

A hand holding a microphone is the central visual element of the cover. The hand is dark-skinned and is holding a black, handheld microphone with a foam windscreen. The background is a blurred sunset or sunrise scene with warm orange and yellow tones, and a crowd of people is visible in the distance.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MONITOR - WEST AFRICA

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Executive Summary

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) monitors, documents and reports on threats and attacks against the right to expression (including press freedom, activism and protests) across the 16 countries in West Africa. This forms part of the organisation's interventions to promote and defend media freedom, civic expression, and civil liberties. The monitoring reports are used as evidence-based tools for advocacy and redress. This initiative aims to ultimately create a more enabling environment for the exercise of the right to expression by all.

This report provides an overview of the freedom of expression situation in West Africa over the first quarter of 2026. The report confirms that even though practically all the countries in the region have ratified international and regional instruments that guarantee freedom of expression, the right is not entirely respected in practice. In particular, findings of the report show that 32 incidents of freedom of expression violations were recorded in 12 out of the 16 countries in the region. Unfortunately, the major perpetrators of the violations were found to be security agents who also have the mandate to protect the rights of the populace.

Nine different categories of violations were recorded. Arrests and detentions emerged as the most dominant violation, perpetrated mostly by security agents. Unfortunately, a volunteer with the Defence of the Homeland in Burkina Faso, who published a video denouncing alleged injustices and accused a government minister, died in Ouagadougou shortly after being violently arrested by security forces in an open market.

On a positive note, some of the violations recorded received remedial actions, largely in the form of release from detention. In particular, five out of the 32 violations cited received some level of redress. In addition to the five, some violations recorded under previous quarters received some notable progress towards redress.

The report ends with recommendations to relevant stakeholders, such as governments, media regulators, news media organisations, ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. The calls enjoin the stakeholders to take proactive and reparative actions to address violations cited while putting in place measures to mitigate violations and/or ensuring that perpetrators face justice.

1.0 Introduction



Freedom of expression remains one of the cardinal pillars for any functioning democracy across the world. It also serves as an enabler of other rights. It fosters transparency, accountability, and an informed populace. Recognising the central role of freedom of expression (FOE) in fostering resilient and progressive societies, all countries in West Africa have ratified key international and regional instruments that guarantee this right. In particular, all 16 countries in the region are parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which protect freedom of expression alongside the rights to association and assembly.

The reality in a number of the countries in the region is, however, different. Expression (including activism and protest) is attacked by different actors (state and non-state) with the ultimate aim of silencing critical voices. The attacks against expression take many forms, including physical assault, arbitrary arrest and detention, killing, threat and intimidation, and the resort to Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) and crippling fines used to silence dissent.

Given the disparity between what states have ratified and guaranteed in their constitutions with respect to the right to free expression, and the everyday experiences on the ground, there is a need to consciously monitor and produce fact-based reporting to highlight the issues while calling on relevant authorities and other stakeholders to take reparative actions. Against this backdrop, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) uses the findings of the monitoring as evidence for advocacy to demand remedial actions and improvement of the freedom of expression landscape in the region.

This report covers the findings of the monitoring conducted by the MFWA in the first quarter of 2026 (January to March). The findings detail the types of attacks that are perpetrated against expression, the perpetrators, the victims and other developments observed during the monitoring period. The report concludes with recommendations to specific stakeholders on remedial actions for the violations reported, as well as actions to better safeguard expression.

2.0 Methodology

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.

