



# West Africa Freedom Of Expression Monitor

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Quarter 3  
July-September 2024

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# Executive Summary

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been actively promoting press freedom and advancing media development to reinforce the media's essential role in promoting good governance across the sub-region. Through its freedom of expression programme, the MFWA monitors and reports on press freedom and freedom of expression issues, including the right to express oneself through demonstrations. The organisation meticulously documents violations and threats to media freedom and the civic space while pursuing advocacy efforts aimed at enhancing freedom of expression across West Africa.

Threats to human rights, and particularly press freedom, have become increasingly evident in recent years. Armed insurgencies and terrorist activities in the Sahel region, encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and northern Nigeria, have resulted in the implementation of restrictive laws that curtail the civic space and undermine press freedom. Additionally, the military takeovers of civilian governments in Mali, Niger, Guinea, and Burkina Faso have further created a suffocating environment that restricts press freedom.

Since 2014, the MFWA has been collating and analysing the findings of its monitoring activities into quarterly publications titled, the West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor. The monitoring and reporting are informed and guided by provisions in international, regional and sub-regional human rights frameworks to which most West African countries are parties and/or signatories.

This edition of the West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor covers the findings from our monitoring and tracking of freedom of expression (FOE) violations and other notable developments recorded in the third quarter of 2024 (July-September 2024).

During the period under review, a total of 40 incidents of freedom of expression violations were recorded. The figure is 24% lower than that of the preceding quarter (April-June 2024), which recorded 53 violations. Unfortunately, most of the violations reported had not been redressed in any way at the time of compiling this report.

Nigeria recorded 19 violations, the highest during the quarter. Guinea-Bissau followed with six violations. Sierra Leone, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire recorded two violations each. Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Togo, Ghana, Benin, Mauritania, Niger, and The Gambia recorded one violation each.

Seven different types of perpetrators were responsible for the 40 violations. Security agents accounted for 27 violations, representing 68% of the total violations. Individuals were responsible for five violations (13%), while Media regulatory bodies and State/Public officials were behind with two violations each (5%). The Courts, Political Party Affiliates, and Media Owners/Managers committed one violation each (3%).



# Introduction

One of the cardinal pillars of democracy is freedom of the press and of expression. The protection, respect and defence of press freedom and free speech are crucial for ensuring transparency, accountability, and an informed populace. Recognising the critical importance of freedom of expression (FOE) in building resilient and progressive societies, all nations in the sub-region have ratified several international treaties and conventions that uphold the right to freedom of expression. Specifically, all 16 countries in the region are signatories to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These frameworks provide safeguards for FOE as well as the rights to freedom of association and assembly. Article 9 of the African Charter, for example, guarantees that "every individual shall have the right to receive information" and "every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law." Furthermore, Article 11 of the Charter upholds the right of individuals to "assemble freely with others."



Despite these commitments, freedom of expression is under severe threat in West Africa, particularly in the conflict-ridden and junta-led Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Alarming, even Senegal – a country long celebrated for its democracy and human rights record – has witnessed a marked decline in respecting and protecting FOE rights. Regular monitoring and reporting on FOE are, thus, vital to provide evidence that can guide policy formulation and advocacy initiatives.

It is within this context that the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)

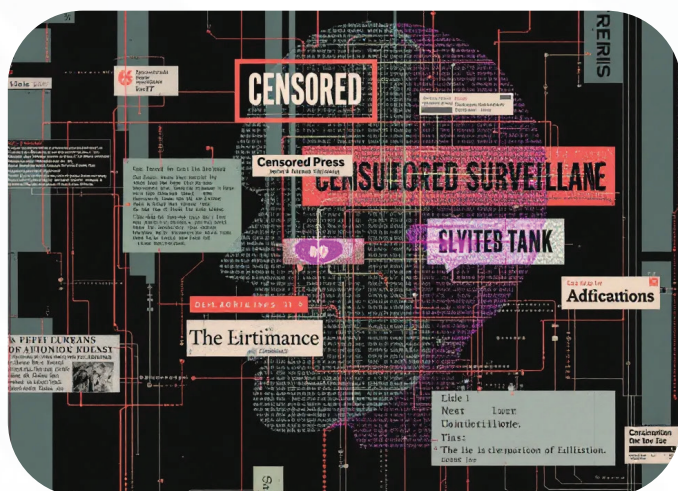
continues its work to monitor, report on, and advocate for the protection and promotion of freedom of expression rights. The organisation's monitoring efforts focus on assessing the extent to which international, regional, and sub-regional safeguards, alongside FOE provisions enshrined in national constitutions, are upheld in both principle and practice. Findings from these monitoring activities are disseminated through alerts, statements, and monthly publications which are ultimately into quarterly reports, referred to as the Freedom of Expression Monitor.



