



Upsurge in Freedom of Expression violations in West Africa

An August 2024 Roundup



Introduction

The press freedom and freedom of expression landscape in West Africa continues to be under intense pressure, characterised by widespread violations of citizens' fundamental rights to information and expression (including protest). Regrettably, the violations are often perpetrated with impunity, despite several legal safeguards.

Law enforcement agents and other powerful individuals and entities continue to lead the charge against critical journalists, activists and other citizens. In August, 2024, security agents in Nigeria went on rampage against the #EndBadGovernance protesters, assaulting, and arresting scores, with at least 17 protesters reportedly [killed](#).

These attacks in Nigeria, and several others elsewhere, including outright abduction of journalists and physical assaults, continue to shrink civic space, which ultimately undermine the role of expression, activism and participation in fostering transparency, accountability, and good governance.

As a contribution to countering repression in the region and providing evidence for advocacy and policy interventions, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been monitoring and documenting abuses and struggles faced by journalists and activists, (especially environmental activists) in the region. The monitoring reports expose the perpetrators and violations they commit against journalists, other media workers, news media organisations, and environmental activist (CSOs, individuals, communities, etc.). The reports also serve as reference materials for further study, advocacy and policy interventions for a more robust protections for freedom of expression.

This report presents findings of the monitoring undertaken in the month of August 2024.

Findings

The monitoring of the region in August 2024 revealed numerous violations, including arrests, detentions, physical attacks, abductions, harassment, and intimidation of journalists, activists, and other critical voices. Regrettably, none of the abuses recorded had been resolved at the time this report was finalised. Details of the findings are presented below:

Physical attacks, Arrests and Detention of Journalists

The month of August was marred by violence as it began with violent repression of protests in Nigeria, which recorded the most freedom of expression violations during the [first two](#) quarters of 2024. The protests, part of a nationwide demonstration dubbed [#EndBadGovernanceInNigeria](#), took a violent turn when State Security Service (SSS) agents and police officers fired tear gas and live ammunition at both protesters and members of the press across various states such as Lagos, Kano, Abuja, Cross River, and Delta. Reports [indicated](#) at least 17 civilian deaths.

In the midst of the repression, on August 1 and 2, at least 21 journalists were attacked, both by state security operatives and hoodlums. In Kano, for instance, armed hoodlums attacked a vehicle of the television station, *Channels TV*, which was carrying about eleven (11) journalists, including *TVC News* Correspondent, Ibrahim Isah.

In Cross River State, precisely in Calabar, a mob assaulted *Nigerian Tribune* reporter, Joseph Abasi-Abasi, seriously injuring him, while another journalist, Jonathan Ugbal, from *Cross River Watch*, was assaulted and detained by police officers before being released.

In Delta State, a group of alleged pro-government protesters assaulted several journalists, including Prince Amour Udemude, an investigative journalist, Matthew Ochei of *Punch Newspaper*, Monday Osayande of *Guardian Newspaper*, and Lucy, a reporter with *Pointer*. The journalists were conducting interviews when the assailants attacked them, and smashed Udemude's phone.

In Abuja, Yakubu Mohammed, a journalist who was on duty for *Premium Times* was attacked and sustained head injuries after police officers allegedly hit him with the butt of their guns and their batons.

Police officers equally arrested protesters and some journalists, including Olukayode Jayeola, a photojournalist with *Punch Newspaper*, while he was covering the protest at Eagle Square, in Abuja. The photojournalist's camera, phones and other personal belongings were confiscated by security operatives. *Daily Independent* photojournalist, Jide Oyekunle, was also arrested and his mobile phone confiscated. Oyekunle could not retrieve his phone, even after his release following protest by other journalists.

According to *Radio Ndarason Internationale* (RNI), nine of their staff members were [arrested](#) at RNI offices in Maiduguri, Borno State. RNI staff were accused of "fake

news” in connexion with the outlet’s reporting via WhatsApp on the protests. The arrested staff include head of office, Lami Manjimwa Zakka; editor-in-chief, Mamman Mahmood; producer, Umami Fatima Baba Kyari; reporters Hadiza Dawud, Zainab Alhaji Ali, and Amina Falmata Mohammed; head of programmes Bunu Tijjani; deputy head of programmes Ali Musa; and information and communications technology head Abubakar Gajibo.

Mary Adeboye, a journalist with *News Central Television*, was exposed to teargas fired by police officers while reporting on the protest in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), a federal territory in central Nigeria, where Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, is located.