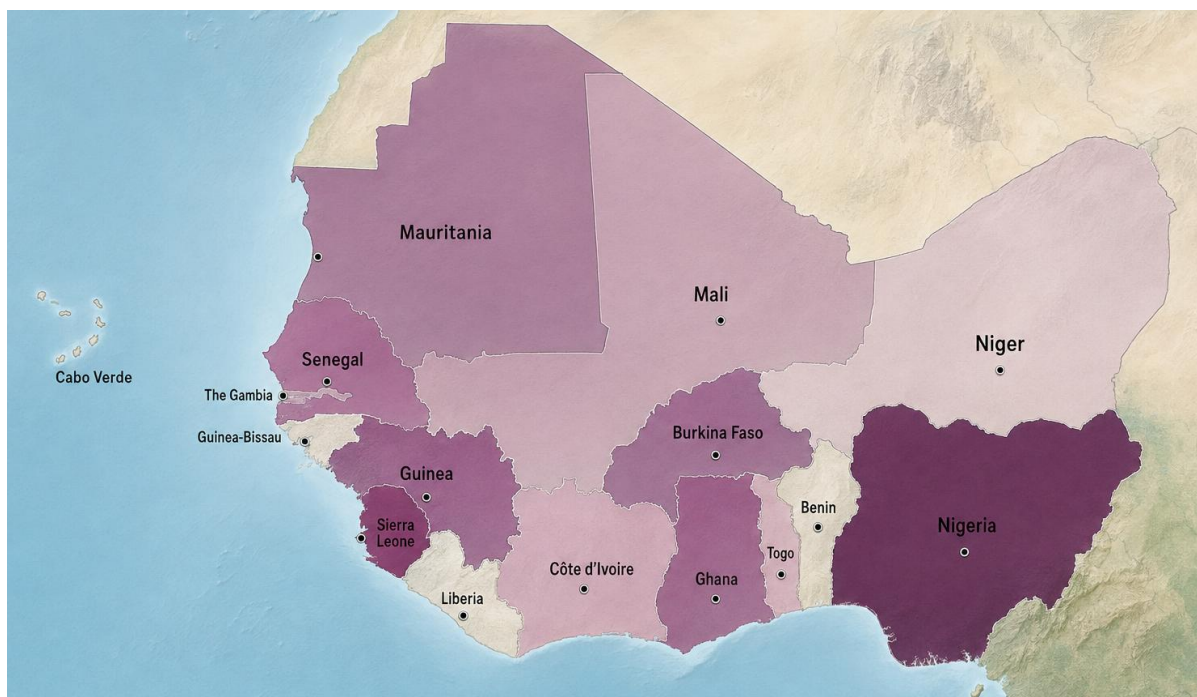
To ensure a comprehensive and reliable dataset, the monitoring draws from multiple sources. These include firsthand reports from MFWA's national correspondents and monitors; verified media accounts and reports from MFWA's national partners; and information shared by local and international human rights 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 first quarter of 2026 (January–March, 2026). It proffers a set of recommendations towards addressing the violations reported and improving the freedom of expression situation in the region.

3.0 Findings

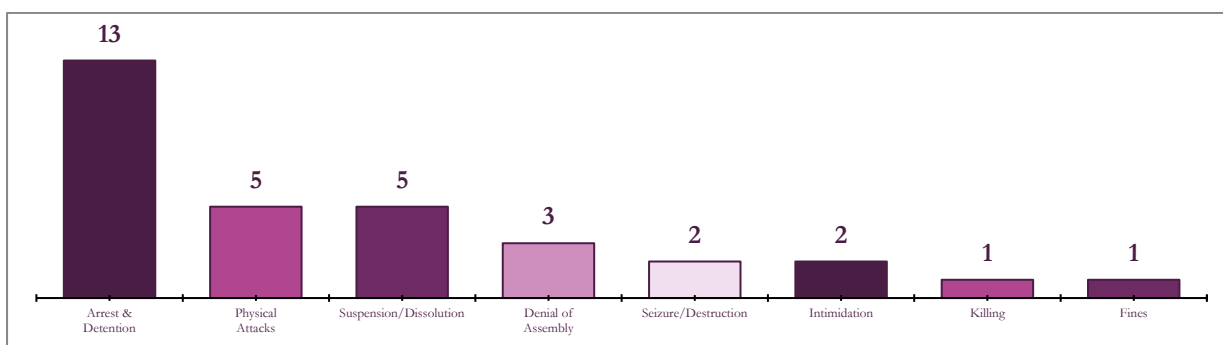
These findings from the daily monitoring conducted across the 16 countries in West Africa from January to March 2026 are presented below under four sections: incidents of violations, perpetrators of violations, victims of violations, and redress of violations. Also highlighted are some key developments observed in the FOE landscape in the region over the monitoring period.