While the evidence suggests that these rights are far from being fully realised in practice, their codification in constitutions, laws, and international instruments provides a critical legal foundation for contesting their violations. These violations manifest in various forms, including killings, threats, physical assaults, arbitrary arrests and detentions, as well as the imposition of crippling fines - even in civil defamation cases. Through its monitoring activities, the MFWA consistently documents these breaches. Regrettably, the primary culprits behind such abuses – often aimed at

silencing journalists, human rights defenders, and activists – are government officials, powerful individuals, and security forces. In recent years, repressive measures have expanded to include digital surveillance, forensic searches, and the hacking of journalists' and activists' electronic devices.

This edition of the Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor) presents findings of the daily monitoring conducted throughout the third quarter of 2024 (July-September 2024).



# Methodology

This report is compiled using data gathered from the MFWA's own monitoring and monitoring reports received from MFWA's correspondents in the various West African countries. To complement the reports from the MFWA and its correspondents, FOE developments reported by MFWA's partner organisations, the media and other human rights organisations that work in the region are integrated into the report.

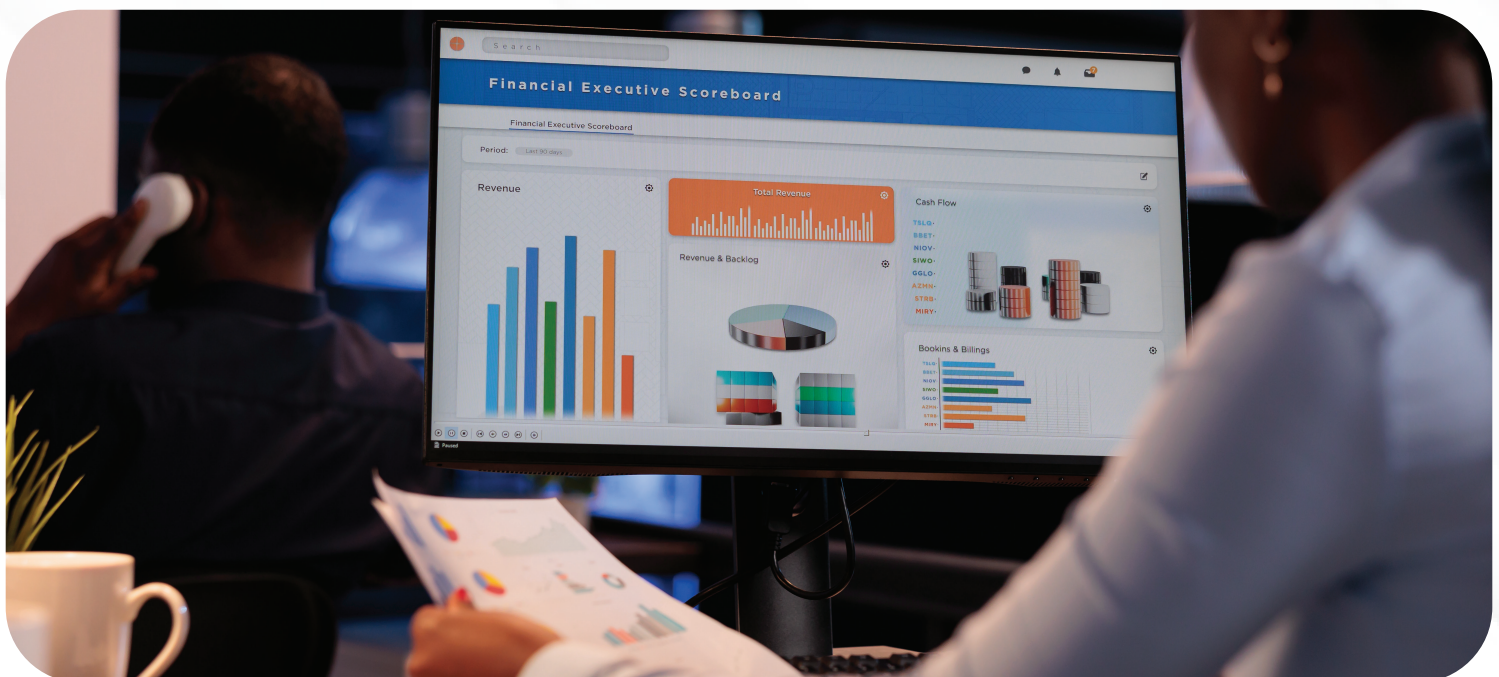
Reports from the daily monitoring by the MFWA, its correspondents and partners, as well as other stakeholders as detailed above, are published as *Alerts* to draw attention to the issues identified for remedial action. This report, the Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor), is, however, a quarterly publication that collates and analyses the Alerts issued over the months of July, August and September 2024. It also highlights other significant developments regarding civic liberties in the region. The Monitor serves as an advocacy material for the promotion, defence and protection of media and

freedom of expression (offline & online) rights.

The report is guided by the UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators. Specifically, the safety and impunity statistics indicators informed the coding of the violations.

## Findings

The findings of the July-September 2024 edition of the Monitor are presented below under the following subheadings: incidents of freedom of expression violations recorded; countries and incidents of FOE violations; perpetrators; and targets of FOE violations. The report also highlights some other important developments which occurred during the quarter. It concludes with several recommendations that will facilitate the nurturing of a progressive media landscape in the region.



