

Freedom of Expression Situation in West Africa



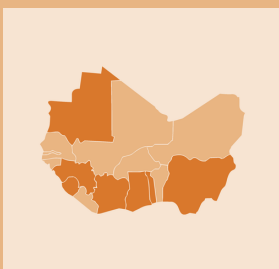
April 2026 Overview

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Introduction



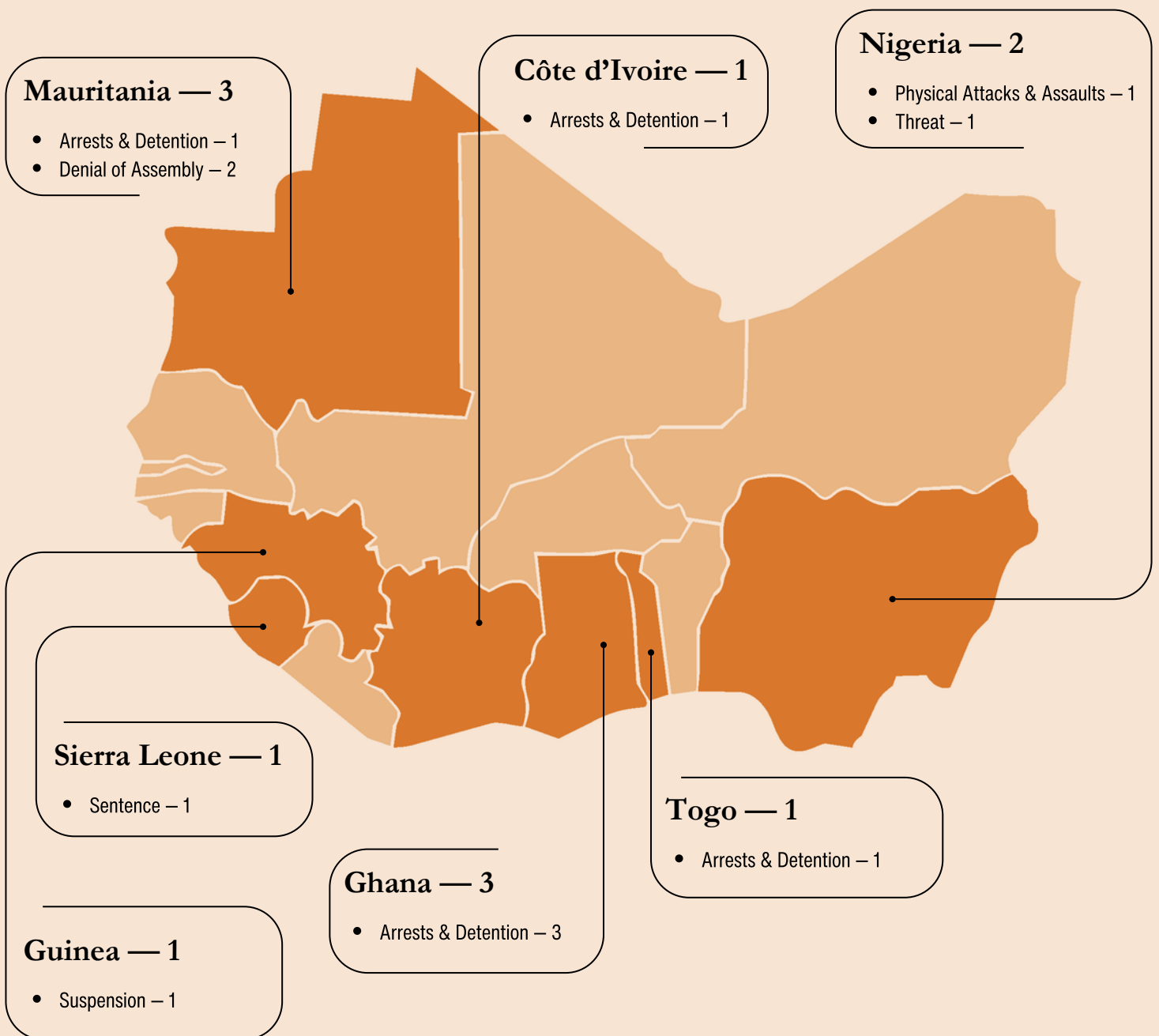
The state of freedom of expression and civic participation in West Africa in April 2026 reflected a troubling pattern of repression where state institutions continued to treat dissent and critical expression as threats rather than essential elements of democratic governance.

