

Freedom of Expression Situation in West Africa

May 2026 **Overview**



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Introduction

Freedom of expression and civic rights remained under pressure across West Africa in May 2026, with violations persisting in both democratic and military-led states. May recorded the highest number of freedom of expression violations so far in 2026 with 16 documented incidents across seven countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, Mauritania, and Niger.

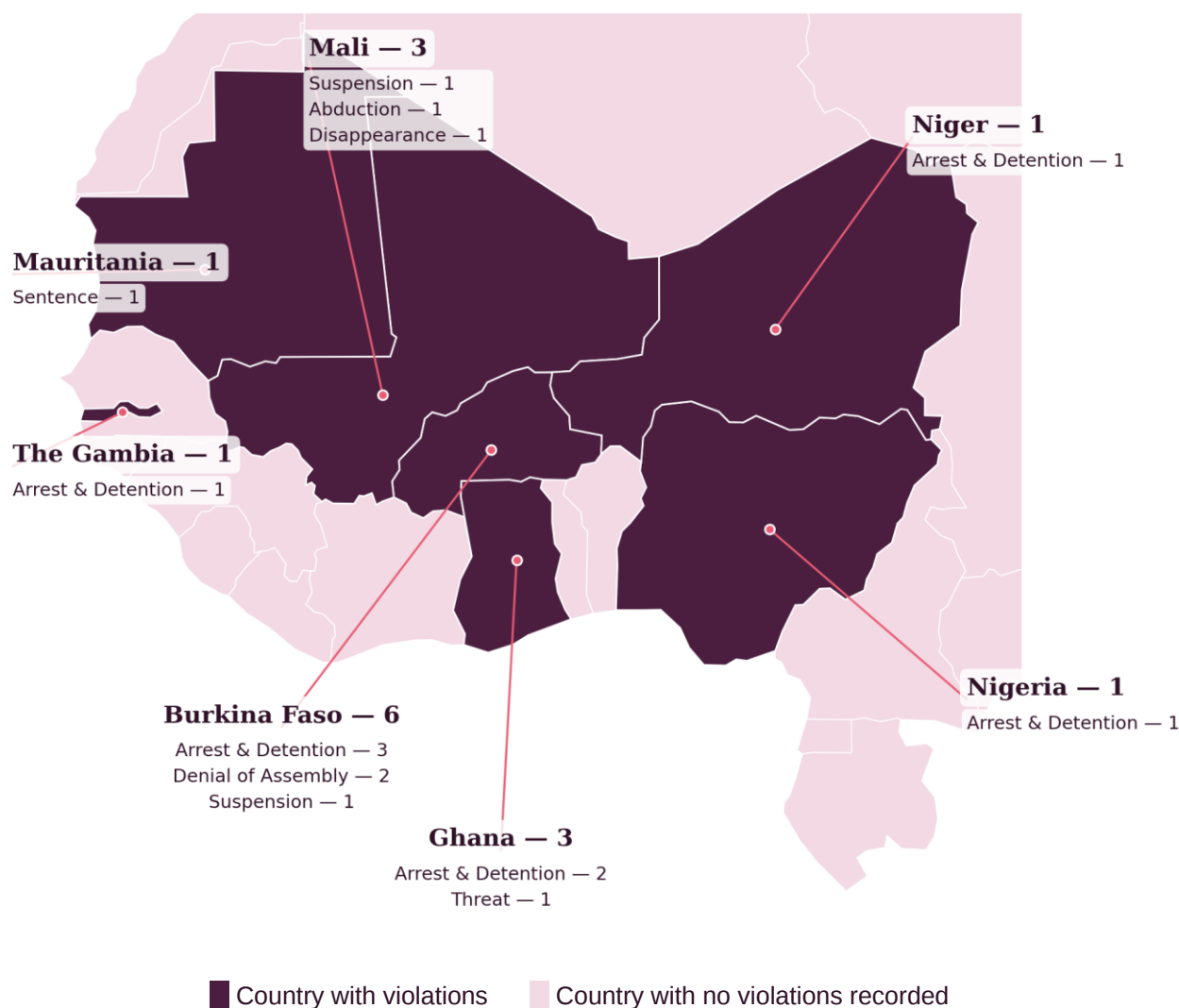
Government authorities, security forces, judicial authorities, media regulatory bodies, and unidentified individuals increasingly deployed arrests and detention, prosecutions, administrative suspensions, enforced disappearances, and regulatory sanctions to suppress free speech and peaceful assembly, thereby further shrinking civic space. These tactics, deployed against journalists, lawyers, religious leaders, activists, political figures, student organisations, and international media outlets for exercising their rights to speak, protest, and hold authorities to account, were justified on grounds of national security, combating disinformation, cybercrime, or maintaining public order.

