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The Shrinking Civic Space in Togo

A Situational Report on Freedom of Expression, Press Freedom and Digital Rights in Togo

Produced with funding support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana

Kingdom of the Netherlands

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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About This Report

This report synthesises thirteen consecutive monthly monitoring reports on freedom of expression, press freedom and digital rights in Togo, produced by the Media Foundation for West Africa between September 2025 and September 2026. Drawing on daily media monitoring, interviews with affected journalists and human rights defenders, engagement with legal defence teams and the tracking of court dockets across Togo's five administrative regions, it examines the gap between constitutional guarantees and law-enforcement practice, documents six emblematic cases. It sets out recommendations for state and non-state actors. It is intended for journalists, civil society organisations, researchers, policymakers and international partners working on civic space and media freedom in West Africa.

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About the Media Foundation for West Africa

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) is a regional, independent, non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting and defending freedom of expression, media development and democratic governance in West Africa.

Disclaimer

The views and findings presented in this report do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Media Foundation for West Africa's funding partners.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Promoting Press Freedom and Women's Digital Rights in Togo

A synthesis of thirteen consecutive monthly monitoring reports produced by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) between September 2025 and September 2026, with funding support from the Dutch Foreign Ministry via the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana.

SECTION 01

Executive Summary

This report synthesizes monitoring findings, empirical observations, situational analyses and documented cases from thirteen consecutive monthly reports covering September 2025 to September 2026. The monitoring and reporting was conducted by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) under its project titled "Promoting Press Freedom and Women's Digital Rights in Togo." Implemented from September 2025 to September 2026, the project was made possible through funding support from the Dutch Foreign Ministry via the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana.

The primary goal of the intervention is to contribute toward creating an enabling environment for expression and participation in governance processes in Togo and across the broader West African sub-region. Specifically, the initiative focuses on improving the offline and online freedom of expression environment, strengthening media capacity, protecting journalists' safety to ensure they can fulfill their public watchdog role, and empowering female journalists, civil society actors, and activists to optimize digital platforms safely for public discourse.

Throughout the 12-month project period, the state of freedom of expression and civic space in Togo presented a deeply paradoxical picture. During the project period, Togo recorded a 24-place rise in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) on April 30, 2026, advancing from 121st in 2025 to 97th in 2026. The government demonstrated commendable swiftness in February 2026 when the Minister for Communication and the Minister of Security issued a joint statement guaranteeing protection for investigative journalist Roger Amemavoh following severe threats.

However, the daily realities for civic actors, independent journalists, cyber-influencers, and political dissidents revealed an environment characterized by judicial harassment and a shrinking democratic space. State authorities consistently relied on heavy-handed administrative and security mechanisms. These included broad criminal prosecution policies targeting social media usage, prolonged pre-trial detentions that exceeded constitutional limits, the imposition of restrictive judicial supervision on pardoned activists, incommunicado detentions, and physical targeting of media workers.

To understand the broader socio-political environment of Togo during this 12-month cycle, it is important to highlight the protracted repercussions of the June 2025 nationwide demonstrations. Those protests, fueled by public frustration over inflation, high unemployment rates, and controversial governance reforms, were met with a severe security response that left seven people dead and dozens arbitrarily arrested. The state's subsequent actions throughout late 2025 and 2026 showed a continued campaign to pacify public space, prevent street re-mobilization, and enforce strict state control over digital communication.

This report notes that while international indicators show formal progress, domestic law enforcement practices routinely violate basic constitutional safeguards. The report also highlights the multifaceted strategies used by state authorities to deter public dissent, constrain journalistic inquiry, and encourage widespread self-censorship.

THE YEAR AT A GLANCE

121 → 97	13	6	7
Togo's rank in RSF's World Press Freedom Index, 2025 to 2026	consecutive monthly monitoring reports synthesised	emblematic cases documented in this report	people killed in the June 2025 protest crackdown