On August 3, *Premium Times* journalist Abdulkareem Mojeed, who was reporting on the protest at the Moshood Abiola Stadium, described the terrifying scene as security forces disrupted the gathering, firing indiscriminately at those present, including the media. “It was a surreal and terrifying experience,” Mojeed recounted, recalling how he and his colleagues from various media outlets (*Premium Times*, *Cable*, *ICIR*, *AriseTV*, and *News Central*) found themselves caught in the middle of what initially seemed like a calm protest but quickly escalated into chaos a bit after 11:00 a.m.

Security personnel in unmarked vehicles, including heavily armed and hooded SSS officers fired tear gas canisters and live ammunition at journalists conducting interviews and protesters alike who scrambled for safety, according to Mojeed and other colleagues who witnessed the events.

In a separate incident, on August 5, 2024, police officers arrested Isaac Bristol, an undercover Nigerian journalist and blogger. Bristol, also known as PIDOM, was arrested in his hotel room in Port Harcourt and tortured, according to local media [reports](#). They accused him of leaking government documents on his Twitter handle between June and July 2024. Other charges included cybercrime, and falsely levelling a money laundering allegation against President Bola Tinubu.

On August 14, 2024, officers of the National Cyber Crime Centre (NCCC) [detained](#) for eight hours Fisayo Soyombo, the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Foundation for Investigative Journalism (FIJ) based in Lagos. Soyombo’s detention and harassment are believed to be linked to a story the FIJ has published on alleged corrupt practices by Orelope Adefulire, a former Lagos State deputy governor, while she was senior special assistant on sustainable development goals (SSAP-SDGs) under

the Muhammadu Buhari administration. In May 2024, the said publication led to the [arrest and detention](#) of Soyomba's FIJ colleague and author of the report, Daniel Ojukwu. The journalist spent 10 days in police custody.

Muktar Dahiru, a broadcast journalist for *Pyramid FM* in Kano, was arrested on August 29, 2024, on charges of criminal conspiracy, defamation of character, and intentional insult. Dahiru had posted on Facebook a broadcast audio interview with an opposition politician who accused the state governor of corruption.

On August 25, 2024, Adejuwon Soyinka, the current West Africa editor of the *Conversation Africa*, was [arrested](#) by the SSS at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos. He was returning from the United Kingdom (UK) when the security officials accosted and detained him for six hours on the basis that his name had been placed on a watchlist. The SSS, who gave no reasons to substantiate their claim, released Soyinka the same day after public outrage. His passport is being withheld by the SSS, infringing his right to freedom of movement.

Some arrests and detentions were also recorded in Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. On August 12, 2024, Steve Amoussou, a prominent Beninese columnist and cyber activist, also known by the pseudonym Frère Hounvi, was arrested by unidentified individuals shortly after leaving his home in Lomé, the capital of Togo. His relatives and some human rights advocates consider the arrest of Amoussou as an abduction due to the manner in which it was carried out. Hounvi left his home to run an errand at shop opposite his home, when four unidentified individuals approached and arrested him, according to Aboubakar Baparapé, President of the human rights organisation, Organisation pour la défense des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples.

Known to be critical of President Talon's regime, Amoussou had been living in exile in Togo since 2019. After his arrest, Amoussou was transferred to the Economic and Financial Brigade (BEF) in Benin. On August 19, he was brought before Benin's special court that prosecutes cases of corruption, drug trafficking, terrorism and cybercrime – Cour de répression des infractions économiques et du terrorisme (CRIET).

According to his lawyer, Barnabé Gbago, Amoussou is facing charges including electronic harassment and incitement to publish false information. The lawyer was, however, denied access to the court on the day of the hearing.

In Côte d'Ivoire, an opposition figure was detained for his criticism of the current regime. On August 9, 2024, the Criminal Investigation Department summoned and subsequently [detained](#) Mamadou Traoré, a member of Générations et Peuples Solidaires (GPS), an opposition political movement affiliated to former Prime Minister, Guillaume Soro.

Traoré was detained on alleged charges of “spreading false information” and “undermining public order” in connection with a post on his [Facebook](#) page. Traoré alleged that the equipment utilised during the Ivorian independence parade on August 7, had been “rented to the European Takuba force, which was expelled from Mali.” A week after his arrest, Traoré was found guilty of these charges and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment.

The Guinean political pressure group, Forces Vives de Guinée, called for a one-day protest in Conakry on August 12, 2024. The protest was in solidarity with two opinion leaders, Foniké Menguè (alias Oumar Sylla) and Mamadou Billo Bah, who were allegedly arrested by defense and security forces on July 9, 2024, with their whereabouts remaining unknown, according to local news [reports](#). They were not informed of the charges against them and had no access to legal counsel. This arbitrary arrest follows shortly after the announcement of a citizens’ mobilisation to restore withdrawn media channels and to protest the worsening living conditions of Guineans amid an electricity crisis and other issues related to the Government’s transition plan.

