



# Spotlight on Freedom of Expression in West Africa:

A September 2024 Round up

2024

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## Introduction

Freedom of expression is guaranteed in the Constitutions of most West African countries which are also signatories to several international and regional treaties and protocols on freedom of expression and human rights. Despite these legal safeguards, there is an insidious culture of repression in both democratically elected governments and junta regimes. Journalists, media houses, activists, civil society organisations, and human rights defenders who challenge these repressive actions or speak out against poor governance, corruption, or mismanagement are often met with reprisals, including physical attacks, arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, heavy fines, and in some cases, death.

In an effort to combat these violations and

advocate for an open civic space, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with support from the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation, monitors and reports on developments that impact expression and the civic space in the region. The monitoring reports serve as evidence that exposes the nature, prevalence and impact of violations against expression. The evidence also contributes to informing advocacy and policy interventions aimed at expanding the frontiers of expression.

This report highlights findings from monitoring carried out in September 2024. It features summarised accounts of violations and other developments recorded throughout the monitoring period.

# Findings



Findings from the monitoring carried out in September 2024 are presented below under the four categories of violations captured: Physical Attacks on Journalists; Arrests and Detentions of Journalists; Sentencing and Judicial Harassment; Media Censorship and Suspension. The summarised narratives under each of the categories expose the incidents, perpetrators and victims of the violations recorded.

## *Physical Attacks on Journalists*

On September 15, 2024, Júlio Oliveira, a reporter for Portuguese media outlet, Lusa, was physically assaulted by members of the Rapid Intervention Police in Bissau, Guinea Bissau. Oliveira was covering a political rally in support of Domingos Simões Pereira, a prominent Guinea-Bissau politician. While filming the rally, Oliveira was approached by police officers who demanded that he delete the photos he had taken. When he resisted, he was punched and stopped from further coverage.

On September 29, 2024, six journalists were violently attacked while covering an opposition party event in Lomé, the capital of Togo. The attackers, dressed in plain clothes, disrupted the event, throwing chairs and stones, smashing sound systems, and attacking journalists.

Among those assaulted were Hyacinthe Gbloedzro of Nana FM, who was struck with a chair, and Godfrey Akpa of Ici Lomé, who was assaulted by a group of more than 10 people. Other journalists, including Yvette Sossou of La Dépêche, Romuald Koffi Lansou of TogoVisions, Albert Agbeko of Togo Scoop, and

Yawo Klousse of Afrique en ligne were left with injuries. Lansou's phone and tripod were thrown into a well.



## Arrests and Detentions of Journalists

On September 13, 2024, 25 members of the citizens' platform Agir pour le peuple (AGIP) were arrested in Abidjan, during a peaceful demonstration to denounce rising costs of food and electricity. Five days later, 16 of them were sentenced to six months in prison for undermining public order. AGIP Secretary General, Armand Krikpeu, remains in detention on several charges, including incitement to insurrection, undermining state security and public order, and occupation, for which he could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison. Despite assurances from the authorities that the demonstration would go ahead, it was banned on the very day it was authorised. Some of the demonstrators who went ahead with the demonstration were attacked and arrested.

On September 20, 2024, police officers arrested Olurotimi Olawale, editor of the National Monitor, and Precious Eze Chukwunonso, publisher of the News Platform for publishing articles implicating Segun Agbaje, CEO of Guarantee Trust Bank, in an alleged fraud case involving 1 trillion Naira (\$600 million) in Ogun state.

Five days later (September 25, 2024) two other journalists were arrested, namely, Rowland Olonishuwa (September 25), a reporter with privately-owned Herald newspaper in Kwara state and Seun Odunlami (September 25), publisher of privately-owned Newsjaunts website.

On September 27, 2024, the journalists were charged under the Cybercrimes Act (sections 24 1.b and 27), specifically for publishing “false and offensive material” about the CEO. The journalists are being remanded at a Lagos correctional centre, pending a bail hearing after

