



Freedom of Expression Developments in West Africa

An October 2024 Round up

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Introduction

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right upheld in the constitutions of most West African nations, with many of these states also committed to international and regional conventions that safeguard this right alongside broader human rights protections. These commitments, however, could not help prevent a growing culture of repression within both democratic and military-led governments. Journalists, media outlets, activists, civil society organisations, and human rights advocates who critique corruption, governance failures, environmental harm, or oppressive practices are often subjected to harsh retaliatory actions. Such reprisals commonly include physical violence, unlawful detention, incarceration, exorbitant fines, and, in severe instances, even loss of life.

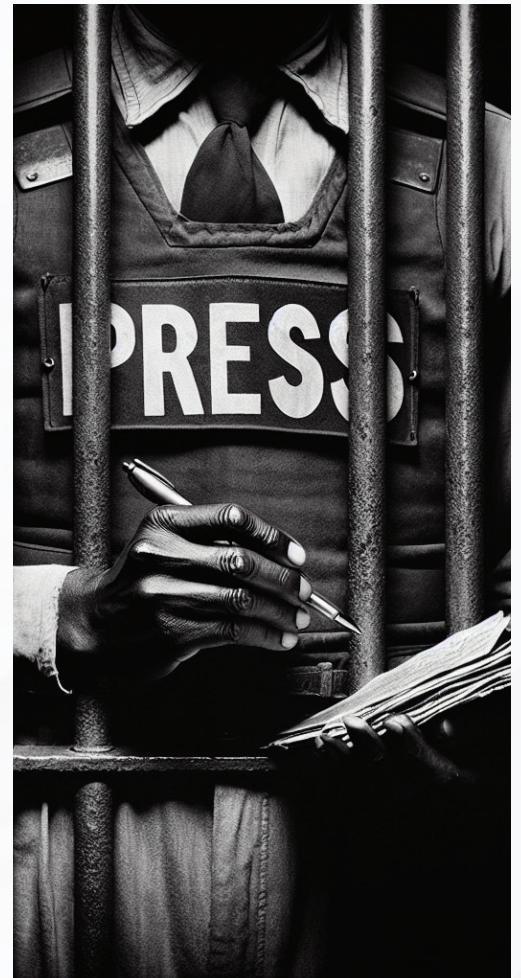
The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with support from the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation, monitors and reports on violations impacting freedom of expression and civic space in the region. This monitoring reports serve as evidence that informs advocacy and policy interventions aimed at safeguarding and expanding the frontiers of expression.



Findings



This report highlights incidents of FOE violations recorded in October 2024. The incidents recorded include Physical Attacks, Arrests and Detentions, Sentencing and Judicial Harassment, and Media Censorship and Suspension.



Physical Attacks on Journalists

In Senegal, journalists were subjected to both physical and verbal assaults while covering politically sensitive events. On October 2, 2024, supporters of opposition leader, Bougane Guèye Dani, verbally abused journalist Ngone Saliou Diop and physically assaulted her colleague, Maty Sarr Niang, both of whom work for the news site, *Sans Limites*. The supporters obstructed the journalists from covering the questioning of Dani, leader of Geum Sa Bopp, who had been summoned by the Cybercrime Unit with no official explanation.

Two incidents of physical attacks were recorded in Ghana. On October 16, 2024 followers of Bishop Elisha Salifu Amoako assaulted Murtala Inusah, a court correspondent for the Accra-based Excellence in Broadcasting (EIB) Network. The attack occurred while Inusah was

covering the bishop's court appearance related to a fatal accident allegedly caused by his under-aged son. Inusah was assaulted, and his mobile phone was taken. A police officer attempting to intervene was also attacked.

