



COMMUNIQUE

Adopted by Participants at the Regional Conference on Press Freedom and Democratic Governance in West Africa, Convened by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), on 11 August 2026, at Abuja, Federal Republic of Nigeria.

PREAMBLE

We, the journalists, editors, media owners, publishers, media support organisations, civil society organisations, digital rights advocates, legal practitioners, academics, policymakers and development partners from across West Africa, gathered in Abuja, Nigeria, on 11 August 2026, at the Regional Conference on Press Freedom and Democratic Governance in West Africa, organised by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA);

Having deliberated on the state of press freedom, freedom of expression and democratic governance in West Africa, and having considered the findings and recommendations of the report commissioned by the MFWA, titled “*State, Determinants, Dynamics and Fate of Media and Free Expression Rights in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea*;

Recognising that freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information are fundamental rights and essential pillars of democratic governance, guaranteed under Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, and further reaffirmed, in the Revised ECOWAS Treaty, particularly Articles 4(g), 4(j) and 66, and in the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance;

Mindful that several States of the region, including the member States of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as well as coastal States, are confronting exceptional security challenges linked to terrorism and organised crime, which impose genuine constraints on public authorities, and convinced that the protection of press freedom and the pursuit of national security are complementary rather than competing objectives;



Deeply concerned that the deterioration of media freedom across parts of West Africa is accompanied by a narrowing of civic space, by weakened institutional accountability mechanisms and by growing constraints on the practice of independent journalism;

Concerned by the increasing recourse to cybercrime legislation, emergency and national security laws, administrative sanctions, surveillance technologies, arrests and detentions, media suspensions, internet restrictions and content controls, and by their cumulative effects on legitimate journalistic work and civic expression;

Further concerned by the erosion of editorial independence resulting from political interference, the limited autonomy of regulatory bodies, economic pressures and the discretionary allocation of state advertising and licensing;

Recognising that women journalists continue to face disproportionate threats, including gender-based online violence, sexual harassment, intimidation, exclusion from leadership and other structural barriers that undermine their equal participation in the media sector;

Acknowledging the resilience demonstrated by journalists, media organisations, civil society and human rights defenders who continue to defend democratic values under increasingly difficult conditions;

Affirming that independent journalism remains indispensable to accountable governance, informed citizen participation, peacebuilding, conflict prevention and democratic resilience across West Africa;

Hereby adopt the following Communique:

DECLARATION

We affirm that:

1. Freedom of expression and press freedom are indispensable pillars of democracy, accountable governance and sustainable development. Any restriction on their exercise, including on national security grounds or under emergency measures, should be provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and remain necessary, proportionate and limited in time.



2. Independent journalism and national security are not competing objectives. A free, professional and responsible media strengthens public trust, improves governance and contributes to national cohesion and stability, including in contexts of armed conflict.
3. The use of cybercrime legislation and vaguely defined security offences to sanction journalistic work raises serious concerns for democratic governance in the region, and calls for a clearer legal distinction between criminal offences and the legitimate exercise of journalism.
4. Insufficient guarantees of independence for media regulatory authorities undermine public confidence in these institutions and weaken media pluralism.
5. Economic pressure on the media, including the withdrawal of broadcasting licences without due process, the discretionary denial of state advertising and the suspension of media houses, constitutes as serious a threat on press freedom as does physical attacks against journalists.
6. The documented widespread practice of self-censorship across the region reflects not merely individual caution, but an environment in which the exercise of press freedom is constrained, to the detriment of citizens' access to information.
7. Internet shutdowns, social media restrictions, digital surveillance and the interception of communications without judicial authorisation are inconsistent with internationally recognised rights and disproportionately affect journalists, civil society and ordinary citizens.
8. Unresolved cases of missing journalists, together with prolonged detentions and prosecutions that are not brought to a transparent conclusion, erode public confidence in institutions and sustain impunity.
9. Gender-specific threats against women journalists require dedicated protection measures, institutional reforms and stronger representation of women in media leadership.

CALL TO ACTION

We therefore call upon:

Governments of West Africa to:

- a) Respect, protect and fulfil constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, press freedom and access to information.

- b) Repeal or amend laws that criminalise legitimate journalistic work, particularly cybercrime and national security provisions that permit arbitrary interpretation.
- c) Prevent arbitrary arrests, intimidation and harassment of journalists, and ensure that unresolved cases involving missing media professionals and civic actors are investigated and their outcomes made public.
- d) Restore judicial oversight over surveillance powers, and end the unlawful interception of journalists' communications.
- e) Guarantee the independence of media regulatory institutions and ensure transparent and appealable regulatory decisions.
- f) Ensure that any suspension or closure of a media organisation follows due process and is subject to judicial review, and provides for the reconsideration of broadcasting licences withdrawn without such process.
- g) Refrain from internet shutdowns and platform blocking, and ensure that any restriction on digital communications is provided by law, necessary, proportionate and limited in time.

Regional and Continental Institutions to:

- i. Place press freedom at the centre of democratic governance assessments, electoral observation missions and political transition processes.
- ii. Develop stronger regional accountability mechanisms for persistent violations against journalists.
- iii. Accompany political transition processes with sustained dialogue and technical cooperation aimed at measurable improvements in media freedom and civic space.
- iv. Strengthen implementation of regional and continental standards protecting freedom of expression.
- v. Treat press freedom as a substantive governance indicator rather than merely an aspirational principle.

Media Organisations should commit to:

- Uphold the highest standards of ethical, professional and independent journalism.
- Strengthen editorial independence and resist political and commercial interference.
- Expand collaboration among media organisations for investigative journalism, safety mechanisms and solidarity responses to attacks.
- Invest in digital security, newsroom safety protocols and journalists' wellbeing.
- Promote greater inclusion of women in newsroom leadership and decision-making.



For Civil Society and Media Support Organisations, we call for:

- Stronger regional coalitions to document, monitor and respond to violations against journalists.
- Expanded legal assistance, emergency response and protection mechanisms for journalists at risk.
- Greater investment in media literacy and public education to strengthen democratic resilience against disinformation while safeguarding legitimate expression.
- Systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data to inform protection strategies.

We urge Development Partners and the International Community to sustain support for:

- Independent journalism and public interest media;
- Legal defence and emergency protection mechanisms;
- Digital security and newsroom resilience;
- Investigative journalism and cross-border reporting;
- Journalists working in exile and independent media operating under constrained conditions.

Adopted on August 11, 2026 at Abuja, Federal Republic of Nigeria by participants at the Conference.