Known to be vocal critics of the junta, Menguè and Bah were [arrested and manhandled](#) on several occasions in 2022 as they mobilised other citizens to demand a shorter transition period and a calendar for early elections.

Abductions and Disappearances

Abductions and disappearance of journalists and activists deemed critical, as well as voices of dissent is steadily rising, particularly under military-led regimes. Over the past two months (June & July 2024), the MFWA has reported the abduction and disappearance of at least five journalists in Burkina Faso and Mali. Unfortunately, in the month under review, another journalist is reported missing in Niger.

On August 31, 2024, Serge Mathurin Adou, an Ivorian journalist working for *Canal 3* in Niamey, Niger, for more than 20 years went missing. According to local media reports, Adou, shortly before his disappearance, informed his wife that he had been

summoned by the judicial police. There has been no official information released by Nigerien authorities regarding Adou's whereabouts.

Sentencing and Judicial harassment

In Togo, the newspaper, *L'Alternative*, [reported](#) on August 7, 2024 that an international arrest warrant has been issued for its publisher, Ferdinand Ayité. According to the media, the Togolese government accuses Ayité of plotting to undermine state security and being one of the masterminds behind a terrorist attack in northern Togo. A prominent journalist, Ayité has faced ongoing legal harassment and threats, which have ultimately forced him into exile. Additionally, his phone number was found on the Pegasus Project list of journalists targeted for potential spyware surveillance. *L'Alternative* is a leading investigative outlet known for its courageous reporting on corruption and protests against President Faure Gnassingbé's extended rule, which has lasted since 1967. The authorities suspended *L'Alternative* twice in 2020 and 2021 due to its critical coverage of government officials.

Media Censorship and suspension

Malian authorities continued their crackdowns on French media, with the media regulator, the Haute Autorité de la Communication (HAC), [suspending](#) *La Chaîne Info (LCI)* from all local broadcast channels for two months starting August 23, 2024. The HAC accused *LCI* of making "disparaging remarks," and false accusations against the Malian armed forces and their Russian partners. The media regulator cited a programme aired on July 27, 2024, that featured Colonel Michel Goya discussing a recent insurgent attack. The HAC claimed *LCI* violated several legal provisions and glorified terrorism. *La Chaîne Info* is the fifth French media to be suspended after the likes of *France 2*, *TV5 Monde*, *France 24*, and *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*.

In Guinea Bissau, on August 13, at least 10 journalists were barred from covering the arrival of Braima Camará, who heads President Umaro Sissoco Embaló's ruling party, MADAM-G15, at Bissau International Airport. According to [reports](#), the police also directed journalists to leave the passenger arrivals area and a nearby roundabout where they had gathered.

In another incident of censorship, journalist Indira Balde Correia of the Portuguese broadcaster *RTP-África* in Bissau, was on August 22 also [barred](#) from reporting on government related activities. Balde, who is also the President of the Sindicato de Jornalistas e Técnicos da Comunicação Social (SINJOTECS), a local press union, was expelled on alleged order from above.

August 30, 2024, marked 100 days since the [closure](#) of media channels of three major media groups in Guinea. The closure of the media outlets has left many journalists unemployed and deprived countless citizens information that they would otherwise have received from those platforms. The affected media groups are Hadafo Médias, Djoma Groupe, and Groupe Fréquence Médias. Other repressive actions of the Guinean junta regime [include](#) the [blocking](#) of news websites, jamming of radio broadcasts, [withdrawal](#) of television channels from operators' packages, restriction of social networks, and expulsion of foreign journalists. Despite several calls by media right organisations, including the MFWA, the situation has remained unchanged.

Other Developments

In Senegal, the media also observed a news [blackout](#) on August 13, 2024, in response to repressive measures imposed by the new government. As a result of the black-out, newspapers displayed the headline “Journée sans presse” (press-free day), while television stations showed blank screens and radio stations played music without live news segments. The media strike was a reaction to various pressures from the government, including the freezing of the Press Development and Support Fund, as well as the bank accounts of certain media outlets, amidst other measures of the government, which caused widespread indignation among journalists, politicians, and civil society.

Following the strike, President Bassirou Diomaye Faye [called](#) for increased attention to media issues and urged the Minister of Communication to ensure compliance with the Press Code and the effective functioning of media outlets. However, no specific measures were outlined to address the concerns raised by the media.

