



# Freedom of Expression Developments in West Africa

**A November 2024 Roundup**



## Introduction

The socio-political context in a number of West African countries continue to have a repressive bearing on the operations of the media, civil society organisations, human rights defenders and other activists, in the region. In countries under military dictatorship such as Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Mali and Niger, for instance, there is a persistent repression of expression to the point that outspoken media outlets are sometimes suspended or closed down. Journalists in such countries are pressurised to self-censor for fear of reprisal attacks should they publish something that is not favourable to the junta rulers.

Even for democratically elected governments, the tendency to silence activists, journalists and human rights defenders is often high. Government officials, powerful individuals and corporate institutions with vested interests sometimes exert physical, psychological and legal pressure through harassment, threats and intimidation, on media practitioners and civic actors (including environmentalists) with the aim of silencing reportage that challenge the status quo, demand accountability, and/or insist on fair, equitable and sustainable management and use of resources. Activism against destructive environmental practices such as illegal mining and other destructive environmental practices, also receive a lot of harassment, intimidation and threats.

To bring attention to such acts of repression, gather evidence for advocacy interventions and policy considerations, and recommend appropriate reparative measures, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with support from the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation, monitors and reports on issues affecting expression, civic engagement and media reportage in the region. The monitoring reports provide crucial evidence that sheds light on the nature, frequency, and impact of such violations on the media and civic space in the region.

In this report, key insights from monitoring conducted in the month of November 2024 are presented. The report highlights recorded violations and other significant developments during the period.

## Findings

Two significant issues were identified from the monitoring conducted across the 16 countries in the West Africa region. The first is about how the junta regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are muzzling expression; and the second is about how regulatory authorities are censoring media outlets and denying the public information through suspension/shut down of media outlets.

### *Suppression of expression by the junta governments of Burkina Faso, Mali & Niger*

For the month of November 2024, the monitoring of the media and freedom of expression landscape found three worrying press freedom violations under the military regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The monitoring observed a rather worrying transnational collaboration between Burkina Faso and Mali meant to suppress expression. A known figure in Mali, Issa Kaou, a former member of the Malian Transitional Council, was reported to have made comments on a local TV channel, Joliba TV, describing a foiled coup attempt in Burkina Faso as a set up. Following concerns raised by Burkina Faso's media regulatory authority about his comments, Kaou was [arrested](#). He is set to face trial in February 2025 on charges of "offending a foreign head of state," a charge that carries severe penalties. Mali's media regulator, High Authority for Communication (HAC), [shut down](#) Joliba TV for airing the programme on which Kaou made the comment and also revoked the broadcast licence of the TV station.

Then in Niger, Serge Mathurin Adou, an Ivorian-Nigerien journalist, was formally [charged](#) with "threatening state security" and subsequently transferred to a prison located approximately 100 kilometers from Niamey. Adou's arrest is linked to his critical reporting on the military junta and its regional allies, particularly Burkina Faso's regime. His work has often highlighted the human rights abuses and authoritarian practices of the junta. It is widely considered that the charges against him are aimed at stifling independent journalism and deterring others from speaking out against the Nigerian junta government.

These are worrying developments as the junta regimes in the three Sahelian countries, through these repressive acts, seem to suggest to the media, activists and members of the general public that commentary about the security status in their respective countries, as well as those in the other junta regimes are prohibited. The collaboration observed between Burkina Faso and Mali in arresting Kaou and suspending Joliba TV; and the arrest and imprisonment of Adou in Niger; are the examples and the evidences substantiating the observation made.

### *Media Regulators' suppression of expression through media suspension & shutdown*

The violations recorded in November 2024, also, show that media regulators are advancing anti-press freedom tactics. In two separate instances, media regulators shut down and suspended media outlets which ultimately denied the public access to information from those media platforms.

The collaboration between the media regulators of Burkina Faso and Mali is what resulted in the shutting down of the Mali-based Joliba TV. And Mali's media regulator, the High Authority for Communication (HAC), went a step further to also revoke the broadcast licence of Joliba TV, a situation that has silenced the media

outlet and thus, denied the station's listeners access to information needed to make informed decisions.