3.1 Incidents of Violations

During the period under review, a total of 32 violations against the right to freedom of expression (FOE) were recorded across the region. The 32 incidents were made up of eight categories of violations. Arrests and detentions emerged as the most dominant violation with 13 incidents. The remaining 19 violations comprised physical attacks; suspension/dissolution; denial of assembly; seizure/destruction of property; intimidation; killing; and the imposition of fines. *Figure 1 below presents statistics of the incidents and categories of violations recorded.*

Figure 1: Frequency and category of violations recorded



Notes: 1) Suspension/dissolution covers suspension of journalists, media outlets and/or the dissolution of a group, including political parties and student groups; 2) Destruction/Seizure covers the seizure and/or destruction of equipment or property belonging to a journalist, media outlet, activist or an individual as a result of their reporting, activism or expression.

Summaries of the specific freedom of expression violations can be found [here](#).

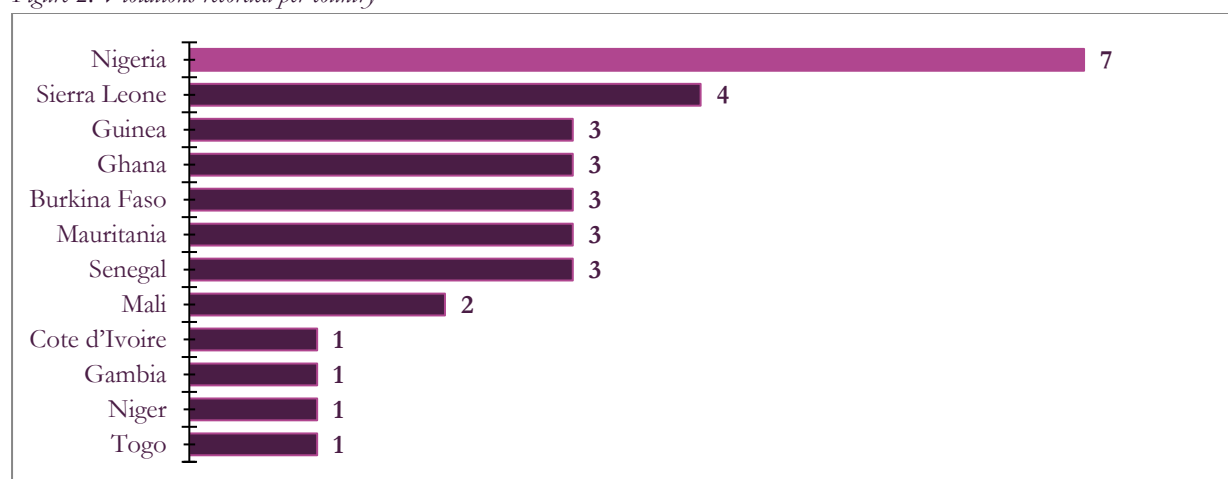
3.2 Countries and Incidents of Violations

The 32 violations recorded during the first quarter of 2026 occurred across 12 countries. Nigeria and Sierra Leone recorded the highest incidents of violations, seven and four violations respectively. Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania and Senegal followed with three violations each. *In Table 1 below, the frequency of violations recorded in each of the 12 countries is presented. The table also features the different categories of violations recorded in each country.*

Table 1: Countries and Types of Violations

Country	Arrest & Detention	Physical Attack	Suspension/ Dissolution	Seizure/ Destruction	Intimidation	Killing	Denial of Assembly	Fine	Total
Nigeria	1	3		2	1				7
Sierra Leone	3							1	4
Guinea			3						3
Ghana	1	2							3
Burkina Faso	1		1			1			3
Mauritania	1						2		3
Senegal	2						1		3
Mali	1		1						2
Cote d'Ivoire	1								1
Gambia	1								1
Niger	1								1
Togo					1				1
Total	13	5	4	2	2	1	3	1	32