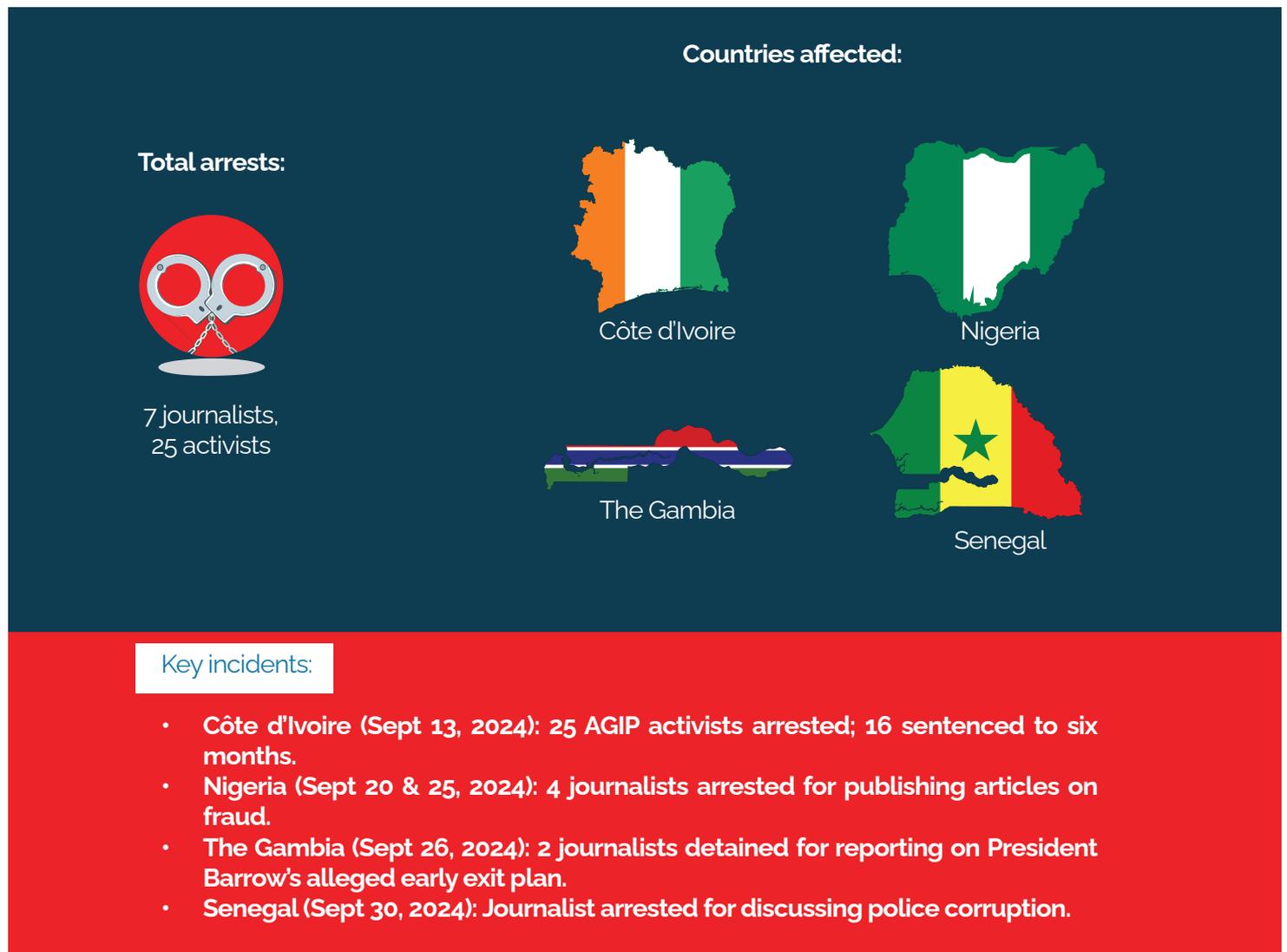


pleading not guilty. Nigeria's federal House of Representatives later announced an investigation into the bank over fraud claims, despite the police compelling the journalists to take down their articles.

On September 26, 2024, Gambian police officers detained Musa Sheriff Hydrara, Editor-in-Chief of The Voice newspaper, and journalist Momodou Justice Darboe of the same media outlet. The two were detained over a story by Darboe that alleged that President Adama Barrow was planning an early exit from office before the 2026 elections and had selected a successor. Hydrara and Darboe were summoned for interrogation at the police headquarters after they received a letter from the President's lawyer, Ida Drameh, threatening a defamation lawsuit

for purportedly publishing false news. Both journalists were subsequently charged with false publication and broadcasting. Hydrara was released on bail on the evening of September 26, 2024, while Darboe was detained overnight and released the next day.

On September 30, 2024, Senegalese journalist Kader Dia was arrested by the special cybersecurity division of the police following a broadcast on Sen TV on September 23, 2024. During the broadcast, Dia discussed allegations of police corruption in connection with a group of migrants found dead off the coast of Dakar. He claimed to possess an audio recording in which a migrant accused a police officer of demanding bribes. This claim led to his arrest for incitement and defamation.