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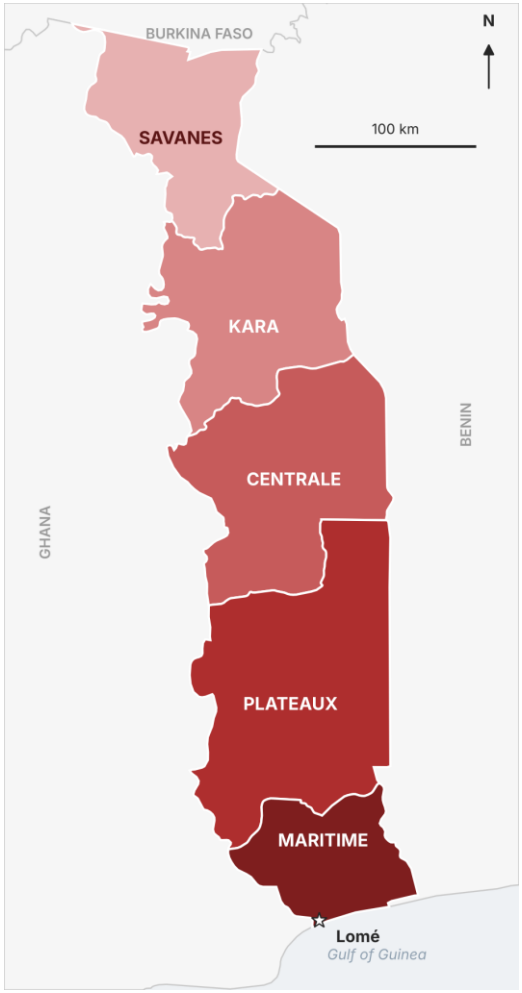
Key analytical finding

The divergence between Togo's rising global press rankings and the persistent judicial harassment of domestic activists highlights a two-tier civic reality: formal diplomatic progress alongside localized, targeted repression designed to enforce self-censorship.

SECTION 02

Methodology

This report is a synthesis of the MFWA's monitoring of freedom of expression and digital rights issues in Togo. A critical element of the monitoring project involved tracking the operational environment for community radio stations and regional press outlets.



Map 1: Togo's five administrative regions, all covered by MFWA's monitoring. Boundaries: Natural Earth.

01. Daily media monitoring

Of print, broadcast and online media.

02. Direct engagement

With legal defense teams, and interviews with affected journalists and human rights defenders.

03. Judicial tracking

Of court dockets across Togo's five administrative regions.

REGIONS MONITORED

- **Savanes** — Regional capital: Dapaong
- **Kara** — Regional capital: Kara
- **Centrale** — Regional capital: Sokodé
- **Plateaux** — Regional capital: Atakpamé
- **Maritime** — Regional capital: Tsévié; includes Lomé, the national capital

The MFWA conducted daily monitoring of print, broadcast and online media, engaged directly with legal defense teams, interviewed affected journalists and human rights defenders, and tracked judicial dockets across Togo's five administrative regions: Maritime, Plateaux, Centrale, Kara and Savanes. By triangulating victim testimonies with official state statements and independent civil society documentation, this report offers an evidence-based assessment of Togo's civic health during the 2025–2026 reporting period.

SECTION 03

Legal Framework

The Constitution of Togo guarantees freedom of thought, expression, press, and assembly under Articles 25 and 26. Article 25 protects individual opinion and conscience, while Article 26 guarantees press freedom, prohibits arbitrary state censorship and establishes the right of citizens to access public information.

In addition to domestic constitutional provisions, Togo is a State Party to major international and regional human rights treaties. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Both instruments impose binding legal obligations on the Togolese government to safeguard freedom of expression offline and online, ensure due process, protect individuals from arbitrary arrest and torture, and preserve the physical safety of journalists and human rights defenders.

Constitutional Guarantees and Implementation Gaps

Despite these unambiguous constitutional guarantees and international commitments, the MFWA's monitoring from September 2025 to September 2026 demonstrated a significant and persistent gap between legal provisions and actual law enforcement practice. The Press and Communication Code, the Penal Code, and the Code of Criminal Procedure were repeatedly applied in ways that undermined fundamental rights.

01. ### Custody beyond the legal limit

Article 52 of Togo's Code of Criminal Procedure limits initial police custody to 48 hours, renewable once for an additional 48 hours under exceptional circumstances. Thus, the maximum allowable time an individual can be kept in police custody is 96 hours. However, in cases such as the arrest of Honoré Sitsope Sokpor in April 2026 and Grace Koumayi Bikoyi in October 2025, detainees were held in police custody for six to ten days before being presented to an investigating judge, directly violating statutory law.

02. ### Pre-trial detention as punishment

Pre-trial detention is intended under international law to be an exceptional measure applied only when necessary. In Togo, pre-trial detention has routinely functioned as a substitute for judicial punishment. Activist and comedian Gros Akpaou spent over seven months in pre-trial detention without trial, while former Defense Minister Marguerite Gnakadé endured over ten months of house arrest under heavy military surveillance.