Figure 2: Violations recorded per country



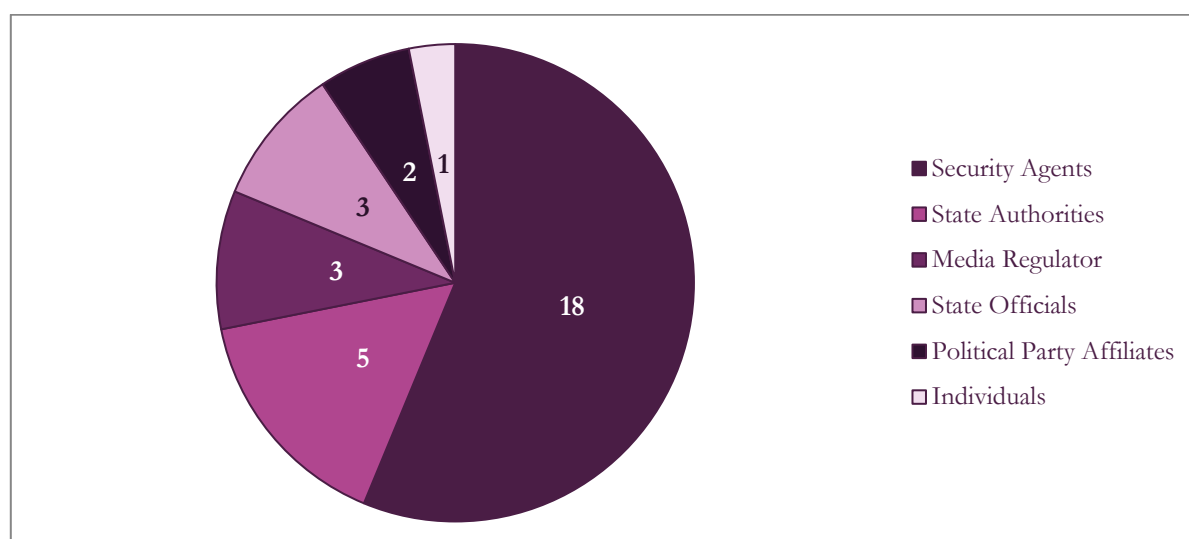
3.3 Perpetrators of Violations

The 32 incidents of FOE violations recorded were carried out by six categories of perpetrators. Security agents were culpable for the majority (18) of the violations, particularly the arrests and detentions, destruction of equipment and cases of physical attack. Security agents were also responsible for the violent abduction of a Burkinabè citizen who died after the incident. Other state actors and non-state actors were responsible for the other violations cited. *Table 2 below presents statistics about the perpetrators of the violations cited in each country.*

Table 2: Countries and Perpetrators of Violations

Country	Security Agents	State Authorities	Media Regulator	State Officials	Individuals	Political Party Affiliates	Total
Nigeria	3			2		2	7
Sierra Leone	2	1		1			4
Guinea			3				3
Ghana	3						3
Mauritania	2	1					3
Burkina Faso	2	1					3
Senegal	3						3
Mali	1	1					2
Cote d'Ivoire		1					1
Gambia	1						1
Niger	1						1
Togo					1		1
Total	18	5	3	3	1	2	32