The region witnessed 12 cases of freedom of expression violations across seven countries - Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo with journalists, political actors, activists, and ordinary citizens facing arrests, threats, physical attacks, intimidation, restrictive sanctions, and the misuse of legal and administrative powers for exercising their rights to speak, protest, and hold authorities to account. Governments and regulatory authorities used laws and coercive measures to suppress free speech and peaceful assembly. This includes the suspension of a television programme and two presenters in Guinea, the arrest of citizens over speech-related offences in Ghana, the violent dispersion of a peaceful protest in Mauritania, and the imprisonment of an opposition flagbearer aspirant in Sierra Leone.

The documented cases of freedom of expression violations recorded this month rose significantly from the eight violations recorded in March. It is worth mentioning, however, that April also witnessed some significantly positive accountability responses and actions from the courts and the police, demonstrating that accountability is possible when institutions act decisively and uphold the rule of law. Notably, the Sierra Leone Police responded promptly to the assault on lawyer and journalist, Paul Kamara, while a High Court in Nigeria ordered the reinstatement of three university students who were suspended after they participated in a protest over school fees hikes.

This April 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.



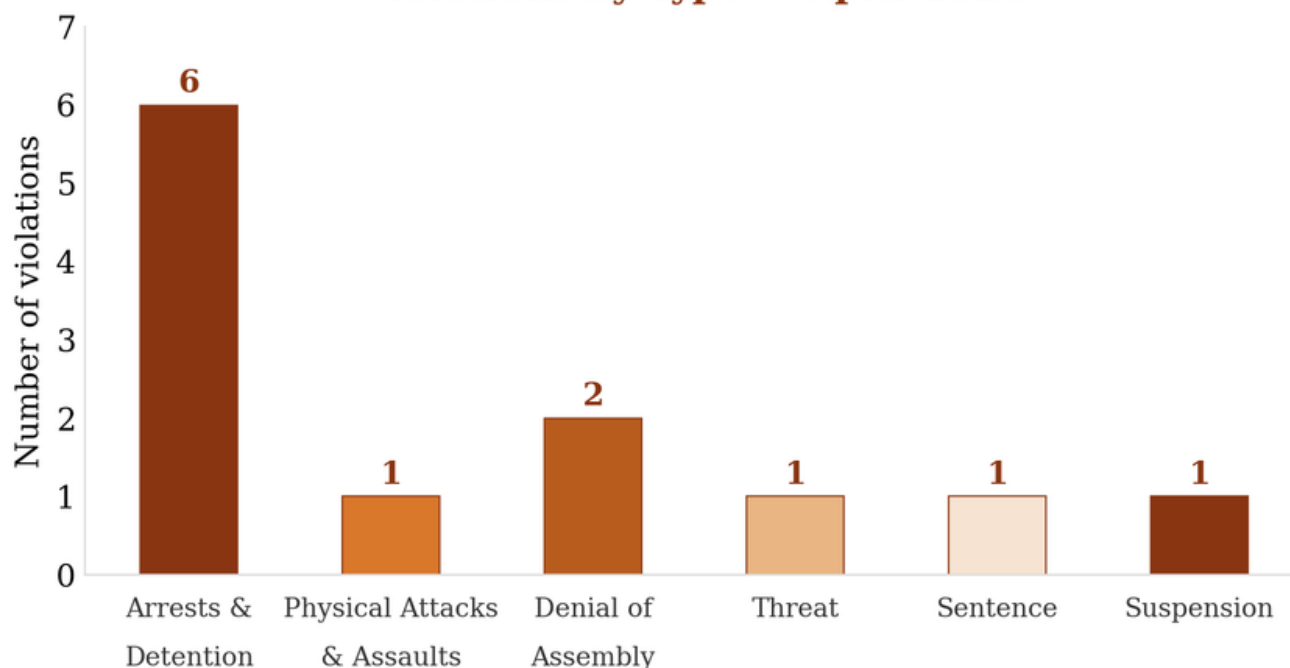
Keys

- Countries with violations
- Countries with no violations

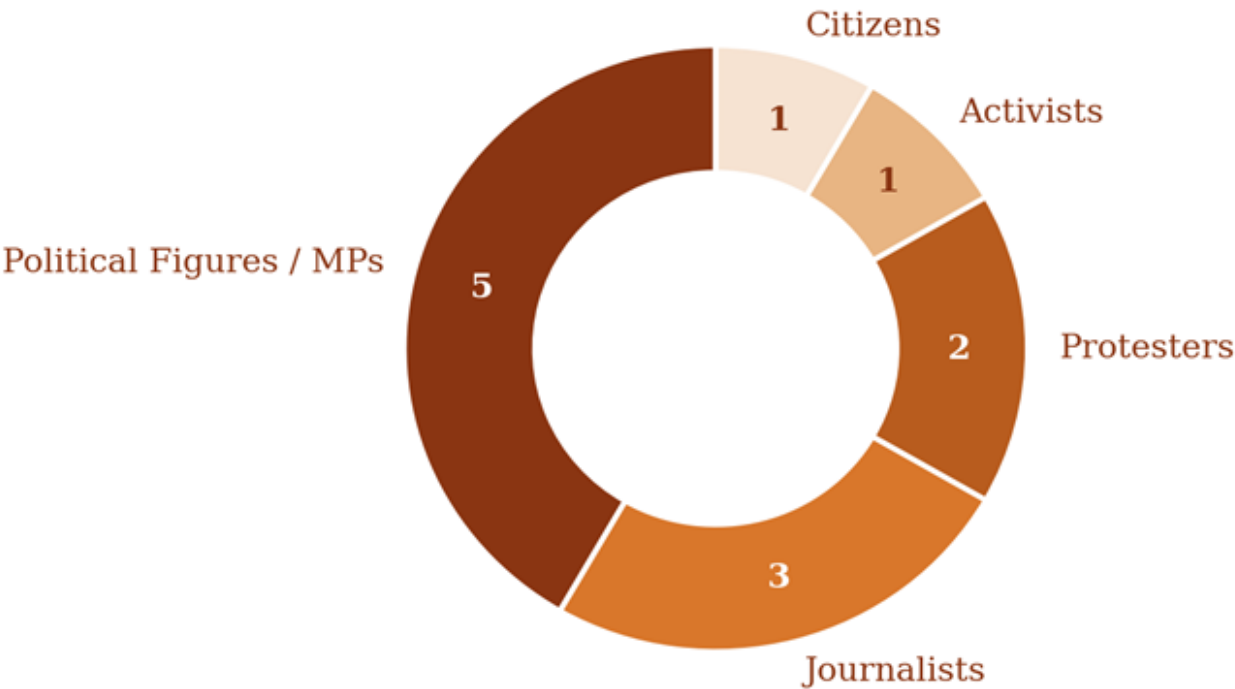
In April 2026, Ghana and Mauritania each recorded three incidents of freedom of expression violations, Nigeria two, and one each in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Togo. There were six recorded incidents of arrests, 1 recorded incident each of physical attacks or assaults, threats, sentences, and suspensions, and 2 recorded incidents of denial of assembly. These violations were mostly perpetrated by government authorities in Mauritania and Ghana, the police in Sierra Leone, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire, regulatory bodies, and thugs in Guinea and Nigeria, respectively. The victims of the freedom of expression violations recorded were journalists, ordinary citizens, opposition Members of Parliament (MPs), political parties/figures, and protesters.