Among the month's most concerning incidents was the abduction of Malian lawyer Mountaga Tall, in Bamako, who had made several public statements critical of the country's political direction and governance under the transition government. Also, the arrest of Imam Dr Mohamed Ishaq Kindo, who had criticised a bill on religious freedom, triggered further violations including the closure of the main Sunni Movement Mosque, the arrest of nearly 100 protesters, and the forcible dispersal of demonstrators. These incidents point to a continued shrinking of civic space and growing intolerance of dissenting voices across the region.

This May 2026 report was produced with support from the 11th Hour Project of the Schmidt Family Foundation. It aims to highlight the state of freedom of expression in West Africa, drawing on data gathered through MFWA's daily monitoring of the freedom of expression environment across the sixteen countries it covers, via its network of monitors, correspondents, and national partners.

The Numbers. The Perpetrators. The Trends.

Freedom of Expression Violations by Country — May 2026



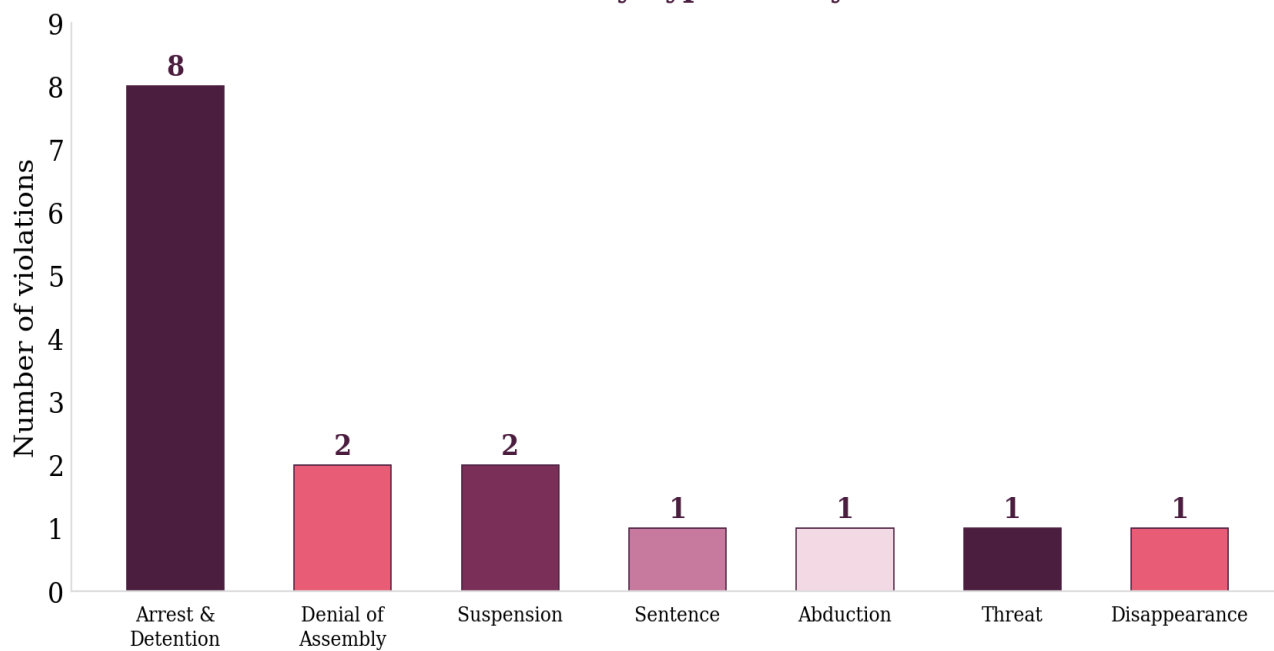
In May 2026, Burkina Faso recorded the highest number of violations (6), followed by Mali and Ghana at three (3) violations each. Nigeria, The Gambia, Mauritania, and Niger recorded one (1) violation each. The documented violations were committed by a range of actors, including government authorities, security forces, judicial authorities, media regulatory bodies, and unidentified individuals. Victims included journalists, lawyers, religious leaders, civil society activists, political figures, student organisations, and national and international media outlets.