Figure 3: Perpetrators by category



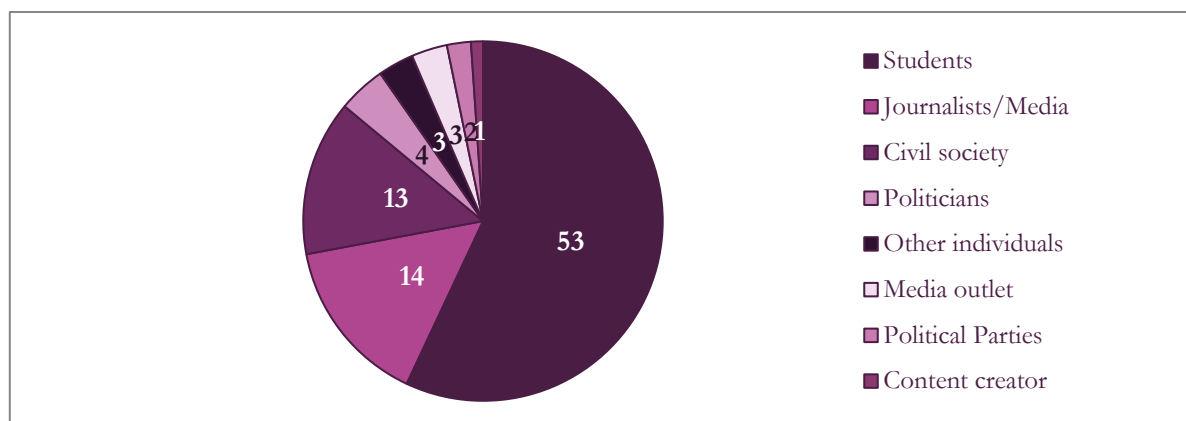
3.4 Victims of Violations

The statistics provided under this section cover the people/institutions that were directly impacted by the 32 violations cited. Others who may have equally suffered from the attacks indirectly are not captured in this analysis. Altogether, 93 people, made up of students, journalists, political actors and other actors (detailed in Table 3), were directly affected by the violations recorded. It is worth noting that a single incident could directly affect more than one individual/institution. For instance, one incident recorded in Nigeria about a protest against kidnapping and insecurity in Ekpoma, Edo State, resulted in the arrest of 52 students.

Table 3: Victims of Violations Recorded

Country	Students	Journalists/ Media Professionals	Civil society actors	Politicians	Other individuals	Media outlet	Political Parties	Content creator	Total
Nigeria	52	5			1				58
Mauritania			13				1		14
Sierra Leone	1			3					4
Guinea		1				2			3
Ghana		2						1	3
Burkina Faso					2		1		3
Mali		1				1			2
Senegal		2							2
Cote d'Ivoire				1					1
Gambia		1							1
Niger		1							1
Togo		1							1
Total	53	14	13	4	3	3	2	1	93

Figure 4: Victims by category



3.5 Redress of Violations

Over the monitoring period, some remedial actions were taken in response to some of the violations cited within the quarter (January–March 2026). Specifically, five out of the 32 violations recorded received some level of redress. In addition to the five, redress actions and processes towards reparations for some violations recorded during preceding quarters were also observed and documented. Below are some excerpts about the incidents and the reparative actions taken during the first quarter of 2026.



Lansana Dumbuya Esq, National Secretary General of the All People’s Congress (APC), was [detained](#) by Sierra Leonean Police on February 4, 2026, following a speech at an APC gathering in January. In his address, he raised concerns about the transparency of the 2023 general elections, particularly the lack of published polling-station results. He was subsequently summoned for questioning and later detained by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID). He was, however, released the day after, on February 5.

Jean-François Kouassi (JFK), president of the Ivorian Youth Movement, was arrested on January 8, 2026, after a post on Facebook accusing public officials of corruption and nepotism. Although he was sentenced to a 15-day imprisonment, he ended up spending 19 days instead. He was finally [released](#) on January 27, 2026.

Momodou Justice Darboe, editor of Jollof News, was [arrested](#) on March 11, 2026, while covering a case at the Banjul Magistrates’ Court. He was granted self-bail on the same day and given specific dates to report himself.

In Ghana, a TikTokker, Isaac Boafo, also known as Duabo King, was [arrested](#) on March 1, 2026, over claims he made about some police patrol activities in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. He was granted bail on March 10, 2026 by a Circuit Court.

Also in Ghana, the Armed Forces [launched an investigation](#) into the case of journalist Solomon Kwame Kanaluwe, who was assaulted by military personnel in Walewale, North East Region. The

investigation was announced through a press statement on January 28, 2026. The journalist was [assaulted and detained](#) on January 26, 2026, over where he had parked his motorbike, which the soldiers claimed was obstructing their operations.