Then in Togo, the media regulator, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC), on November 5, 2024, [suspended](#) the privately owned Tampa Express for publishing alleged false information without providing evidence and also, for repeated ethical violations. The suspension followed an article published by the bi-monthly newspaper that criticised Minister Sandra Ablamba Ahoéfavi Johnson's political influence, likening her to France's Christine Deviers-Joncour. According to the Togolese media regulator, HAAC, the incident marked the fourth time that the newspaper's publishing director, Francisco Napo-Koura, had been summoned to the HAAC over professionalism issues since 2022.

In an unrelated violation in Guinea Bissau, police violently cracked down on a peaceful vigil organised by students from the Escola Superior da Educação (ESE) in front of the Ministry of Education on November 20, 2024. The students were protesting delayed publication of school results, increment in tuition fees and poor teaching conditions. Police officers arrested at least six students and assaulted two journalists, namely Carabulai Cassamá, a reporter for Rádio Capital FM, and Turé da Silva, a journalist from Rádio Sol Mansi. The police also seized the journalists' phones, cameras and recording devices.

### *Other Developments*

On November 18, 2024 in Conakry, capital town of Guinea, journalist Oury Maci Bah escaped a [kidnapping](#) attempt while waiting for a driver to deliver a package. Two unidentified individuals tried to take him by force, but he was able to escape through the intervention of two young people on their way to prayer. Bah suspects that this attack is linked to his role in mediating a conflict between the sub-prefectures of Maci and Gongorè, where he had denounced a local criminal network. He calls on journalists to be vigilant in the face of threats to the profession. From the records of our monitoring, no environmental activist or reporter was attacked during the month under review.

## **Redress of violations**

The monitoring in November 2024 cited two redress actions in Senegal and The Gambia. On November 29, 2024, Journalist and political analyst Adama Gaye was granted provisional [release](#) after being charged with spreading false news. Gaye's case has reignited debates about press freedom in Senegal. The charges against him are seen as part of a broader trend of using the law to intimidate and silence critical voices. Gaye's release, while a positive development, has not alleviated concerns about the shrinking space for independent journalism in Senegal. Media freedom advocates

continue to call for reforms to protect journalists from arbitrary arrests and prosecutions.

On November 4, 2024 President Adama Barrow of The Gambia [withdrew](#) a defamation lawsuit against *The Voice newspaper*, but false news charges against its editor remain.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings in this report underscore the persistent threats to press freedom and freedom of expression in West Africa, particularly in countries governed by military juntas. Journalists, media organizations, and opposition figures continue to face arrests, assaults, censorship, and legal harassment for their work. The increasing collaboration between repressive military regimes to suppress dissent further exacerbates the shrinking civic space in the region.

While some positive developments, such as the provisional release of journalist Adama Gaye and the withdrawal of the defamation lawsuit against *The Voice* newspaper in The Gambia, provide some hope, they do not erase the broader pattern of repression. The MFWA, therefore, calls on governments in the region, whether military or civilian, to respect the constitutional guarantees for expression and access to information. They must, as much as possible, accommodate the work of journalists and the media at all times. The MFWA, in particular, calls on the following governments and regulators to address the violations highlighted in this report.

### **Government of Burkina Faso and Mali:**

- Ensure a fair trial for Issa Kaou N'Djim

### **The High Authority for Communication (HAC):**

- Restore the licence of Joliba TV and lift the shutdown imposed on the station to ensure the people's right to information is respected and protected.

### **The High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC):**

- Lift the suspension imposed on the privately owned *Tampa Express* and drop all charges against the publishing director, Napo-Koura

### **Government of Guinea Bissau:**

- Ensure that the police officers who assaulted the journalists are punished to serve as a deterrent to other state security officers
- Enhance compliance with provision 9 of UN special provisions on the use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials.



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