Country	Arrests & Detention	Physical Attacks & Assaults	Denial of Assembly	Threat	Sentence	Suspension	Total
Côte d'Ivoire	1	–	–	–	–	–	1
Ghana	3	–	–	–	–	–	3
Guinea	–	–	–	–	–	1	1
Mauritania	1	–	2	–	–	–	3
Nigeria	–	1	–	1	–	–	2
Sierra Leone	–	–	–	–	1	–	1
Togo	1	–	–	–	–	–	1
Total	6	1	2	1	1	1	12

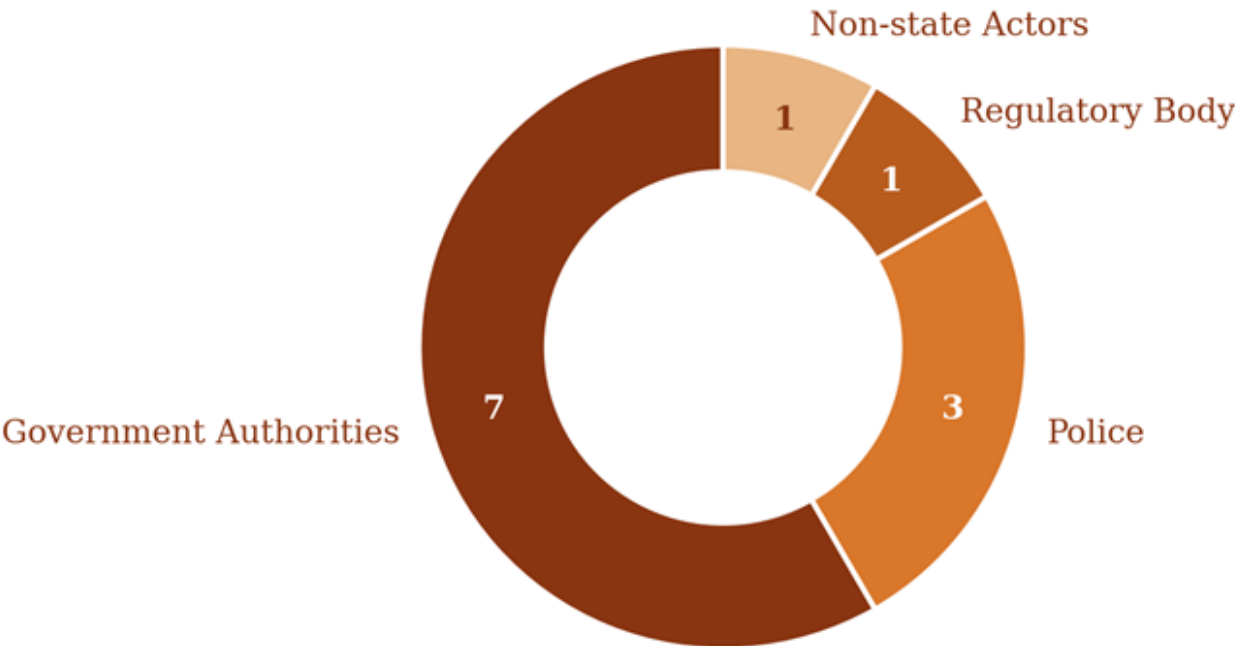
Violations by Type – April 2026



Victims by Category — April 2026



Perpetrators by Category — April 2026



Country Cases

Côte d'Ivoire: Mayor and newspaper founder detained over remarks criticising the political system



Assalé Tiémoko Antoine

(Mayor; founder, L'Éléphant déchaîné)