The eight-year-old litigation to get justice for JoyNews' Latif Iddrisu finally saw some [progress](#) within the reporting period when a Senior State Attorney announced during a court session on February 17, 2026, that both parties had committed to settling the case. However, Iddrisu's counsel requested the court to allow the trial and settlement negotiations to occur simultaneously, which was granted. The presiding judge granted a one-month adjournment to present settlement terms, but the case was to resume on 2 April 2026. Iddrisu was assaulted by some police officers in March 2018 while covering a protest outside the Criminal Investigations Department headquarters in Accra. The case has faced numerous delays, with multiple adjournments and changes in judges (four different judges) by early 2026.

In another assault case involving Iddrisu, the Accra Circuit Court, in February 2026, [began criminal proceedings](#) against a suspect accused of assaulting the broadcast journalist in May 2025. On May 27, 2025, while Iddrisu was reporting live from the Economic and Organised Crime Office (EOCO) in Accra during a protest by supporters of the opposition New Patriotic Party, he was harassed by some security personnel and alleged NPP supporters and subsequently assaulted. Following the incident, police arrested a suspect named Theophilus Thompson on June 7, 2025, who assisted in the investigation. Thompson was arraigned before the Circuit Court on February 18, 2026, while the police continue to search for four additional suspects involved in the assault.

In Nigeria, a coroner's court in Lagos [ordered](#) the Chief Medical Director of Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH) to submit a report within 14 days regarding an unidentified body linked to journalist Pelumi Onifade's death. This directive is part of an inquest initiated after a Federal High Court ruling in 2024, which called for an investigation into Onifade's death. Onifade, a reporter for Gboah TV, went missing during the #EndSARS protests in October 2020 and was later found dead. The inquest is focused on the identity and handling of the unidentified body, referred to as "Body 1385," which was transferred for examination but faced record inconsistencies and compliance issues. This development was a major progress in the quest to seek justice for the slain journalist.

The other redress interventions documented were from Sierra Leone. Edwina Hawa Jamiru, a law student at Fourah Bay College, was [detained](#) on February 10, 2026 by the Cyber Crime Unit in Freetown over remarks she made in a video response to an interview the First Lady had granted. She was released on February 17, 2026 after bail was secured for her.

Then, in the case concerning the dismissal of Umu Thoronka, a journalist who used to work with the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) until her dismissal in July 2024, the Independent Media Commission (IMC) of Sierra Leone [ordered](#) the SLBC to compensate her. Thoronka was dismissed by SLBC after sharing a TikTok video in which she highlighted the difficulties faced by a woman who posed a question to the President of Sierra Leone during a Presidential Town Hall meeting. The IMC conducted three hearings and came to the conclusion that the SLBC failed to properly handle the termination and therefore ruled that SLBC must compensate Thoronka with a negotiable sum.

3.6 Other Developments

Beyond the violations and redress measures documented during the quarter under review, other issues with implications for freedom of expression were also observed. Prominent among them are court sentences handed down for some online and offline publications. Although this section basically highlights these trends and not the merit or otherwise of the cases and their adjudication, the implications of the sentences are quite obvious — a call to self-censorship, which is the ultimate object of the criminalisation of speech. The specific cases involving the sentences are cited below.

On 24 March 2026, journalist Pascal Mitowadé of La Tribune de la Capitale was [sentenced](#) by Benin’s CRIET court to five years in prison and a fine of 10 million CFA francs (approximately USD 17,558) over a social media post published in December 2025, during a failed coup attempt. He had been arrested shortly after the events and formally charged with offences including incitement to rebellion and spreading information deemed harmful to state security.

On 26 January 2026, Jean-François Kouassi, president of the Ivorian Youth Movement, was [sentenced](#) by a court in Abidjan to 15 days in prison, eight months suspended, and fined 500,000 CFA francs for his Facebook criticism of alleged corruption and nepotism in civil service recruitment. Having already spent 19 days in detention since his arrest on 8 January 2026, he was released on 27 January 2026.