Table 1: Violations by country and type

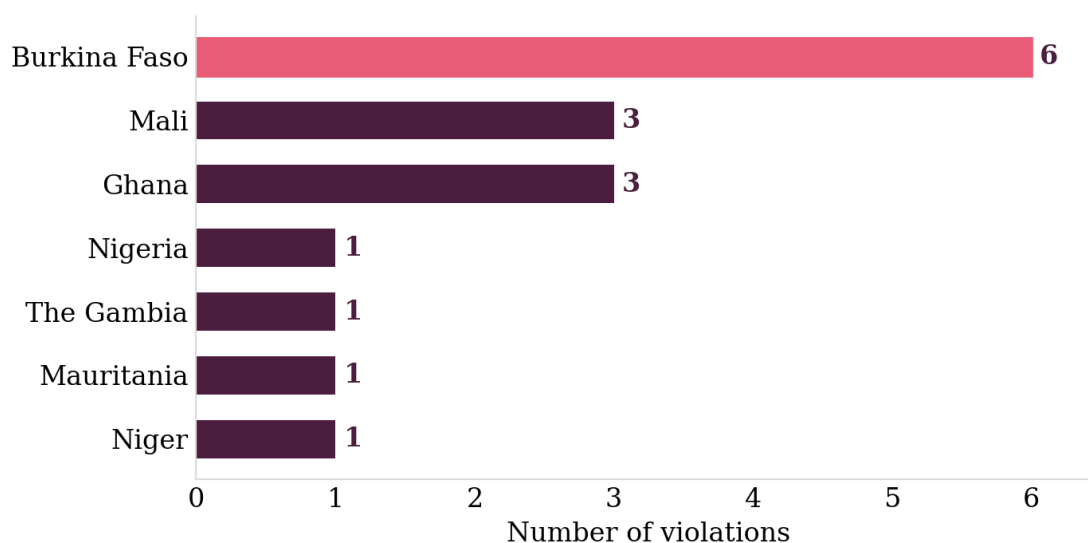
Country	Arrest & Detention	Denial of Assembly	Suspension	Sentence	Abduction	Threat	Disappearance	Total
Burkina Faso	3	2	1	–	–	–	–	6
Mali	–	–	1	–	1	–	1	3
Ghana	2	–	–	–	–	1	–	3
Nigeria	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
The Gambia	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
Mauritania	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
Niger	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
Total	8	2	2	1	1	1	1	16