Assalé Tiémoko Antoine, the mayor and founder of investigative newspaper *L'Éléphant déchaîné*, was taken into custody on April 22, 2026, after nearly 14 hours of police interrogation in Abidjan. This was after he was issued a summons by the General Investigations Department of the Abidjan Police headquarters to appear before investigators with his lawyers, over comments he made during an interview in France in March this year. Antoine expressed his discontent with Côte d'Ivoire's political system, calling it corrupt. He pointed out that opponents are treated as adversaries, which undermines social cohesion in the country. Antoine currently faces allegations of disrupting public order, inciting revolt, undermining state institutions, and disseminating false information. According to his party, *Aujourd'hui et Demain, la Côte d'Ivoire* (ADCI), the hearing lasted until late at night, and his lawyers were not informed of the charges until several hours into the proceeding. It was reported that Antoine suffered two cardiovascular episodes during the interrogation and was transferred under police escort to the Abidjan Institute of Cardiology after medical specialists recommended urgent treatment. While investigators reportedly assured him he would return home once his condition stabilized, ADCI later stated that he was placed in police custody while still hospitalized before the order was lifted later the same day. As of the time of publishing this report, Ivorian authorities had not issued an official statement on the matter.

Togo: Poet arrested after photographing newly constructed drainage canals



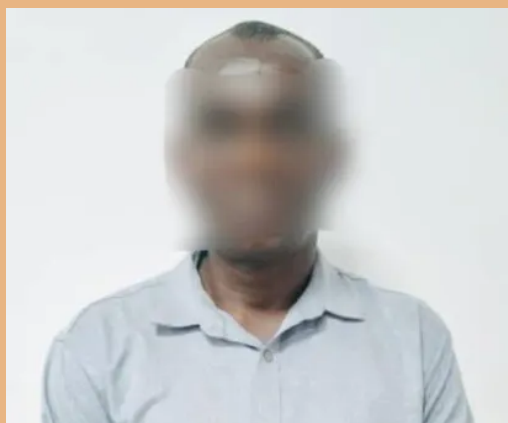
Honoré Sitsope

*Also known as Affectio
Credit: Icilome*

A Togolese poet and activist, Honoré Sitsope, known as Affectio, was arrested on April 24, 2026, after taking photographs of newly constructed drainage canals. Even so, news of his arrest was not known until four days later, when activist Grace Koumayi posted a video about his arrest on a social media platform. Meanwhile, authorities remained silent until April 30, when the opposition party l'Alliance Nationale pour le Changement / National Alliance for Change (ANC) released a communiqué regarding its visit to Affectio at the Agoè-Nyivé police station, where he was in custody.

Reports indicate that anti-gang unit officers initially stopped Sitsope and demanded that he delete the images, then, after he agreed to delete the images, they forcefully took him to meet their superior. According to a joint statement by the CNCC coalition, he was physically assaulted during the arrest, allegedly strangled, pinned to the ground, and deprived of his phone and bag. The opposition party later stated that police expanded their investigation after searching his phone and finding additional photographs beyond those of the drainage project.

Ghana: Three persons arrested and detained over speech-related offences



Pastor-William-Gyimah

*General Overseer of Elobim International Ministry
Credit: MyJoyOnline*

In Ghana, three individuals were arrested and detained over speech-related offences, including allegations of false publication, offensive conduct, and statements likely to cause fear and panic. While some of the speech content involved controversial or potentially harmful content, the repeated use of legal provisions, such as Section 208 of the Criminal Offences Act and Section 76 of the Electronic Communications Act, 2008 (Act 775), raises concerns about the potential misuse of criminal law to regulate expression and political commentary.

A Ghanaian pastor, William Gyimah, was remanded in police custody on April 8, 2026, by the Adenta Circuit Court in Accra and was charged with publication of false news with intent to cause fear and alarm under Section 208 of the Criminal Offences Act, 1960 (Act 29), and Section 76 of the Electronic Communications Act, 2008 (Act 775). This was after he was arrested the previous day over a viral TikTok video in which he allegedly made death threats against the Vice President. The pastor was arrested on April 7 during an intelligence-led operation, after the video was detected through routine social media monitoring by the Inspector-General's Cyber Vetting and Enforcement Team.