03. Indefinite judicial supervision

Under Article 110 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, judicial supervision allows courts to grant provisional release subject to some strict conditions. Following the presidential pardon of December 2025, several high-profile activists, including Honoré Sitsope Sokpor, Grace Koumayi Bikoyi, and Yawo Attiso, were placed under indefinite judicial supervision. The conditions, which require monthly court appearances and bar any public comment on ongoing cases, have effectively paralyzed their advocacy.

04. Vaguely defined offences

Statutory charges such as 'incitement to revolt,' 'disturbing public order,' 'criminal conspiracy,' 'threatening state security,' and 'disclosure of state property' are defined vaguely. Public prosecutors frequently utilized these broad definitions to classify routine public photography, critical social media posts, and political commentary as grave national security crimes.

Table 1: The law on paper and in practice

Provision	What the law says	What monitoring found
Constitution, Arts. 25–26	Freedom of opinion, expression and the press; no arbitrary censorship; right to access public information.	Satire, poetry, photography and social media posts prosecuted as security offences.
Code of Criminal Procedure, Art. 52	Police custody of 48 hours, renewable once (96 hours maximum).	Detainees held for up to ten days before appearing before a judge.
Code of Criminal Procedure, Art. 110	Judicial supervision as a condition of provisional release.	Open-ended supervision of pardoned activists, with monthly reporting and a bar on public comment.
Press and Communication Code (Law No. 2020-001), Art. 3	Press offences by recognised professional journalists are decriminalised.	Journalists and bloggers prosecuted under the Penal Code or cybersecurity legislation instead.
Press and Communication Code, Art. 20	Foreign correspondents must obtain HAAC accreditation.	Conflict between ministry permits and HAAC led to the detention of a foreign film crew.

96 hours

Maximum police custody allowed by Article 52 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (48 hours, renewable once).

10 days

Time Honoré Sitsope Sokpor was held before being brought before an investigating judge, April 24 – May 4, 2026.

During the reporting period, the Press and Communication Code (Law No. 2020-001) remained the primary law governing the media. While Article 3 of the Code decriminalizes press offenses committed by recognized professional journalists in the exercise of their duties, authorities frequently circumvent this protection by prosecuting journalists and bloggers under the General Penal Code or cybersecurity legislation. By framing online commentary or social media posts as 'cybercrime' or 'undermining state security,' state prosecutors successfully strip media workers of their guaranteed press protections and subject them to severe prison sentences and heavy fines.

Additionally, significant legal concerns have been raised about the regulatory role of the High Authority for the Regulation of Written, Audiovisual and Digital Communication (HAAC). Originally established as an independent constitutional body to safeguard press freedom and guarantee equitable access to media, HAAC has increasingly become a punitive enforcement body. Through arbitrary summons, formal reprimands, and bureaucratic accreditation procedures, HAAC has created a system that deters independent journalism.

The legal environment is further complicated by the constitutional reform of 2024, which shifted Togo toward a parliamentary system. This political shift generated intense public debate, which state security agencies suppressed. Citizens, former state officials, and journalists who voiced opposition to the constitutional amendments were routinely subjected to surveillance, summons, and criminal charges, illustrating how legislative tools are deployed to protect political transitions from public scrutiny.

Other legislation, notably on cybersecurity and cybercrime, contains expansive definitions of 'false information' and 'electronic disturbance.' In practice, police investigators at the Central Service for Criminal Research and Investigations (Service Central de Recherches et d'Investigations Criminelles – SCRIC) rely on these broad powers to demand digital device encryption passcodes, inspect private messaging application histories, and construct secondary security conspiracy charges against detainees originally arrested for minor civic infractions.

SECTION 04

Findings

An analysis of the 12-month monitoring project reveals four trends defining Togo's civic space: violations of legal custody limits, restrictive nature of judicial supervision, weaponization of pre-trial detentions and broad state security offenses.