Total: 16 violations across 7 countries — May 2026

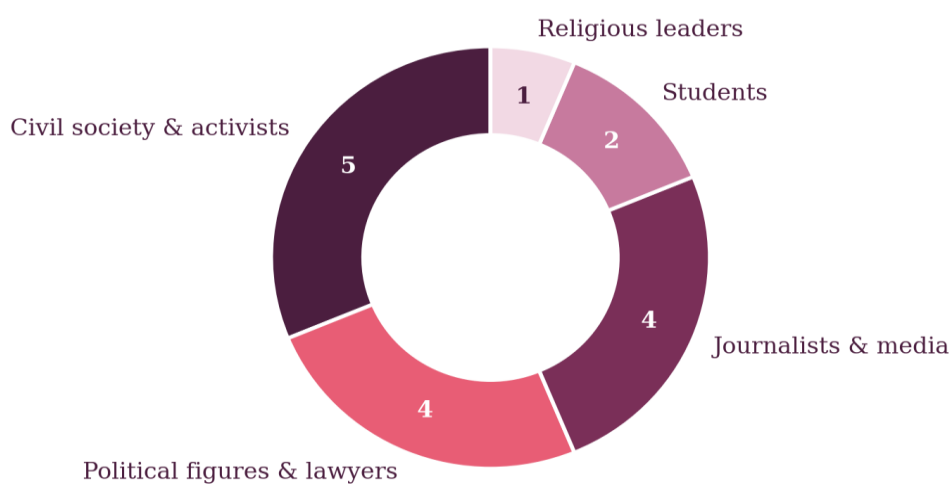
Violations by Type — May 2026



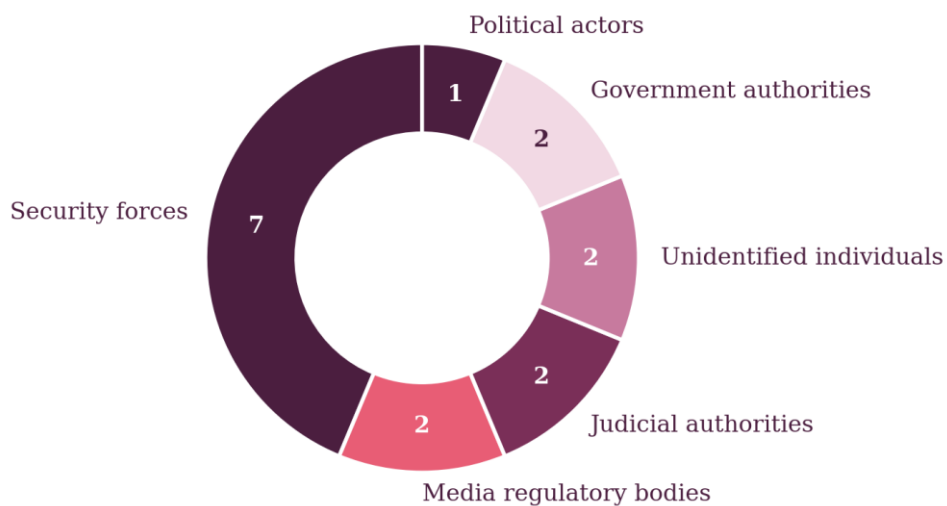
Violations by Country — May 2026



Victims by Category — May 2026



Perpetrators by Category — May 2026



Country Cases

Burkina Faso: Authorities tighten restrictions on religious leaders and student organisations



Imam Dr Mohamed Ishaq Kindo
Vice-president of the Sunni Movement of Burkina Faso

Incidents of freedom of expression violations recorded in May 2026 illustrate a worrying trend toward the use of arrests and administrative measures to restrict freedom of expression, religion, and association. On May 26, 2026, Burkinabè security forces [arrested](#) Imam Dr Mohamed Ishaq Kindo, vice-president of the Sunni Movement of Burkina Faso, over remarks he made criticising a bill on Religious Freedoms in Burkina Faso. The bill prohibits the establishment of places of worship in

public institutions, including government offices, hospitals and military barracks. It also includes measures to limit noise pollution from religious activities. Its adoption drew strong criticism from religious leaders, particularly among the country's Sunni Muslim community, who view it as a restriction on freedom of worship. The Imam's arrest sparked street protests in Ouagadougou that security forces dispersed with tear gas. Nearly 100 protesters were arrested and detained, and transferred to a military camp for "civic and citizenship training". Following this, the authorities also ordered the indefinite closure of the Sunni Movement's main mosque in central Ouagadougou, citing a "risk of public disorder" linked to tensions following the arrest.

On the same day, Burkina Faso's military government [suspended](#) the General Union of Burkinabè Students (UGEB) for three months, and opened a criminal investigation against the Union's leadership. This was just a day after the Union issued a statement criticising the junta's failure to restore security. The Union was suspended on allegations of "glorification of terrorism" and "demoralising the defence and security forces." The night before the suspension, about ten UGEB members, including its president Wilfried Bazo, were arrested by unidentified armed men. UGEB, founded in 1960 and one of the country's oldest civic organisations, also cited the unresolved cases of two other students abducted in 2025 who remain unaccounted for without charge.