In a related incident, the Ghana Police Service arrested and detained a Regional Chairman of the country's main opposition party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Kwame Baffoe, also popularly known as Abronye DC. His arrest is linked to comments he made on his political commentary programme, accusing a judge of being “political” and alleging that the judge had negotiated with the government to use the court as a tool of intimidation. His remarks followed proceedings involving a content creator who had been remanded into police custody over social media claims that the President engaged in sexual relationships with women at the Jubilee House. Abronye DC was charged with offensive conduct, false publication, and conduct likely to cause fear and panic. Baffoe's arrest marks the second time in less than a year that he has been detained over controversial public comments.

Still on speech-related offences, Abubakar Yakubu, a Communications Officer for a constituency of the opposition party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), was on April 13, 2026, arrested by the Police and transferred to the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) Headquarters. His arrest was in connection with a Facebook post he made, which contained AI-generated or digitally altered images depicting the President, Communications Minister, and the Minister for Government Communications in LGBTQ+ pride-themed attire, following recent government comments on the proposed anti-LGBTQ+ bill. Although the police have not publicly disclosed the specific charges, the case is reportedly linked to allegations of false publication and statements likely to disturb public peace.



Mauritania: 60 protesters arrested in an authorities' crackdown

The two freedom of expression violations recorded in Mauritania reflect the growing intolerance by the government and state security agencies toward political expression, and the selective application of the controversial Protection of National Symbols Law enacted in December 2021.

While intended to be a peaceful protest by citizens, the Police in Nouakchott, the country's capital city, on April 5, 2026, used tear gas to disperse a protest against rising fuel prices. Approximately 60 protesters were arrested, including key political figures such as Wajaha Ould Ladham, Secretary-General of the Mauritanian Workers' Party, and Yacoub Lemrabott, President of the Renouveau du Mouvement Démocratique. The protest followed a 10% increase in transport fares. Mr. Lemrabott reportedly collapsed and was hospitalized. Media coverage of the event was restricted, with journalists barred from the area and equipment confiscated.

Mauritania: Two opposition MPs arrested for criticising the President online

Two opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) were also arrested in Nouakchott by the Mauritanian authorities for criticising the President online. Mariem Mint Cheikh, who is the MP for South Nouakchott, and Ghame Achour Salem, who is part of the seat delineated for women in Mauritania's National Assembly, were arrested for posting social media videos of themselves criticising President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. Mariem was detained at her home on April 9, while Ghame was arrested on April 10 after protesting Mariem's arrest and calling for her release. Their arrests are linked to a videoing the president and discussions of discrimination and detainee conditions. Despite their parliamentary immunity, the two MPs were charged under the controversial Protection of National Symbols Law aimed at protecting national symbols and prohibiting attacks on state authority. Since it was enacted in 2021, the law has been criticised for its restrictions on free expression.



Mariem mint Cheikh

Member of Parliament with her three-month baby



Ghame Achour Salem

Member of Parliament

Mauritania: Mass arrests during an anti-government protest

On April 16, 2026, Mauritanian security forces arrested about 40 activists and confiscated broadcasting equipment from journalists during a peaceful protest organized by the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA). Security forces dispersed the gathering, reportedly injuring several protesters and arresting numerous IRA leaders and activists, including an adviser to IRA President Biram Dah Abeid. The protest was against the country's worsening economic and social conditions. It was also to request the release of citizens and parliamentarians arrested and detained during an earlier protest on April 5. Journalists covering the protest were also targeted, with the Independent Press Agency reporting that security personnel seized a phone used for a live broadcast, forcing its team to continue coverage through an alternative device.

The crackdown has intensified concerns about shrinking civic space and declining respect for fundamental freedoms in Mauritania, which fell from 33rd to 50th place in the 2025 World Press Freedom Index amid growing tensions between the government, opposition groups, and civil society actors.