Youssouf Sissoko was [sentenced](#) on 23 March 2026 by the National Cybercrime Court to two years in prison and ordered to pay 1 million CFA francs (about USD 1,600) in damages. He was arrested on February 5, 2026, in relation to an article written by an external contributor that was published by L’Alternance, a Malian newspaper of which he is the editor-in-chief.

Meanwhile, Zainab Sheriff, an APC flagbearer aspirant and chairperson of the “Wi Dutɪ Lappa” movement, who was arrested and detained on February 20, 2026, on charges of “incitement and threatening language” following remarks made at an APC gathering in Freetown, has been [denied bail four times](#) without any clear indication of the reasons for the denials. It is feared that her prolonged detention may deter women’s political participation and expression, and erode public confidence in the justice system.

Other developments observed through the monitoring that could possibly impact the freedom of expression landscape include the introduction of the Gender-Based Online Abuse and Harassment Act of 2026 in Liberia, which stakeholders fear [could undermine](#) existing protections for freedom of expression when exploited by powerful individuals to target journalists and critics.

In Guinea, the media regulator, the High Authority for Communication (HAC), has [announced](#) the launch of a nationwide media census campaign. There are, however, concerns about how the census will be conducted in a fair and transparent manner to ensure that relatively smaller and financially vulnerable media outlets are not disproportionately affected.

4.0 Conclusion



The 32 incidents of freedom of expression violations documented over the three-month period in the 12 countries underscore the persistence of the challenges to free expression and civic activism across West Africa. Unfortunately, the security agencies charged with the mandate to protect and defend the guaranteed rights of the public to expression end up being the perpetrators, as evidenced in this report. This reality and other factors continue to impact how violations against the right to expression are accounted for, especially in instances where the perpetrators are also expected to front as the prosecutors. These challenges, in addition to the steady criminalisation of speech offences, continue to foster an atmosphere of repression in a number of countries in the region.

However, the right to expression is critical for nurturing the nascent democracies in the region, particularly in demanding participatory, transparent and accountable governance that is critically needed for improving standards of living for the people of West Africa. It is, therefore, an imperative that the continuous attacks on expression are collectively countered for the betterment of society. The Media Foundation for West Africa, therefore, calls on the following stakeholders to implement the recommendations proposed below as part of the measures for countering violations against expression and fostering a more conducive landscape for free speech.

5.0 Recommendations



To Government and State Institutions

- We call on governments in the region to hold security and law enforcement agencies fully accountable for violations committed against media practitioners, civil society actors, or citizens exercising their right to expression. In line with that, we also call on governments to continuously build the capacity of security agents to appreciate the work of the media in democratic societies and to collaborate with them.
- Ensure that perpetrators of freedom of expression rights violations (both state and non-state actors) are appropriately dealt with, and victims are adequately compensated.

To Media Regulatory Bodies

- We call on media regulatory bodies in the region to prioritise dialogue over suspension of media outlets, as such sanctions end up denying people the right to access information and the right to expression through media platforms. We, in particular, call on the media regulators in Guinea and Mali to lift the suspension of media outlets Africaturemedia.com, Guineesource.com, Kaback TV and Jeune Afrique while engaging them to resolve all challenges.

To Journalists and Media Organisations

- We call on journalists and media organisations to continue to uphold the highest ethical and professional standards in their work at all times. Maintaining professionalism strengthens public trust and fortifies the media's credibility as a pillar of democracy.
- Media owners and managers should provide legal and psychosocial support to journalists and media workers who are attacked as a result of their work to pursue justice.

- They should also support and sustain collective advocacy for the respect of press freedom and freedom of expression.

To ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

- We call on ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to strengthen their oversight mechanisms to ensure Member States comply with established human rights instruments.
- They should hold governments accountable for persistent or systemic violations and executive overreach.



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Voices for Public Good*

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