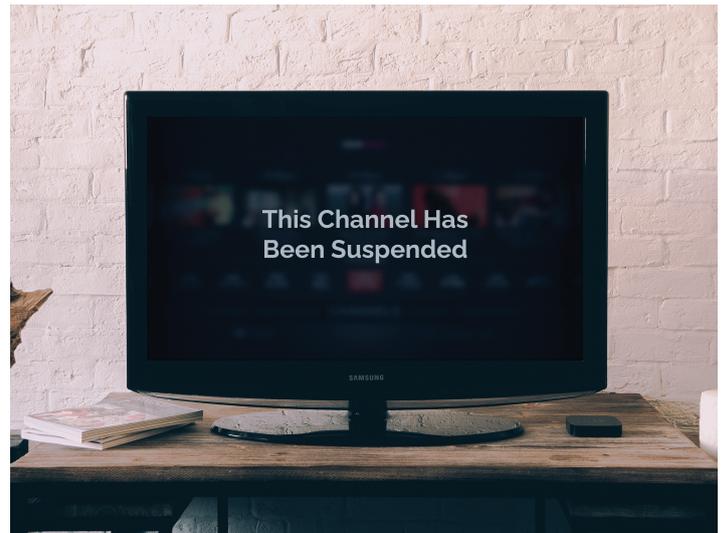
## Sentencing and Judicial Harassment

On September 3, 2024, a court in northern Bauchi state issued an arrest warrant for Haruna Mohammed Salisu, the publisher of a local news outlet, following charges of criminal defamation, falsehood, and mischief. The charges stem from an April 16 report that accused federal lawmaker, Mansur Manu Soro, of colluding with businessman, Abubakar Abdullahi, to fraudulently divert public funds. Both Salisu and the reporter who authored the article, Yawale Adamu, face up to five years imprisonment for defamation and falsehood, with an additional two years for mischief under the Bauchi state penal code.

On September 25, 2024, prosecutors in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger launched investigations into French journalist Wassim Nasr, a reporter for France 24, accusing him of publicly supporting terrorism. Nasr had made an analysis of a jihadist attack on several key sites in Bamako, Mali, on September 17, 2024, and his remarks were deemed to justify terrorist actions. Director of France 24, Amaury Guibert, condemned the allegations stating that these legal proceedings mark another stage in the obstruction of press freedom in the region.”

## Media Censorship and Suspension

On September 5, 2024, Mali’s media regulator, the Haute Autorité de la Communication (HAC), suspended French broadcaster TV5Monde for three months, accusing the outlet of biased reporting on a military drone bombing in northern Mali. The broadcast, aired on August 25, 2024 allegedly failed to present the Malian military’s perspective. Although the military’s version was aired by the media in a follow-up report the next day (on August 26), the HAC maintained its decision. Before TV5Monde was suspended, other French outlets, including RFI, France 24 and LCI had been suspended for “false allegations.”



Total  
journalists  
facing legal  
action:

**3**

Countries involved:



Nigeria



Senegal



Burkina Faso



Niger



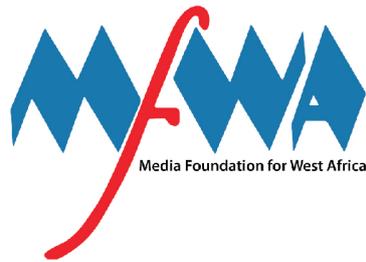
# Conclusion and Recommendations

The attacks and arrests documented during the month of September in Nigeria, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau, expose the hostile environment within which journalists, activists, and civil society organisations operate. These acts of repression harm not only journalists and activists, but also the broader society. When media outlets are shut down, the public is deprived of the knowledge needed for informed decision making, and the ensuing environment of fear discourages individuals from speaking out, allowing abuse and poor governance to go unchallenged.

To address these violations and foster a safer, more open civic space in West Africa, the MFWA calls upon relevant stakeholders to take the following actions:

- Government of Cote d'Ivoire: release unconditionally all arrested members of AGIP, journalists, and activists detained for exercising their rights to free expression.
- Government of The Gambia: President Barrow and his counsel to drop all charges against Musa Sheriff Hydera and Momodou Justice Darboe.
- Prosecutors in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger: drop charges against French journalist, Wassim Nasr.
- Nigerian federal government: conduct independent investigations into the:
  - attacks and abuses against citizens, including journalists covering the protests.
  - treatment of those arrested, including allegations of police brutality and the denial of due process during their detention.
  - abuses against citizens and take punitive action against all identified perpetrators.
- Government of Mali: reinstate TV5Monde and other suspended outlets, allowing them to resume their operations without restrictions.
- Nigerian federal government: Judicial authorities in Bauchi to drop the charges against journalists Salisu and Adamu.
- Government of Guinea-Bissau: conduct thorough investigations into the harassment and assaults on Júlio Oliveira
- Togolese authorities: investigate the assault on abused journalists, ensuring accountability for those responsible.





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