Nigeria: One journalist faced threatening remarks from a state official; another was attacked by assailants



Nyesom Wike

Minister for the Federal Capital Territory

Credit: BBC



Allwell Ene

Investigative journalist, Punch

Nigeria

In Nigeria, the two cases of freedom of expression violations involved journalists. On April 3, 2026, the country's Federal Capital Territory Minister, Nyesom Wike, strongly reacted to comments by Channels Television journalist, Seun Okinbaloye, which decried the risk of a one-party state in Nigeria. The journalist's comments followed Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission's decision not to recognize rival factions of the political party, African Democratic Congress (ADC). The Minister, who considered the journalist's comment inappropriate, claimed that he "would have shot" Okinbaloye for expressing such views, even though he later clarified that his remarks were figurative.

Investigative journalist Allwell Ene of Megalectrics Media Group was, on April 13, 2026, attacked by more than 15 men while filming an alleged criminal activity at Garrison Junction in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The assailants beat him and stole his belongings. The incident has drawn condemnation from the Rivers State Council of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ).

Guinea: Media regulator suspends a television programme and two presenters

On April 23, 2026, Guinea's media regulator, the High Authority for Communication (HAC), suspended the TV show "Guinea Today" on Tél  24, along with two hosts, Aboubacar Diallo and Bah S kou, for three months. The suspension followed a broadcast that aired unverified allegations against legislative candidate Bald  Ibrahima Sory, including claims of livestock theft and the misappropriation of public property. The HAC cited a previous incident on April 21, 2026, in which the show aired content considered electoral propaganda, and treated the recent broadcast as a repeat offense. Show host Aboubacar Diallo, however, just before the TV show was suspended, clarified that the discussion was aimed at examining the allegations rather than promoting the candidate.

While regulators have a legitimate mandate to enforce broadcasting standards, sanctions that restrict media content or suspend journalists raise important freedom of expression concerns as they may affect the public's right to receive information and participate in public debate.

Sierra Leone: Opposition flagbearer aspirant sentenced to four years in prison

On April 14, 2026, Zainab Sheriff, Chairperson of the Wi Duti civic movement and a flagbearer aspirant of Sierra Leone's main opposition party, the All People's Congress (APC), was sentenced to four years and two months in prison for incitement and threatening language under the Public Order Act. She was declared wanted on February 13, 2026, and arrested on February 20 for alleged remarks about election rigging during an APC National Mammoth rally. Throughout her trial, Sheriff faced eight bail denials despite her pleas of not guilty and her status as a mother.



Zainab Sheriff

*Flagbearer aspirant, All
People's Congress (APC)
Credit: Engage Salone*

Burkina Faso: Public prosecutor's accounts over the death of an activist contradict eye witness account

On April 1, 2026, the public prosecutor handling the case involving the arrest, police custody, and subsequent death of Burkinabè activist Mahamadi Baguian stated that the victim had fallen ill while being transferred to the criminal investigation department and was pronounced dead despite receiving medical care. Baguian, a member of Burkina Faso's Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP), died in Ouagadougou on March 31, 2026, shortly after being arrested by security forces.

His arrest followed a viral video posted on March 22 in which he criticised Transport and Territorial Administration Minister Émile Zerbo over what he described as his unjust exclusion from arrangements to accompany Burkinabè pilgrims to Mecca. The prosecutor's account contrasted with that of eyewitnesses, who indicated that Baguian was forcibly subdued, hooded, and bound after attempting to flee, and that he cried out in pain during the arrest. Baguian's father also reported seeing blood on his son's body, raising concerns about possible ill-treatment.

Positive freedom of expression-related developments in April

Nigeria: Magistrate's ultimatum to advance the inquiry into a journalist's death

After several delays and inconsistencies, Coroner Magistrate, Temitope Oladele, who is presiding over the inquiry into the death of Gboah TV journalist Pelumi Onifade, on April 7, 2026, issued a new 14-day directive for the Chief Medical Director of the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH) to submit a comprehensive report on the whereabouts and status of a body marked Tag No. 1385, believed to be that of the slain journalist.

