



Silencing the Watchdogs:

A June 2024 Overview of West Africa

Photo credit: Freepik



Introduction

Freedom of expression remains one of the fundamental pillars of democracy. The right to freedom of expression (FOE) is recognised and protected in all major international policies and frameworks. The respect and protection of this right encourages expression in varied formats, and enhances inclusion, participatory governance, press freedom and activism. It promotes a healthy civic space where all voices are heard and respected. Where there are excesses or infringement, due process is followed to seek redress.

Unfortunately, in most parts of the world, the above is not the situation. In West Africa, in particular, violations against journalists, media outlets, activists, human rights defenders and dissidents abound, largely due to intolerance of opposing and critical views. Attacks against journalists, activists and critical voices are often intended to close the civic space and silence people; a situation that often leads to lack of stewardship and accountability from governments, corporate entities and other stakeholders.

Regrettably, because the violations against expression are often treated with impunity, the situation festers, and non-state actors increasingly get into the fray at the least provocation. The resultant effect is that sometimes, journalists and activists are prevented from raising red flags about critical issues such as environmental degradation, unhealthy agricultural practices, corruption and general governance challenges, among others. As a result, there is little room to demand accountability regarding environmental sustainability, climate change, agro-ecology, and other sectors of the economy.

As a contribution towards addressing FOE abuses and ensuring that civic spaces in the West Africa region remain open and safe for all persons to freely express themselves and demand good stewardship at all levels, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) with support from the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation, is monitoring and reporting violations and other developments around FOE in West Africa. Specifically, the monitoring and reporting seeks to track and document actions and inactions that seek to constrict the FOE and civic space in the region and prevent journalists, activists and communities from highlighting and interrogating critical issues of public interest.

The reports from the MFWA's monitoring on the freedom of expression landscape in the region serve as evidence to inform advocacy and policy interventions. This report covers findings from the monitoring done for the month of June 2024 across West Africa.

Findings

In the month under review, the civic space in the region shrunk further as a result of a number of abuses against journalists, media organisations and some environmental activists. For example, one media house in Burkina Faso resorted to self-censorship as a result of [intimidation](#) from a pro-government demonstrators. The violations recorded were in the forms of repressive media law reforms; regulatory sanctions; abductions/disappearances; and threats, arrests and physical attacks. Sadly, media regulators and state security agents - the very institutions that are entrusted with ensuring rule of law and protecting the rights of the media, citizens and activists – were among the key perpetrators.

Repressive Regulatory Reforms

In a retrogressive move suppress press freedom and civic engagement online, the authorities in Niger [reintroduced](#) prison terms of up to two years for defamation and the dissemination of data likely to disturb public order, under the country's cybercrime law. The changes were effected via an ordinance signed by the junta leader, General Abdourahamane Tiani, on June 7, 2024. This move has reversed the amendments made by the previous civilian government which annulled prison sentences for such offenses under the cybercrime law.

In Cote d'Ivoire, the country's Parliament approved an amendment to Article 185 (2) of the Criminal Code, Law n°2019-574 of June 26, 2019. The approved amendment censors criticism against court rulings and criminalises sympathy for potential victims of miscarriage of justice. Specifically, the amendment criminalises public expression of disapproval of court convictions for certain financial crimes and statements that seek to disapprove the judicial authorities, summon solidarity or launch an appeal for funds in support of a person convicted for certain crimes including money laundering.

Regulatory Sanctions

The civic space in Burkina Faso was severely restricted in the month under review, with the media regulator in the country, the Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC), descending heavily on media outlets and journalists over some purported infractions. On June 18, the CSC [suspended](#) the French channel *TV5 Monde-Afrique* for six months. The channel was accused of spreading misinformation about the country's security situation and reporting on alleged military mutinies.

The next day (June 19), the CSC [suspended](#) *L'Evenement*, a bi-monthly investigative newspaper, for publishing an article accusing a high-ranking military official of embezzlement. On the same day, the regulator ordered the [suspension](#) of "7 Infos", a popular show on *BF1* (a private television channel) for two weeks, over a comment made by a guest journalist (Kalifara Séré) on the show. Séré questioned the authenticity of some viral images of Burkina Faso's military Head of State, Ibrahim

Traore, donating blood, and suggested that it was a fabrication for propaganda purposes. The regulator described the comments as defamatory and ordered them to be deleted from all *BF1*'s platforms.

The beleaguered *BF1 TV* decided, on June 25, 2024, to [stop](#) all opinion and debate broadcasts following intimidation from pro-government demonstrators. The demonstrators invaded the premises of the media organisation, condemning the TV station's critical broadcasts as "imperialist," "demoralising and outrageous."

On June 19, the CSC also ordered another media outlet, *Lefaso.net*, an online newspaper, to [remove](#) an article the regulator said contained unverified information and misinformation. The regulator ordered the media organisation to take steps, within a month, to ensure a rigorous moderation of its articles' column.

Abductions/Disappearances

Four journalists have been reported missing in the month under review alone. The four incidents happened in two of the Junta regimes in the Sahel – Burkina Faso and Mali. At the time of finalising this report, none of the three had been found.

Burkina Faso:

On June 19, the day the "7 Infos" show on *BF1 TV* was suspended, Kalifara Séré, the journalist whose comments triggered the sanctions, went missing. His family, friends and media colleagues have since received no news of or from him. The day before he was last seen, he had been questioned over the comments and released by the judicial police.