Armed private guards of a mining company, Edelmetallum Resources Limited, assaulted a three-member crew from the Multimedia Group Limited on October 20, 2024. The guards, armed with pump-action guns, attacked the journalists, confiscated their equipment, including a drone, before evicting them from the site. The crew, consisting of reporter Erastus Asare Donkor, drone pilot Majid Alidu, camera technician Edward Suantah, and driver Edward Arko, was documenting environmental destruction linked to mining activities near Manso Nkran in the Ashanti region of Ghana.



**3 major cases
in October**



**2 separate
attacks: court
case and
mining report**



**2 journalists
attacked while
covering
politics**

Arrests and Detention of Journalists

On October 1, 2024, the Cybercrime Unit of the police detained Cheikh Yerim Seck, journalist and founder of Yerim Post TV. He was summoned for questioning on charges of 'disseminating false news and defamation' following statements he made on September 27, during a programme on the private television channel, 7 TV. Seck allegedly disputed the figures presented by the Senegalese government regarding the economic situation inherited from the previous administration. He was released on October 3, 2024, and the case was dropped.

In Mauritania, a prominent politician and advocate for the rights of the Haratines, Ahmed Ould Samba, was on October 2, 2024, arrested alongside two others, Mohamed Yelem and Sidati Ali, for distributing an audio clip in which he (Ould Samba) harshly criticised Mauritania's President, Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani. In the clip, Ould Samba accused the President of corruption and trafficking. The three were detained in Nouakchott prison without being presented to an investigating judge.

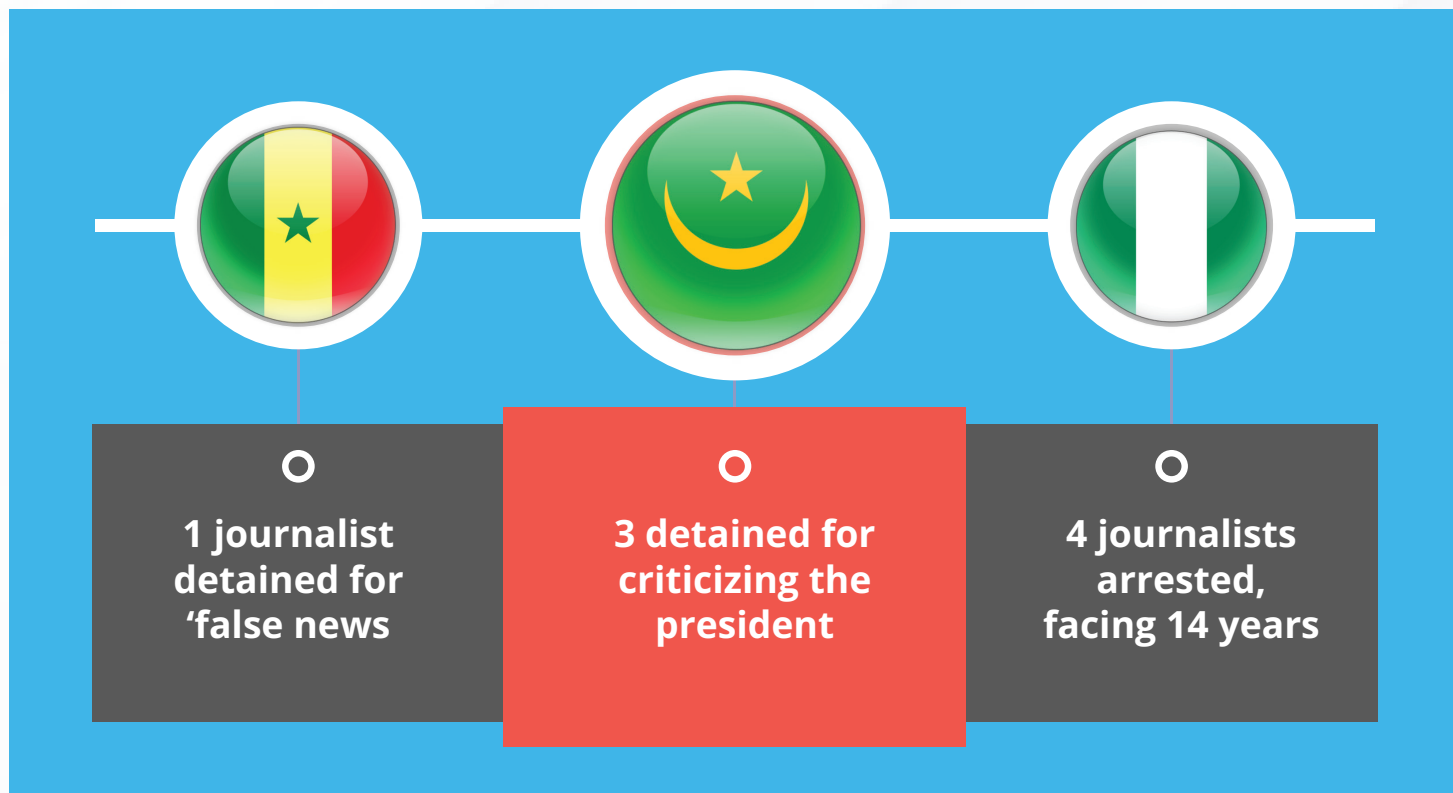
In late September 2024, between the 20 and 25, four Nigerian journalists were arrested in separate operations across Lagos, Kwara, and Ogun States. The four journalists,