FOUR TRENDS DEFINING TOGO'S CIVIC SPACE

01 Violations of legal custody limits

02 Restrictive nature of judicial supervision

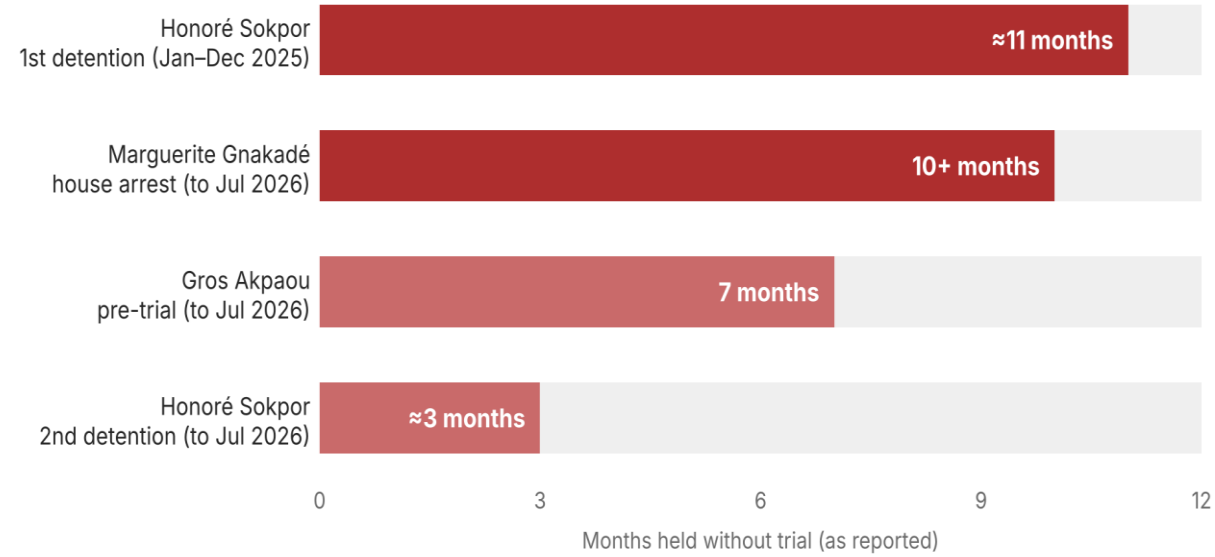
03 Weaponization of pre-trial detentions

04 Broad state security offenses

- Following the heavy restriction of street protests after June 2025, digital platforms – particularly TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp – became the primary avenues for civic commentary. State security apparatuses responded by shifting surveillance and penal measures online. Satirical skits, poetry, and civic photography were systematically reinterpreted as national security offenses under elastic charges such as 'incitement to revolt' and 'criminal conspiracy.'
- The state frequently utilized procedural tools – such as pre-trial detention and judicial supervision – as instruments of long-term civic neutralization. By maintaining open-ended judicial supervision post-presidential pardon, authorities successfully imposed self-censorship without generating high-profile prison statistics.

Unlike major commercial broadcasters based in Lomé, rural media outlets operate under extreme economic fragility, making them particularly vulnerable to local administrative coercion, security threats, and political intimidation. In many instances outside the Maritime region, local authorities used informal verbal warnings and police summonses to deter local journalists from investigating corruption, land disputes, or local security incidents.

Figure 1: Time held without trial in four documented detentions



Durations as reported in MFWA's monitoring; figures for 2026 are as of July 2026.

The following six case studies illustrate how these trends played out in practice.

CASE 01

The Case of Grace Koumayi Bikoyi and the October 3 Social Media Crackdown



Grace Koumayi Bikoyi

PROFILE

Human rights defender, midwife and activist

ARRESTED

October 3, 2025, at her home, by plainclothes security agents

CHARGES

Incitement to revolt; attempting to undermine state security

STATUS

Provisional release, January 2026; under strict judicial supervision

On October 3, 2025, Public Prosecutor Talaka Mawama held a widely publicized press conference in Lomé to announce new state measures aimed at regulating social media platforms across Togo. The Prosecutor announced that criminal prosecution would be initiated against individuals for the 'misuse' of social media and warned that publishing, sharing, or validating content deemed illegal

online would lead to severe legal penalties. While authorities framed the measures as necessary to combat defamation, hate speech, and privacy violations and to protect minors, public opinion and civil society viewed the policy as a repressive state response to the deadly public protests of June 2025, which had resulted in seven deaths and widespread arrests.

On the same day that Prosecutor Mawama announced these online regulations, human rights defender, midwife, and activist Grace Koumayi Bikoyi was arrested at her home by unidentified plainclothes security agents. Her arrest occurred shortly after she attended a civil society meeting at the Collective of Associations Against Impunity in Togo (Collectif des Associations Contre l'Impunité au Togo – CACIT). Bikoyi was taken to the Central Service for Criminal Research and Investigations (SCRIC) unit of the National Police, where she was held incommunicado for three days without access to counsel or family.