Some UGEB members at an event on 25 May 2026 marking the 36th anniversary of the killing of Dabo Boukary / Credit: UGEB

Mali: Suspected enforced disappearances and media suspension deepen shrinking of civic space



The context in Mali was marked by incidents of suspected enforced disappearances and restrictions on the media, further highlighting the increasing intolerance for critical voices. For instance, on May 2, 2026, lawyer and political figure Mountaga Tall was [abducted](#) from his home in Bamako by armed, masked men. In the months before his abduction, Tall had made several public statements critical of the country's political direction and governance under the transition authorities. On May 5, 2026, the Mali Bar Association condemned the abduction as a grave violation of fundamental rights and an act carried out outside any legal framework. In a related development, on May 16, his eldest son, Cheick Mamadou Tall, was [reported](#) missing after responding to a call asking him to deliver clothing and medication to his father, who was being held at an undisclosed location, without charge or legal process. According to his family, since Cheick Mamadou Tall left home that afternoon, he has still not returned.



In a separate development, the High Authority for Communication (HAC) on May 19, 2026, ordered the [suspension](#), until further notice, of Al Arabiya and Al Hadath channels. This was after the channels aired a May 8 report about the security situation in the northern Kidal region of Mali. The HAC accused Al Arabiya of presenting unverified claims as fact, disrespecting the national army's honour, broadcasting images of identifiable prisoners of war, and effectively glorifying terrorism.

Ghana: Politician and content creator arrested, journalist threatened over free expression cases

In Ghana, the month opened with the case of Kwame Baffoe, a regional Chairman of the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP), who was [re-arrested](#) on May 13, 2026, and brought before Accra Circuit Court 9 over remarks criticising a judge. He faced two charges: offensive conduct conducive to a breach of peace under Section 207(1) of the Criminal Offences Act, 1960 (Act 29), and publication of false news under Section 208(1) of the same statute. The court denied him bail and remanded him into custody. It was on May 21, eight days after his detention, that the Accra High Court granted him bail of GH¢100,000 (about US\$ 9,009.01) with two sureties. This came after sustained political and legal pressure from the NPP, which had also petitioned the diplomatic community over Baffoe's arrest and detention, describing it as part of broader efforts to resist what the party called the suppression of democratic freedoms.