namely Olurotimi Olawale, editor of the *National Monitor*; Precious Eze Chukwunonso, publisher of *News Platform*; Roland Olonishuwa, a reporter with the *Herald Newspaper*; and Seun Odunlami, publisher of *Newsjaunts*; were detained following their publication of investigative reports implicating Segun Agbaje, CEO of Guaranty Trust Bank (GTBank), in an alleged fraud case involving 1 trillion Naira (approximately £470 million).

On September 27, the journalists were formally charged under sections of Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act, accused of publishing "false and offensive material" and engaging in cyberstalking. By October, their legal predicament had intensified. On October 4, the Federal High Court in Lagos denied bail to all four journalists, effectively prolonging their detention. Then, on October 14, prosecutors amended the charges to include conspiracy, extortion, and the dissemination of misleading information. These expanded charges expose the journalists to significant penalties, with potential sentences of up to 14 years in prison under the combined provisions of the Cybercrimes Act and Nigeria's Criminal Code, in addition to substantial fines.

Throughout this ordeal, the journalists have maintained their plea of not guilty. Adding to their challenges, the police reportedly compelled them to remove the contested articles from their platforms. Amid these developments, the Nigerian House of Representatives announced an

investigation into Guaranty Trust Bank over the same fraud allegations originally reported by the journalists. This move introduces a contradictory dimension to the case, as it validates the substance of the journalists' reports while their prosecution continues.



Suspension of Media

In Burkina Faso, the Voice of America (VOA) was suspended on October 7, 2024 by the Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC), the media regulator. The suspension followed a September 19 broadcast on VOA's *Washington Forum*, which the CSC accused of "demoralising" military troops and "condoning terrorism." The suspension, which will last for three months, also includes a ban on local media from relaying news from international.