On October 6, 2025, Bikoyi was formally presented to the court, charged with 'incitement to revolt' and 'attempting to undermine state security,' and remanded in custody.

WHY IT MATTERS

Bikoyi's legal case illustrates the swift execution of state policy announced on October 3. Her immediate detention signalled to civil society that female online activists would not be spared from harsh judicial measures. The action by the state also removed one of the country's most vocal digital human rights defenders from public debate. The lack of legal clarity surrounding what constitutes 'incitement to revolt' in digital spaces created a chill across civil society.

In January 2026, Bikoyi received a provisional release under presidential clemency directives but remained subject to strict judicial supervision. She was required to report to court authorities every first Monday of the month, barred from commenting publicly on her case, and subjected to travel restrictions. This legal status has significantly constrained her humanitarian advocacy and digital campaigns, although she continued to use social media to draw attention to other detained activists.

CASE 02

The Case of Honoré Sitsope Sokpor (‘Affectio’) – Cyber-Activism, Presidential Pardon, and Re-arrest



Honoré Sitsope Sokpor ‘Affectio’

PROFILE
Poet and cyber-activist

RE-ARRESTED
April 24, 2026, Agoè-Nyivé, Lomé, while photographing drainage canals

CHARGES
Threatening state security; disclosure of state property

STATUS
In pre-trial detention for the second time (nearly three months by July 2026)

Honoré Sitsope Sokpor, popularly known on social media as Affectio, is a Togolese poet and cyber-activist whose legal ordeal exemplifies the persistent cycle of judicial harassment facing dissenting voices. Sokpor was originally arrested in January 2025, after publishing a poem on Facebook that authorities alleged threatened state security. He spent nearly eleven months in pre-trial detention before being granted a presidential pardon by President Faure Gnassingbé in December 2025 and released in January 2026. However, upon his release, Sokpor was placed under strict judicial supervision, requiring him to report to the court every first Monday of the month and to refrain from public commentary.

On April 24, 2026, Sokpor was involved in a fresh incident while taking photographs of newly constructed drainage canals near his parents’ residence in the Agoè-Nyivé district of Lomé, to highlight the importance of public infrastructure in preventing recurrent severe flooding in the capital. The construction site workers confronted him and alerted the police. Officers from the Anti-Gang Unit arrived on the scene, confiscated his phone, and forced him to delete all photos.

Although he deleted the photographs, the officers violently assaulted Sokpor, seized his personal belongings, and transported him to the Agoè-Nyivé police station. His arrest remained unknown to the public for five days until activist Grace Koumayi Bikoyi published an explanatory video on TikTok. On April 30, 2026 (six days after his arrest), the Alliance Nationale pour le Changement (ANC) political party reported that police had expanded their investigation after analyzing Sokpor’s phone. Authorities alleged finding additional images and claimed Sokpor shared them with diaspora activists previously linked to the June 2025 protests. After being held for ten days without a court appearance in direct violation of Article 52 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, Sokpor was brought before an investigating judge on May 4, 2026, charged with ‘threatening state security’ and ‘disclosure of state property,’ and placed back into pre-trial detention.

Timeline

Jan 2025	Arrested over a poem published on Facebook
Dec 2025	Granted a presidential pardon after nearly eleven months in pre-trial detention
Jan 2026	Released; placed under strict judicial supervision
Apr 24, 2026	Arrested while photographing drainage canals in Agoè-Nyivé
May 4, 2026	Charged before an investigating judge after ten days in custody; returned to pre-trial detention

WHY IT MATTERS

Sokpor's case exposes the limits of presidential clemency in Togo. While these pardons are presented internationally as acts of executive benevolence, the immediate imposition of restrictive judicial supervision leaves released activists in a legal limbo. Any routine civic activity, such as documenting municipal drainage works, can be swiftly re-categorized as a state security violation, leading to immediate re-incarceration and long-term isolation.

By July 2026, Sokpor had spent nearly three months in his second period of pre-trial detention. His continued imprisonment drew strong condemnation from the MFWA and international human rights organizations, who pointed out that taking photographs of public infrastructure aimed at flood prevention is a legitimate civic activity, not a national security offense. His case remains one of the clearest examples of police overreach and judicial weaponization.