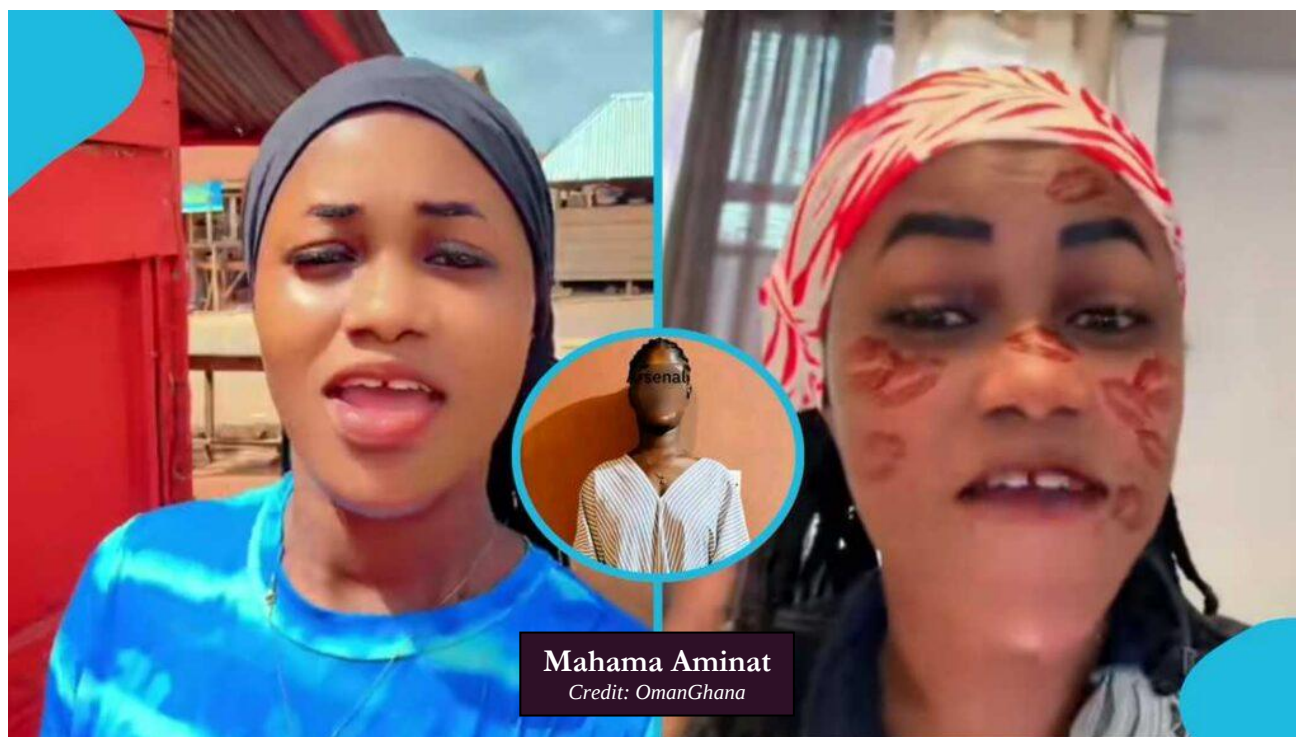


Kwame Baffoe
Regional Chairman of NPP
Credit: Metro TV



Metro TV Journalist Ibrahim Seidu Abode (Left); Alale Baba Atimbilla (Right), communications officer for the NDC in the Pusiga constituency

Days later, press freedom concerns took a different shape. On May 19, 2026, Metro TV journalist Ibrahim Seidu Abode [was prevented](#) from covering the launch of a government project in Pusiga, in Ghana's Upper East Region. According to Abode, Alale Baba Atimbilla, a constituency Communications Officer of the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC), ordered him to leave the venue, saying that Pusiga Member of Parliament, Hajia Laadi Ayamba, did not want him there, and threatened him with consequences if he stayed. Abode complied but later shared his experience on Facebook, where he received other threats in the comment section.



That same day, a separate case unfolded online. Videos began circulating of TikTok content creator Mahama Aminat insulting and issuing threats against President John Mahama and First Lady Lordina Mahama, in which she called on others to harm the first family. As the videos went viral, she [was arrested](#) on May 20, 2026, and charged with offensive conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace, incitement to public hostility, and electronic threats of death. Police initially denied her bail, but on May 22, 2026, the Accra Circuit Court 2 granted her bail in the sum of GH¢1 million (about US\$ 90,090.09) with two sureties.

Nigeria: Arrest of a podcaster raises concerns over the criminalisation of critical expression



On May 13, 2026, Segun Ajibare, a member of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), known online as “Ajibare Talks,” was [arrested](#) in Osogbo, Osun State, by a joint team from the Department of State Services (DSS) and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC). His arrest was linked to podcasts questioning the ₦1.2 billion rehabilitation of the collapsed Moro Bridge in Kwara State. He highlighted alleged discrepancies in the project’s cost and quality and called for greater transparency. Following his arrest, Ajibare was transferred to Ilorin, Kwara State, and detained at the Oke-

Kura Correctional Centre. Ajibare’s arrest raises concerns about the use of security agencies to suppress critical expression on matters of public interest.

The Gambia: Arrest of anti-corruption activists raises concerns over freedom of peaceful assembly



On May 8, 2026, The Gambian police [arrested](#) 15 members of Gambians Against Looted Assets (GALA) as the group gathered at the Youth Monument in Westfield to mark its first anniversary. Despite having secured a permit from the venue's custodian, the Kanifing Municipal Council, the Police Intervention Unit blocked most members from entering, claiming

the group did not have a police permit. Those arrested were detained at Kairaba and Kotu police stations. GALA has also recently put the Gambia Police Force under increasing pressure over the killing of two police officers in September 2023 by an unknown gunman with the hashtag #WhoKilledTheCops. Some of their members are blocked from commenting on The Gambian Police Force's (GPF) Facebook page. The Gambia's National Human Rights Commission said it was investigating, and a human rights lawyer argued no police permit was actually required for an enclosed venue like the monument.

