According to HAC, the suspension was a preventive measure. Additionally, two individuals linked to the two websites, Saa Edouard Tinguiano and Foromo Lamah, were suspended for six months for the production and dissemination of the contested content and for lack of professional press accreditation.



Mahamadi Baguian | Lefaso.net

Burkina Faso: Abduction of a citizen for criticising a minister turns tragic

Mahamadi Baguian, a Burkinabè citizen, member of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) and a pilgrimage guide, posted a viral video on March 22, 2026, criticising the Minister of Transport and the Minister of Territorial Administration, Émile Zerbo, over being blocked from resuming work escorting Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. Nine days later, on March 31, he was abducted at a market in Ouagadougou and died shortly after. Witnesses say he was hooded, bound, and heard crying out in pain as he was being taken away, but the public prosecutor claims he instead fell ill in custody and died despite medical care. His father reported seeing blood on his body, contradicting the official account, and authorities say an investigation has been opened.

Other freedom of expression-related developments/updates in March

Still in March, a newly enacted law in Senegal and a proposed legislative amendment in Liberia sparked significant discussion and reaction from media stakeholders and civil society over their potential to restrict media freedom in those countries. On March 3, 2026, Senegal's National Assembly passed a law establishing the National Media Regulatory Council (CNRM), a new body tasked with overseeing print, broadcast, online media, content creators, and foreign outlets accessible in the country. The law aims to modernize regulation in response to digital expansion, disinformation, and the use of AI, while preserving freedom of expression, protecting minors, and maintaining social cohesion. It replaces and expands the limited mandates of the National Audiovisual Regulatory Council (CNRA) and the Council for the Observance of Ethical and Professional Standards (CORED). However, media unions, such as SYNPICS and CDEPS, criticized their exclusion from the drafting process and expressed concern over the CNRM's broad powers, including the ability to shut down media outlets, suspend operations, block content, and cut platform access with immediate effect and no possibility of appeal.

Liberia, on March 3, 2026, introduced the "Gender-Based Online Abuse and Harassment Act of 2026" to the Liberian House of Representatives. The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) expressed concern over the proposed Act, warning that it could undermine the country's Press Freedom Act of 2019 by reintroducing criminal penalties for speech-related offences. Speaking at a public hearing on March 9, 2026, PUL President Julius Kanubah cautioned that provisions imposing up to two years' imprisonment or fines for insulting or harassing online messages risk reversing gains made by the 2019 reforms, which had decriminalised offences such as criminal libel, sedition, and malevolence. The PUL and other stakeholders argue that existing laws already address abusive conduct and warn that the proposed amendments could be misused to target journalists, activists, and government critics. They urged lawmakers to ensure any new legislation aligns with Liberia's constitutional and international human rights obligations while preserving freedom of expression.

Finally, in Sierra Leone, Zainab Sheriff, a flagbearer aspirant of the main opposition, the All-People's Congress (APC), and chairperson of the "Wi Dutu Lappa" movement, remains in detention after being charged with "incitement and threatening language" over remarks she allegedly made at an APC mammoth rally in Freetown. She reportedly stated in an interview granted during the gathering that anyone who rigs an election "should be killed" and accused the president of being "a rigger." Zainab was declared wanted on February 13, 2026, and arrested on February 20. She has since appeared in court four times, pleading not guilty but denied bail nine times and remanded at the Female Correctional Facility at Pademba Road Prison. Her continued detention contrasts with that of the APC's Secretary-General, Lansana Dumbuya, who faced similar charges from the same event but was granted bail shortly after his arrest.

Key Trends and Implications

Journalists face persistent risks for critical reporting

In March 2026, we observed grave attacks on media independence as journalists and an editor-in-chief were physically assaulted, arrested, detained, and convicted for carrying out their professional duties. These incidents demonstrate the hostile environments in which media

professionals operate, and they also provide fodder for quick retaliation from those who feel affected by legitimate journalistic reporting. The recording of five incidents of violations against journalists in the reporting period is a significant indicator of the continued use of legal, administrative, or coercive measures by governments and security agencies to muzzle the press across West Africa. This situation has implications for press freedom and democratic accountability, and signals the need for stronger protections for the media.

Another notable trend observed in the period under review is the expansion of laws across the region, with the tendency to treat speech-related offences as criminal matters rather than civil disputes. Many countries have introduced or expanded cybercrime, fake news, and mis/disinformation laws to

The growing legislation of restrictions on free expression

regulate, limit, or penalise expression by media actors and individuals, whether sharing opinions, information, or engaging in public discourse. These laws are easily applied to target critical voices, especially journalists, activists, and political opponents. Often, states justify these laws as necessary for national security, public order, and misinformation control, and yet the selective application of such with regard to critics suggests otherwise.

Continued trend of abduction of critical voices

Also, we observed that the abduction of dissenting voices has created a deep climate of fear and censorship, and enabled an even more restricted civic space. This hinders freedom of expression and of the press, significantly reducing public debate and participatory governance. More importantly, it establishes an exclusive concentration of control over information and expression in the hands of those in power.

Conclusion and Recommendations



The cases highlighted in March 2026 reveal a region that is still struggling to adequately address journalistic and speech-related offences. This is demonstrated in authorities' responses to online expression through the use of arrests and detention of journalists and individuals, as in the cases of Mali and Benin. Governments in West Africa will need to revisit the use of criminal laws to govern journalistic reports and free expression, whether online or offline.

To this end, the MFWA calls on governments in West Africa to repeal or amend laws that criminalise defamation and false news, including provisions under criminal and cybercrime laws. We equally urge authorities to promote the use of civil remedies instead of criminal sanctions for speech-related offences. We also call on the government of Nigeria to promote dialogue between media organisations and security agencies to reduce violent exchanges between journalists and security agents. We also urge the government to adopt clear operational guidelines for law enforcement when interacting with journalists. More importantly, we urge the authorities to swiftly conduct independent and transparent investigations into the cases of physical attacks against journalists, Habeeb Adejobi and Mohammed Adamu, and prosecute persons found culpable to help deter other security agents from using violence against journalists.



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Voices for Public Good*

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