CASE 03

The Case of Gros Akpaou ('Tayo')



Gros Akpaou 'Tayo'

PROFILE
Comedian and content creator, 900,000+ TikTok followers

ARRESTED
December 30, 2025, at his residence

CHARGES
Disturbing public order; criminal conspiracy

STATUS
Pre-trial detention at Kara Civil Prison, seventh month by July 2026; no trial date

Gros Akpaou, popularly known by his stage name Tayo, is one of Togo's most prominent comedians and content creators, with an audience of over 900,000 followers on TikTok. Akpaou's comedic videos frequently addressed sensitive social issues, denouncing perceived government

corruption, social inequality, and administrative failures. On the night of December 30, 2025, police officers arrested Akpaou at his residence. In a striking irony, his arrest occurred on the very day the Council of Ministers announced a presidential clemency pardoning 1,511 prisoners.

Following his arrest, Togolese authorities maintained complete silence regarding Akpaou's whereabouts, health status, or formal charges for nearly three months. This prolonged incommunicado detention created severe anxiety within civil society and raised international concerns regarding potential enforced disappearance. It was not until March 2026 that activist Grace Koumayi publicly disclosed that Akpaou was being held in secret at Kara Civil Prison in northern Togo. Information obtained from the prison administration revealed he faced formal charges of "disturbing public order" and "criminal conspiracy."

By June 30, 2026, Akpaou had completed exactly six months in pre-trial detention at Kara Civil Prison. Monitoring highlighted that Akpaou was completely unable to secure legal counsel. This legal isolation stemmed from the extreme shortage of defense attorneys operating in the Kara region, forcing detainees to hire lawyers from Lomé (over 400 km away). The immense financial burden of covering travel, accommodation, and legal representation fees created an insurmountable barrier for Akpaou. By July 2026, Akpaou remained in pre-trial detention for a seventh consecutive month without a trial date.

WHY IT MATTERS

Akpaou's prolonged detention demonstrates the high risks faced by non-traditional media actors in Togo. Digital creators, comedians, and social media influencers who command large online followings are increasingly viewed by state security apparatuses with the same suspicion as political opposition leaders. Their ability to mobilize public opinion through humor makes them prime targets for lengthy pre-trial detention aimed at neutralizing their online reach.

The complete absence of official state communication for 90 days following Akpaou's arrest violated fundamental international standards regarding prompt notification of charges and judicial review. By transferring Akpaou to a remote prison facility in Kara, state authorities effectively severed his connections to family and legal defense networks, illustrating a deliberate strategy of geographical isolation to minimize public solidarity campaigns in the capital.

CASE 04

The Case of Foreign Media Accreditation and Detention of Film Crew



Tony Comiti Productions crew

WHO
French filmmakers Sebastian Perez Pezzani and Gaël Mocaër, and Togolese fixer Fred Vedomey

ARRESTED
July 27, 2026, northern Togo, while filming for France 5

CHARGES
Alleged ‘false statements’ on administrative work permits

STATUS
Provisional release, September 1, 2026; charges pending

On July 27, 2026, state authorities arrested two French filmmakers, Sebastian Perez Pezzani and Gaël Mocaër from Tony Comiti Productions, alongside their Togolese fixer, Fred Vedomey, in northern Togo. The crew was actively filming an episode of the acclaimed international documentary series ‘Les Routes de l’impossible’ for France 5. The arrest occurred in an area classified by security forces as restricted due to regional terrorist threats. Authorities initially detained the team under suspicion of espionage and seized all filming equipment and passports.

Although police reviewed the filmed footage and found no evidence supporting espionage allegations, the crew was re-arrested and confined under heavy security to a hotel for eight days. On August 17, 2026, the three individuals were brought before the Lomé Public Prosecutor’s Office and placed in pre-trial detention over alleged ‘false statements’ regarding administrative work permits. The incident remained hidden from the public until August 19, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs disclosed the matter following reports by French media.

An inter-institutional conflict emerged over their accreditation status. While Tony Comiti Productions insisted that the filmmakers possessed valid work visas and official accreditation issued by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Arts, the media regulator, HAAC, issued a statement on August 19 asserting that no accreditation request had been received. HAAC cited Article 20 of the Press and Communication Code, which mandates that foreign correspondents obtain direct HAAC accreditation. Pezzani was placed under hotel house arrest on August 20 due to deteriorating health, while Mocaër and Vedomey remained incarcerated. On September 1, 2026, all three were granted provisional release, allowing the French filmmakers to return to France on September 3, though formal criminal charges remain pending.