Pelumi Onifade, on October 24, 2020, went missing after being arrested during the EndSARS protests in Lagos. A body marked Tag No. 1385, believed to be his, was found at Ikorodu General Hospital on November 3, 2020. The Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH) has repeatedly failed to comply with court orders to provide a report on the body, hindering progress on investigations. LASUTH claims it cannot confirm the identity because the DNA samples were destroyed in a fire during the protests, a claim contested by Onifade's family's legal representatives.

In another win for freedom of expression, the Federal High Court in Ibadan on April 15, 2026, ordered the University of Ibadan to reinstate three students who had been suspended for participating in a peaceful protest against increased tuition fees in May 2024. The court found that the university violated the students' right to a fair hearing during disciplinary proceedings and ruled that the sanctions were unlawful. The judgment nullified the suspension,

Nigeria: Court orders university to reinstate students suspended over a fee-hike protest

restored the students' academic rights, and prohibited the university from taking further disciplinary action against them in connection with the protest. The ruling represents an important affirmation of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and underscores that educational institutions must respect due process when responding to student activism.

Sierra Leone: Swift police action following the assault on a lawyer and journalist

Following public outcry from the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and the West Africa Network of Activists and Media Defence Lawyers (WANAMDEL), MFWA's network of pro bono lawyers, the Sierra Leone Police has transferred the matter involving the assault on lawyer and journalist Paul Kamara to the CID headquarters. The police have also arrested the

implicated officers in the assault and facilitated investigations by the Independent Police Complaints Board. Lawyer and journalist Paul Kamara was attacked and pepper-sprayed on April 4, 2026, by police officers while trying to de-escalate a confrontation between a police officer and a civilian at the Adonkia Police Station in Freetown, despite identifying himself as a lawyer and journalist.

Key Trends and Implications

a) Democratic expression remains under attack

The period under review emphasizes the continuous attack on democratic expressions in West Africa as governments, state security officials, and political actors seek to suppress and punish legitimate forms of public participation and dissent. From the crackdown on protesters in Mauritania, assault on journalists in Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, the arrest of individuals over speech-related offences in Ghana, to the imprisonment of an Opposition flagbearer aspirant in Sierra Leone, these developments raise concerns about the inherent risks ordinary citizens face when exercising their fundamental rights. These incidents foster self-censorship, thereby further shrinking the civic space. Regrettably, a flagbearer aspirant of Sierra Leone's main opposition party, the All Peoples Congress (APC), was handed a four-year prison sentence, raising concerns about the protection of political expression and women's political participation.

b) State accountability actions help reduce impunity

Meanwhile, a notable trend we observed in the period under review is the significant accountability responses and actions taken by state actors – the court and the police –toward the violations against journalists, activists, and students. Such oversight actions provide essential safeguards against abuse and contribute to a more enabling environment for free expression and civic participation. The directive by Nigeria's High Court for the University of Ibadan to reinstate the three suspended students and the prompt action taken by the Sierra Leone Police following the assault on journalist and lawyer Paul Kamara demonstrate how timely state accountability responses help to deter future violations and restore public confidence in the rule of law.



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Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the incidents of freedom of expression violations documented in April 2026 reveal a regional environment in which the rights to political expression, press freedom, and peaceful assembly remain under sustained pressure. As the countries cited for freedom of expression in this report remain parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Union’s African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, we urge them to translate their commitments into concrete action to ensure that journalists, activists, opposition figures, and citizens can exercise their rights without fear of censorship, intimidation, or reprisals.

The MFWA specifically calls on the authorities in Burkina Faso and Nigeria to ensure that ongoing investigations into the death in custody of activist Mahamadi Baguian and the death of journalist Pelumi Onifade, respectively, are concluded without further delay. These investigations must be independent, impartial, and transparent, with findings made public, while culprits are duly punished in accordance with the law.

We also urge the authorities in Sierra Leone to ensure that investigations into the assault on journalist and lawyer, Paul Kamara, by police officers are conducted thoroughly and transparently, as the timely and credible outcomes of these cases are essential to combating impunity and demonstrating that violations against journalists and citizens will not be tolerated.



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