In July 2024, the MFWA reported about the summary dismissal of journalist Umu Thoronka by her employer, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). On August 20, the SLBC claimed that journalist Umu Thoronka was a freelancer whose employment with the SLBC had ended in 2018. However, Thoronka contested this claim, asserting that she joined SLBC in 2014 and worked there until her contract was abruptly terminated on July 26, 2024. She also discussed challenges she faced in securing a permanent contract with the national broadcaster, highlighting unethical demands, including instances of sexual harassment. Thoronka, a journalist with nearly a decade of service, was fired by the SLBC following her TikTok post disapproving of the humiliation of a woman during a Town Hall meeting with President Julius Maada Bio in Freetown. She revealed that she received multiple online threats after her dismissal, forcing her into hiding out of fear for her safety.

On August 23, 2024, a circuit court in Accra, [sentenced](#) blogger, Jeffrey Epprim Nyame, to 30 days in prison on charges of false news, and causing fear and panic. Nyame, who runs the blog, *reportghana.net*, published a 2022 story which speculated that the Bank of Ghana was about to issue an order for dollar account holders to be given Ghana cedis for withdrawals. Prosecutors argued that this misinformation caused panic among account holders, leading to a rush of withdrawals that disrupted banking operations.

From August 22 to 23, communication experts from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso gathered for a workshop to discuss a communication strategy among the member countries of the Alliance of Sahel States. As part of this initiative, which aims at countering “orchestrated disinformation campaigns,” the Alliance [plans](#) to launch its own digital media platform, which will include a web TV in September 2024.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The violations against freedom of expression and press freedom in August are deeply concerning. The violent dispersal of peaceful protesters and the overt intimidation of journalists signal a troubling escalation in the ongoing crackdown on free speech and the press in Nigeria. The attacks recorded in Nigeria, in addition to those recorded in Togo, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Guinea Bissau, show the level of intolerance against expression, including expression through protests, and how journalists performing their duties are abused especially by security agents who are expected to protect them and ensure that their rights are respected.

The arrest of cyber activist and columnist, Frère Hounvi, who was in exile in Togo, highlights the precarious situation for journalists even in countries where they seek refuge. Similarly alarming is the continuous disappearance of journalists, particularly in countries under military regime, and the suspension/closedown of media outlets. These are indications of the unfriendly environment journalists in such countries have to contend with in keeping the public abreast of developments in their respective countries.

Equally worrying is the sentencing of opposition politician in Côte d’Ivoire, Mamadou Traoré, to two years in prison, and the sentencing of Ghanaian blogger, Jeffrey Epprim Nyame, to 30 days in jail.

The abuses captured in this report, and previous reports, in the form of arrests and detention; brutalities against protesters and journalists; disappearance of journalists,

suspension/closedown of media outlets; and sentences for offline and online expression, are indications of the unfriendly environment journalists, protesters and other activists in the respective countries in West Africa have to contend with in keeping the public abreast of developments and demanding accountability from governments. And the implications of such acts are far-reaching, affecting not only the landscape of journalism but also the broader society. For instance, the shutdown/closedown of media outlets lead to a significant reduction in the diversity of voices and opinions available to the public, limiting access to critical information. The economic repercussions are also significant, as media outlets often employ many individuals, and their closure result in job losses and reduced economic activity in the sector. The arrests, imprisonment and disappearances also create an environment of fear and self-censorship among journalists, activists and the general public which fester abuse of rights, poor governance, mismanagement of resources, and lack of stewardship. Ultimately, the erosion of press freedom poses a significant threat to democracy and the protection of citizens' rights.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) is, therefore, making the following calls to the relevant stakeholders named in this report to ensure that the violations cited are redressed:

- Benin authorities must release cyber-activist and columnist Steve Amoussou and hold accountable those responsible for his arbitrary arrest.
- The government of Niger should investigate the disappearance of Serge Mathurin Adou and ensure his safe return to his family.
- The government of Nigeria must investigate incidents of civilian deaths and abuses against journalists during the #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria protests and bring the perpetrators to justice.
- Governments must implement strict policies prohibiting arbitrary detention and harassment of journalists, with clear consequences for violators.
- ECOWAS should call its Member States to order to ensure that the peoples of the ECOWAS community indeed enjoy the rights to press freedom and freedom of expression as espoused in Article 66 (a-c) of ECOWAS Treaty. ECOWAS should also urge
 - the Nigerian government to account for the human rights violations during the #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria protests in August 2024;

- the Guinean junta to restore the operations of Hadafo Médias, Djoma Groupe, and Groupe Fréquence Médias.
- the Ghanaian government to repeal Act 29 of the Criminal and Other Offences Act (1960);
- the government of Benin to release Steve Amoussou;
- the Guinea Bissau government to uphold press freedom;
- the Togolese government to drop charges against investigative journalist Ferdinand Ayité.



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