Timeline

Jul 27, 2026	Crew arrested in northern Togo on suspicion of espionage; equipment and passports seized
Aug 17, 2026	Brought before the Lomé Public Prosecutor; placed in pre-trial detention
Aug 19, 2026	Ministry of Foreign Affairs discloses the case; HAAC says no accreditation request was received
Aug 20, 2026	Pezzani moved to hotel house arrest on health grounds
Sep 1–3, 2026	All three provisionally released; filmmakers return to France

WHY IT MATTERS

This case underscores the dangerous bureaucratic traps foreign journalists face in Togo. Inter-institutional misalignment, where permits issued by government ministries are rejected by independent regulatory bodies, creates extreme legal risk for media professionals. The incident reinforced concerns about Togo's treatment of foreign correspondents, given the previous suspensions of international outlets such as RFI and France 24.

CASE 05

Physical Vulnerability of Journalists – The Abduction of Roland Yaovi Kodjo



Roland Yaovi Kodjo

PROFILE

Reporter, Tampa TV (private broadcaster)

INCIDENT

Abducted in September 2026 while covering a traditional festival in Bassar

PERPETRATORS

Unidentified masked men

OUTCOME

Abandoned in rural bush about 50 km away; the intended target was reportedly his director

In September 2026, a grave security incident demonstrated the dangers journalists operating outside the capital are sometimes exposed to. Roland Yaovi Kodjo, a reporter for the private

broadcaster Tampa TV, was abducted while covering a traditional cultural festival in Bassar, north-central Togo. Kodjo was approached by an unknown individual who asked if he was taking photographs for Tampa TV. After Kodjo confirmed that he worked for Tampa TV, he followed the individual toward the stadium exit while carrying his heavy broadcast equipment.

Upon reaching the exit, Kodjo was ambushed by masked men who handcuffed, blindfolded, and forced him into an unmarked vehicle. The abductors verbally abused Kodjo, claiming they were angry at Tampa TV for publishing critical reports about their superiors. Shortly into the drive, the vehicle's driver received a phone call and spoke in 'Langue des plateaux,' a regional dialect from southern/central Togo different from the local Bassar language.

Recognizing his native dialect, Kodjo said aloud to the driver, 'You speak my language.' This revealed that Kodjo was not from Bassar, and the abductors realized they had seized the wrong man. The Director of Tampa Express, Francisco Napo Koura (who is natively from Bassar), later confirmed to MFWA that he had been the intended target due to his investigative editorial stance. Realizing their mistake, the abductors abandoned Kodjo in an isolated rural bush area approximately 50 kilometers away from the festival site. While Kodjo escaped serious physical injury, the targeted abduction exposed the alarming level of physical vulnerability and hostility facing independent journalists in Togo's interior regions.

WHY IT MATTERS

The abduction of Roland Yaovi Kodjo represents a dangerous escalation from judicial harassment to direct physical violence against media personnel. The fact that masked abductors acted with impunity at a major public event highlights the lack of physical protection for regional reporters. Unless the authorities promptly investigate and prosecute those responsible, they risk creating a dangerous precedent of impunity for violence against the press.

CASE 06

Senior State Figures and Prolonged Arbitrary Detention – The Case of Marguerite Gnakadé



Marguerite Essisonma Gnakadé

PROFILE

Former Minister of Defense

ARRESTED

September 17, 2025, after criticising the 2024 constitutional reform

CHARGES

Inciting revolt; disseminating false information; disturbing public order; obstructing justice

STATUS

House arrest under military surveillance for 10+ months; hunger strike from July 27, 2026

The repressive environment in Togo extended beyond journalists and young digital activists to encompass former senior government officials. Marguerite Essisonma Gnakadé, a former Minister of Defense, was arrested on September 17, 2025, after speaking out publicly against government policy, advocating for democratic leadership, and strongly criticizing Togo's controversial 2024 constitutional reform. Following her arrest, she was charged with 'inciting revolt against state authority,' 'disseminating false information,' 'disturbing public order,' and 'obstructing the proper functioning of the justice system.'

For over ten consecutive months, Gnakadé was held under strict house arrest at an undisclosed location under continuous, heavy military surveillance. Her detention conditions involved severe isolation, strict restrictions on visitors, and the denial of basic essential supplies. On July 27, 2026, after ten full months of arbitrary confinement without a trial date, Gnakadé initiated an indefinite hunger strike to protest her inhumane detention conditions and demand her constitutional right to due process. Her case underscored the state's willingness to deploy prolonged, unconstitutional detention against prominent political figures.