VOA banned for 3 months



Local media barred from relaying VOA content



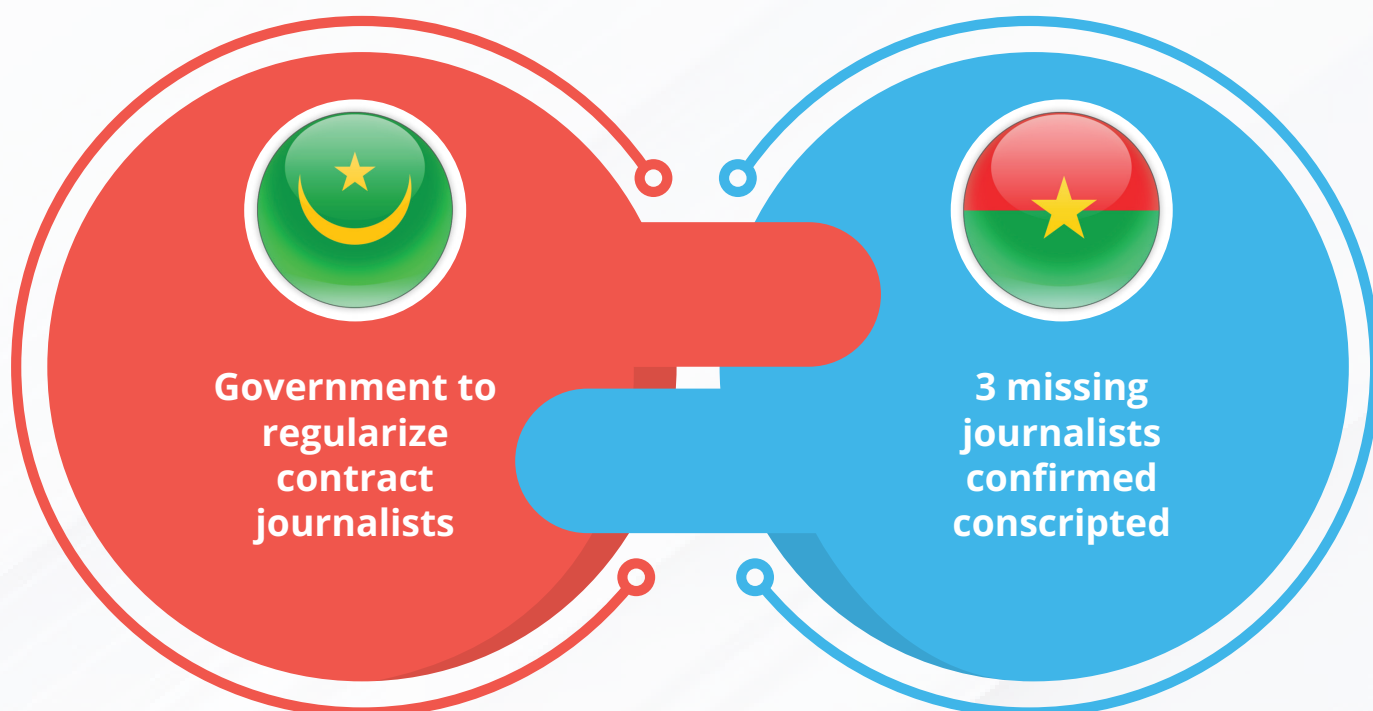
Other Developments

One positive development observed during the monitoring in October 2024 is the announcement by the government of Mauritania to regularise contract journalists. The Minister of Communication, Houssein Ould Medou, announced this on October 30, 2024 adding that a commission had been established to address the issue, in collaboration with relevant ministries and trade unions.

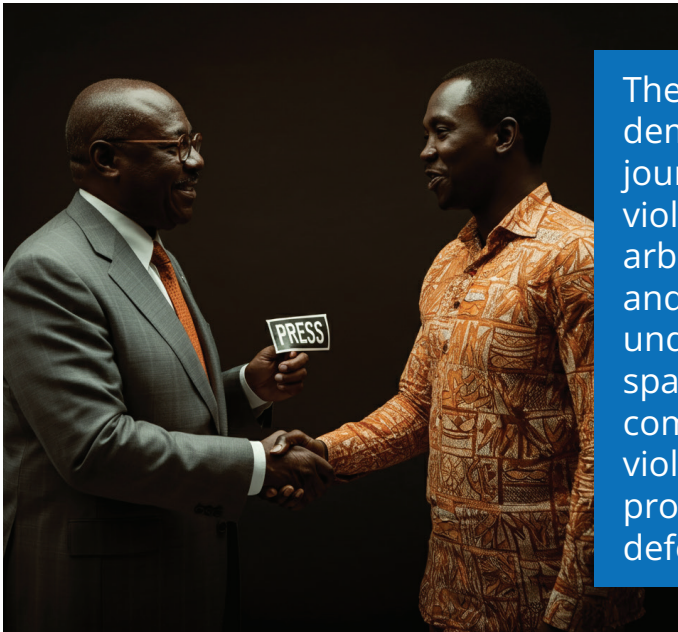
In Burkina Faso, three journalists - Serge Oulon, Adama Bayala, and Kalifara Séré - who went missing in June 2024, have been confirmed to have been conscripted into the army. Their whereabouts had remained unknown until the Burkinabe