Mauritania: Two opposition MPs convicted over critical social media posts



Mariem Cheikh Jink (Left) and Gamo Achour (Right)

Credit: Chevylane and Trustmag

On May 4, the Criminal Division of the Nouakchott West Court of First Instance in Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital, [sentenced](#) two opposition Members of Parliament, Mariem Cheikh Jink and Gamo Achour, both members of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), to four

years in prison, convicting them on charges including insulting state symbols, incitement to violence, and disseminating content deemed likely to disturb public order.

The two lawmakers were [arrested](#) on April 9 and 10, 2026, under Law No. 2021-021 on the Protection of National Symbols and the Criminalisation of Attacks on the Authority of the State and the Honor of the Citizen, a criminal law adopted in 2021 that has been widely criticised for its impact on freedom of expression and public debate. Their arrest followed social media posts criticising President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. Beyond the prison term, the court also ordered the removal of the posts in question, the seizure of their mobile phones, and the closure of their social media accounts.

Niger: Nine international media outlets suspended over content purported to threaten public order



Niger's record of violations in May was marked by the [suspension](#) of nine international media outlets on May 8, 2026, by the country's media regulator, the National Communications Observatory (ONC). The affected outlets are France 24, Radio France Internationale (RFI), France Afrique Media, LSI Africa, Agence France-Presse (AFP), TV5 Monde, TF1 Info, Jeune Afrique, and Mediapart. The regulator accused them of broadcasting content likely to undermine public order, national unity, social cohesion, and the stability of state institutions. The ONC offered no concrete evidence for the accusations. It cited no specific reports, broadcasts, or publications to back up the allegations. The suspension raised concerns about the use of administrative measures to restrict access to independent sources of information.

Positive Freedom of Expression-related Developments

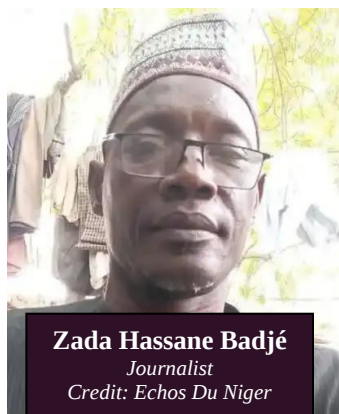
Ghana: High Court condemns violations against journalists during the #OccupyJulorbiHouse protest



On May 14, 2026, the Accra High Court ruled that the Ghanaian police had [violated](#) the rights of journalists Bridget Otoo and Vanessa Edotom Boateng, and activist George Gyening Anyang, during the 2023 #OccupyJulorbiHouse protest. On September 21, 2023, civil society group Democracy Hub organised a three-day protest to register displeasure with the government over concerns of economic hardship, illegal mining, and corruption. The protest, which was termed #OccupyJulorbiHouse, plays on the word 'Julorbi' (thief), reflecting the protesters' frustration with perceived corruption within the government. During the protest, the police attacked and tore Otoo's blouse during an assault, while Boateng was unlawfully detained and stripped of her phone to prevent her from filming the brutality. Anyang was slapped, punched in the face, and whipped with a metal belt and baton as he live-streamed events at the regional police station.

The court awarded them compensatory damages of GH¢100,000 (about US\$8,580), general damages of GH¢50,000 (about US\$4,290), and GH¢30,000 (about US\$2,573) in legal costs. The court also ordered the police to issue a public apology to be published in the *Daily Graphic*, a national newspaper. The ruling is a significant step for the protection of freedom of expression and press freedom in Ghana, affirming the duty of security forces to respect the fundamental rights of journalists covering protests.

Niger: Release of two journalists marks positive progress



Nigerien journalist Zada Hassane Badjé, Director of Canal 3 in Dosso and the newspaper *Touba Info*, was granted [provisional release](#) on May 6, 2026, after spending eight months in detention. Badjé was arrested on August 25, 2025, following the circulation of a WhatsApp audio recording containing remarks deemed insulting to President Abdourahamane Tiani and was subsequently sentenced to 30 months in prison with a fine of two million CFA francs.