WHY IT MATTERS

Gnakadé's hunger strike drew renewed attention to the physical and psychological toll of indefinite house arrest. Deprived of regular access to independent medical professionals, her deteriorating health led civil society organizations to demand immediate independent medical evaluation. It also shows that political dissent from former insiders can be met with exceptionally harsh isolation measures designed to silence opposition voices.

SECTION 05

Conclusion

To contextualize Togo's civic space dynamics within the wider West African region, it is valuable to compare its institutional mechanisms with neighbouring states. Across the ECOWAS region, several nations have faced escalating civic space pressures, including internet shutdowns, military coups, and suspension of opposition media. In Togo, the state's strategy relies less on wholesale internet blackouts and more on targeted, high-impact prosecutions. By arresting prominent influencers and activists at critical political junctures, the authorities achieve a chilling effect across digital networks while maintaining an outward appearance of telecommunications openness and economic stability.

Legal isolation in the regions

The case of Gros Akpaou at Kara Civil Prison demonstrated that detainees incarcerated outside Lomé suffer severe legal isolation. The lack of practicing defense attorneys in northern regions, combined with high travel costs from Lomé, effectively deprives regional detainees of their constitutional right to a fair legal defense.

Regulatory control of foreign media

Through bureaucratic enforcement of Article 20 of the Press and Communication Code, regulatory authorities (HAAC) exerted tight control over foreign media reporting. This regulatory pressure complemented the ongoing suspension of major international news channels such as France 24 and RFI.

Gendered online risks

Additionally, the monitoring highlighted a worrying trend regarding gendered online risks. Female activists and journalists in Togo face compounded vulnerabilities. As shown by the case of Grace Koumayi Bikoyi, women who engage in digital advocacy are not spared arrest and prosecution, and female civic actors also face gendered risks such as targeted online harassment and character assassination. Strengthening digital resilience and legal protections for female civic actors remains an urgent priority for the MFWA and human rights defenders across West Africa.

Self-censorship in newsrooms

Another crucial issue revealed by the MFWA's monitoring is the widespread psychological impact of continuous surveillance on local newsrooms. Journalists across Togo reported practicing pre-emptive self-censorship, particularly when covering land disputes, military spending, governance, and public infrastructure projects. The fear of triggering security apparatus investigations or losing media accreditation has effectively narrowed the scope of investigative journalism in Togo.

SECTION 06

Recommendations

To address these documented human rights violations, ensure full compliance with national and international legal commitments, and foster an open democratic environment, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) presents the following recommendations:

To the Government of Togo and Judicial Authorities

01. Unconditionally release all civic actors, social media creators, journalists, and political figures currently held in pre-trial detention or house arrest (including Gros Akpaou and Marguerite Gnakadé).

02. Immediately lift all restrictive judicial supervision conditions imposed on pardoned activists (Honoré Sitsope Sokpor, Grace Koumayi Bikoyi, Yawo Attiso) to restore their full constitutional rights.

03. Strictly enforce Article 52 of the Code of Criminal Procedure across all police units, ensuring no detainee is held beyond 48 hours without judicial review.

To Public Prosecutors and Security Agencies

01. Interpret and apply social media-related offenses narrowly, in strict alignment with international human rights standards on free expression.

02. Cease the practice of seizing personal phones and forcing content deletion during arrests without judicial authorization.

03. Thoroughly investigate all physical attacks, violent assaults, and abductions targeting journalists (including the Roland Kodjo abduction) and bring perpetrators to justice.

To Media Regulatory Bodies

01. Harmonize accreditation procedures between the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Arts and HAAC to prevent administrative entrapment of foreign correspondents.

02. Reopen suspended media operations, including France 24 and RFI, to foster press pluralism and public access to information.

To Civil Society, Legal Bodies, and International Partners

01. Establish organized legal aid networks in interior regions (e.g. Kara and Sokodé) to provide pro bono defense representation for marginalized detainees.

02. Maintain continuous international monitoring and use diplomatic channels, including through the European Union, ECOWAS and bilateral missions, to ensure that Togo's commitments under the ICCPR and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights translate into practical protections.

03. Invest in capacity building, digital security training and legal defense support for journalists in rural and interior regions.

04. Strengthen digital safety training and legal protection for women journalists and activists, who face compounded risks online and offline.



Empowering Media and Voices for Public Good

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