Individuals claiming affiliation to the National Intelligence Agency [abducted](#) another journalist, Atiana Serge Oulon, in Ouagadougou on June 24, 2024. Oulon, the editor-in-chief of *l'Évènement* newspaper, was taken from his home at dawn and his wife was compelled to produce his mobile phones and computer.

In the third incident, Adama Bayala, another critical journalist and regular panellist on *BF1* went [missing](#) on June 28. Neither his family nor those close to him have had any news of his whereabouts since.

Mali:

In Mali, some unidentified persons believed to be national security operatives [abducted](#) journalist and cyber-activist Yeri Bocoum on June 8. Bocoum, who runs a Facebook news page called YBC, was forcibly taken away, a day after covering an opposition demonstration.

Threats, Arrests and Attacks

On June 10, 2024, police officers in Benin arrested three journalists of *Daabaaru TV* in Parakou, northern Benin, with a court subsequently convicting them to six

month's suspended imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 CFA francs (about \$900) each. This follows allegations made against the police by a caller into the "Jeudi Libre" popular call-in programme on April 4. The show was also suspended for one month.

In Sierra Leone, Thomas Dixon, editor of the *Salone Times Newspaper*, [faced online attacks](#) and death threats following his critical comments about the country's First Lady, Fatima Maada Bio, on June 6. The journalist had described the First Lady as arrogant, following her recent statement in which she said the first family will no longer need anyone because they are done looking for votes.

On June 7, the police in Kenema assaulted and detained journalist Munya Bawoh who had gone to the police station to follow-up on a case. A police officer accused Bawoh of recording his interaction with some individuals who had come to lodge a complaint, leading to an altercation and the subsequent detention of Bawoh.

On June 18, some heavily-armed police officers stormed the office of a lawyer, Precious Joy Bayoh, and [arrested](#) her over a tweet questioning the fairness of the election that gave President Julius Maada Bio a second mandate.

In Ghana, supporters of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) [stormed](#) the studio of *Eagle FM 94.1MHz* on June 13, and attacked a fellow party member, disrupting a live programme.

In another case of assault, in Nigeria, police in Kaduna [arrested](#) and allegedly tortured Gabriel Idibia, a correspondent for the *Daily Times*, for photographing them. The police were herding some cattle along the street of Kaduna, where the authorities recently launched a crackdown on stray cattle. Idibia was forced to write a statement without legal counsel.

In Liberia, *Daylight*, a news website operated by an environmental non-governmental organisation bearing the same name, Daylight, was [targeted](#) with a series of cyber-attacks. The attacks, which began in October 2023, were finally resolved in June 2024. The attacks are believed to have been perpetrated by a firm whose destructive environmental activities had been repeatedly reported on by *Daylight*.

James Giahyue, Director and Managing Editor of *Daylight*, told the MFWA that the website was infected with malicious malware that shut it to visitors and subscribers. He said that although the substantive malware attack has been fixed, the *Daylight* continues to be targeted.

"The attacks continue to come. They send us trapping Facebook messages, sometimes pretending to come from a social media company," Giahyue added.

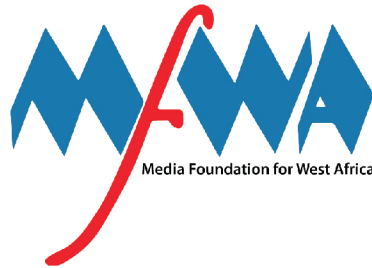
In another case involving the environment, The Gambia's Minister for the Environment, Rohey John Manjang, threatened the online news outlet, *The Alkamba Times*, with a libel and defamation suit over a [story](#) about her. The story authored by Kebba Ansu Manneh, alleged that the minister and a former governor of the Lower River Region (LRR) were involved in illicit deals concerning some seized logs. A letter from the Minister's solicitors delivered to *The Alkamba Times* on June 19, demanded that the news organisation retracts the story and issues a public apology within one week, failing which it would face a lawsuit for libel and defamation. Although the media house refused to issue the apology, it is yet to receive any further communication from the Minister.

Conclusion and Recommendation

As evident from the incidents cited above, the landscape in West Africa is largely not conducive for expression on general issues, investigative journalism and/or activism about the environment. The inimical regulatory reforms, the suspensions, disappearances/ abductions and attacks (offline and online) cited above send only one signal – keep off from reporting or discussing the issues around which the violations occurred or we will come after you. This signal is indeed forcing a number of journalists and activists and media outlets, as in the case of *BF1* in Burkina Faso, to self-censor. This is worrying as it emboldens perpetrators to abuse expression with impunity, and corporate entities, including those destroying the environment, to continue to silence activism against their unsustainable practices.

The MFWA is deeply concerned by these developments, and urges governments in the region to take steps to protect the right to freedom of expression to enable journalists, media outlets and activists to work freely and hold duty-bearers and corporate institutions accountable. We also call on governments in the region to take punitive steps against perpetrators of the above-mentioned violations to deter others from such unlawful acts.

The organisation is also appealing to media regulators, and the CSC in Burkina Faso in particular, to resort to dialogues and alternative dispute resolutions in dealing with supposed infractions by the media and journalists, and desist from suspensions as the implications of such actions are dire. Beyond denying the public access to information, the suspensions also result in financial losses to the media organisations and in some cases, job losses to some Burkinabes. Such dialogues and alternative dispute resolutions will also likely bring an end to tensed relations and build bridges.



Media Foundation for West Africa

Aar-Bakor Street, Ogbojo

Telephone: +233 (0) 302 555 327

Twitter: @TheMFWA

Facebook: Media Foundation for West Africa

info@mfwaw.org

www.mfwaw.org



@themfwa



www.mfwaw.org



themfwa