government admitted this on October 24, 2024, at a session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

Séré disappeared after being questioned by the media regulator, the CSC, over critical comments he made on a TV show. Bayala vanished after leaving his office, and Oulon was abducted by individuals claiming to be from the National Intelligence Agency. While it is a relief that the journalists are alive, media groups have condemned their forced conscription and called for their immediate release. The fate of a fourth journalist, Alain Niozè Traoré, remains unknown since his abduction in July.



Conclusion



The incidents recorded in October 2024 demonstrate the continuing challenges facing journalists and the media in West Africa. FOE violations highlighted above – physical attacks, arbitrary detentions and suspension of media – and other such violations, continue to undermine press freedom and restrict civic space in the region. The MFWA reiterates its commitment to monitoring and reporting these violations while advocating for reforms to protect the rights of media workers and other defenders of expression.

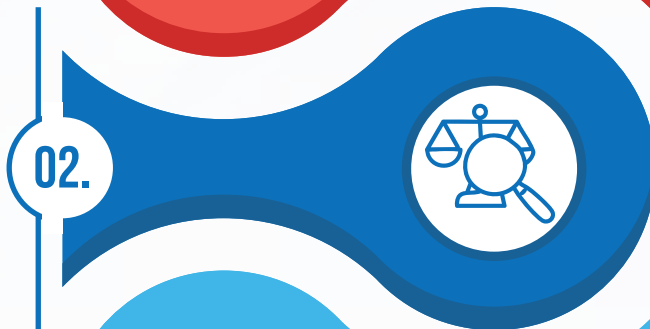
While pursuing that cause, MFWA calls upon relevant stakeholders to also take the following actions:

- **Government of Senegal:** Laws that criminalise defamation should be reformed to ensure that media and speech offenses are not criminalised, but handled through civil legal processes.
- **Government of Ghana:** investigate and hold accountable individuals responsible for the assault on journalist Murtala Inusah and the attack on the Multimedia crew.
- **Government of Mauritania:**
 - ensure that critics of the government, like Ahmed Ould Samba and his colleagues, are not detained without due process or subjected to prolonged pre-trial imprisonment.
 - Expedite the regularisation of contract journalists in public media as announced, ensuring fair wages and protections under labour laws.
- **Government of Burkina Faso:**
 - lift the suspension on Voice of America and allow local media to relay international broadcasts without undue restrictions.
 - the Conseil supérieur de la communication (CSC) should operate independently, ensuring that decisions about media content are not politicised or used to suppress dissenting voices.
 - security concerns should not be used as pretexts to limit press freedom or censor diverse viewpoints.
- **Government of Nigeria:**
 - revise sections of the cybercrime law that expose journalists to harsh penalties for reporting on corruption or corporate misconduct online.
 - Journalists detained over allegations of “false and misleading information” against Guaranty Trust Bank should be afforded expedited and impartial judicial processes.



01.

Senegal
Reform defamation laws to decriminalize media offenses.



02.

Ghana
Investigate and hold perpetrators accountable for journalist attacks.



03.

Mauritania
Ensure due process for detained critics and fast-track journalist regularization.



04.

Burkina Faso
Lift VOA suspension, ensure independent media regulation, and avoid censorship under security claims.



05.

Nigeria
Revise cybercrime laws to protect journalists and ensure a fair trial for detained reporters.



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