Nigerien journalist Gazali Abdou Tasawa, a Hausa-language correspondent for Deutsche Welle (DW), was granted [provisional release](#) on May 8, 2026, after 105 days in detention. He was arrested on January 23, 2026, following a report on the living conditions of Nigerian refugees settled near a cemetery in Niamey. The authorities accused him of disseminating information likely to disturb public order.



Senegal: Journalist freed after eight years in prison following presidential pardon

On May 27, 2026, journalist and writer René Captain Bassène was [released](#) following a presidential pardon, ending his eight years in detention. His conviction had been widely criticised by the MFWA and other press freedom organisations, who considered it an unfair decision by the court. Bassène was arrested in January 2018 following the Boffa-Bayotte massacre in Casamance, in which 14 people were killed and seven others injured. Prosecutors accused him of helping to organise the attack because of his alleged links with members of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC), an allegation he has consistently denied.

In June 2022, he was found guilty of complicity in murder, attempted murder and criminal conspiracy, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. A review of court documents found that prosecutors cited Bassène's journalistic work as part of their arguments for conviction, reinforcing concerns that his reporting was treated as evidence of criminality. His lawyers challenged the decision, arguing that the evidence was unreliable and that some testimonies had been obtained under coercion.

Nigeria: Police go after suspects in journalist's assault case

On May 4, the Rivers State Police Command announced the [arrest](#) of 13 suspects in connection with the April 13 [assault](#) of investigative journalist Allwell Ene of Megaletrics Media Group. He was 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. However, after Ene went to identify the arrested suspects, he disclosed that they were not the ones who attacked him. The police say investigations are ongoing. It is worth pointing out that the swift arrest of the suspects involved in the assault on the journalist underscores the importance of effective and timely state actions in protecting press freedom.



Allwell Ene
Investigative Journalist, Punch Nigeria

Key Trends and Implications

a) Increasing criminalisation of free speech

The violations documented in May emphasise the continuous attack on free speech in West Africa as governments, state security officials, and political actors rely on arrests, detention, and criminal charges to respond to dissent and other legitimate forms of public participation.

From the criminal proceedings against content creators in Ghana, the detention of journalist Segun Ajibare in Nigeria after questioning the management of public funds, to the imprisonment of two opposition MPs in Mauritania over social media posts criticising the President, these cases demonstrate how criminal and public-order laws continue to be used against political expression, online speech and commentary on matters of public interest. Such measures risk encouraging self-censorship and limiting citizens' participation in public debates.

b) A widening repression ecosystem beyond traditional media actors

In May, the victims of freedom of expression violations expanded beyond the usual targets of journalists and media houses to religious leaders, students and political figures, indicating how the repression ecosystem is widening to include a range of people who are attacked for exercising their right to express their opinions, organise or publish. In Burkina Faso, for example, the arrest of Imam Dr Mohamed Ishaq Kindo, which further triggered protests, the arrest of nearly 100 demonstrators, and the closure of the Sunni Movement's main mosque are classic examples. The suspected enforced disappearance of lawyer Mountaga Tall and his son, alongside the suspension of Al Arabiya and Al Hadath, further illustrates the use of security and administrative measures against critical voices. These developments lead to a further shrinking of civic space across the region.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The right to free expression must not just be guaranteed in national constitutions. It must actually be protected in practice to facilitate public access to information and democratic participation. In view of this, the MFWA calls on the authorities of Ghana, Nigeria, Mauritania, Niger, and The Gambia to refrain from using judicial proceedings, administrative restrictions, or security measures to silence journalists, activists, political figures, and citizens peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Particularly, we call on the Burkinabè authorities to release Imam Dr Mohamed Ishaq Kindo, Wilfried Bazo, president of the General Union of Burkinabè Students (UGEB), and the other students who are still in detention. We also call on them to respect the rights to freedom of religion, association, and expression by opening the main Sunni Mosque and lifting the suspension of UGEB.

We also urge the Malian authorities to conduct an independent investigation into the disappearance of Mountaga Tall and his son, Cheick Mamadou Tall, and sanction the perpetrators involved.



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