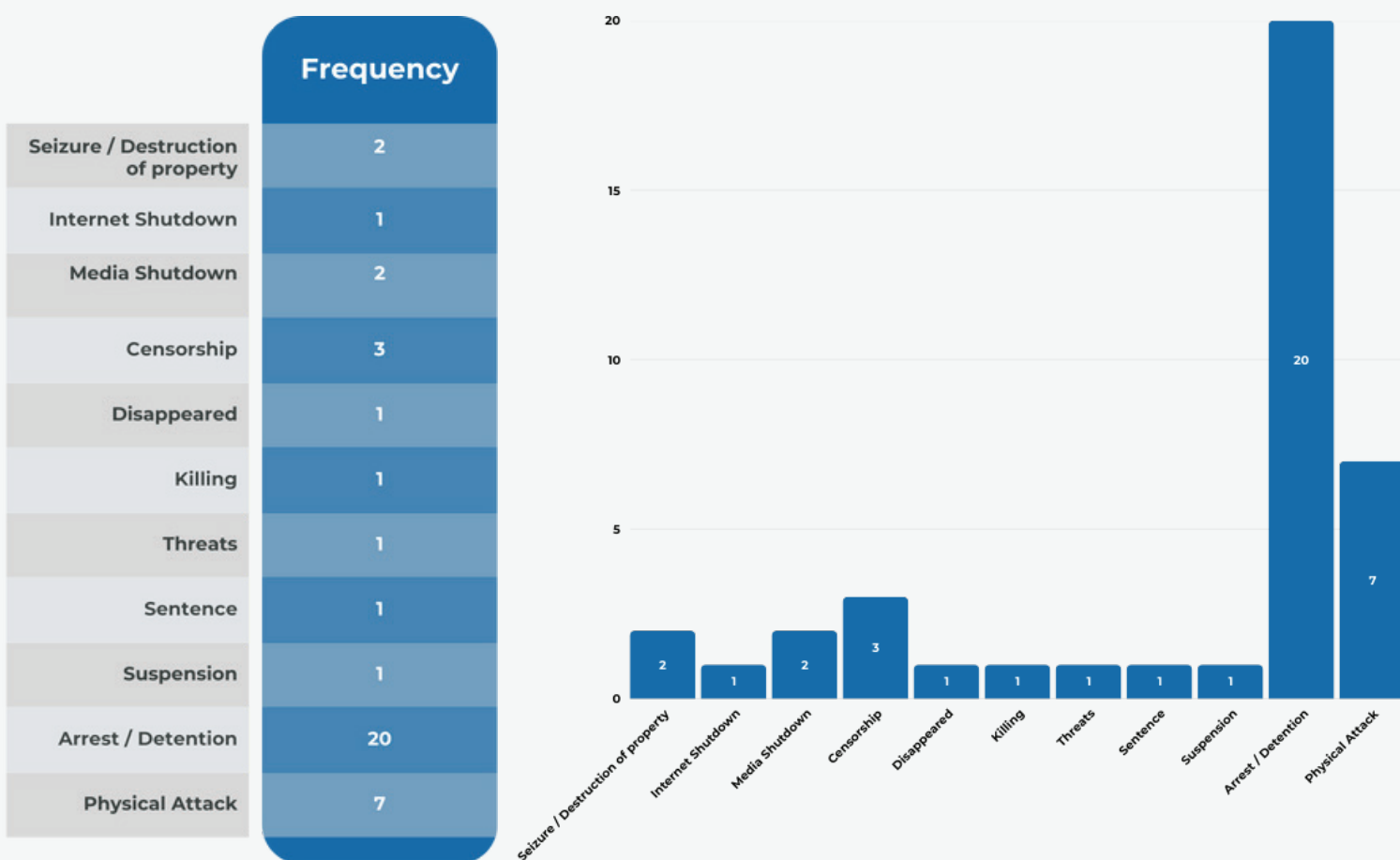


# Incidents of FOE Violations



A total of 40 FOE violations were recorded in during the monitoring period (July to September 2024). The 40 violations were made up of eleven different types of violations. Arrests/detentions and physical attacks were the dominant types of violations, occurring 20 and seven times respectively. Figure 1 below presents all the violations recorded and their respective frequencies:

Figure 1: Frequency of Violations





# Countries and Incidents of Violations



A total of 14 countries recorded the 40 FOE violations. Nigeria recorded close to 50 percent (19) of the violations. Guinea-Bissau followed with six violations. Protests in Nigeria and Ghana were violently repressed by police officers. At least 17 people died during the protests in Nigeria while in Ghana, about 54 protesters were arrested, out of which 39 were arraigned before the Accra circuit court, where they were denied bail.

In another set of grievous violations, at least six journalists were violently attacked while

covering an opposition party event in Lomé, the capital of Togo and two French media houses were shut down in Mali. A summarised narration of all the violations recorded during the quarter under review can be found here.

In Table 1 below, the frequency of FOE violations recorded in each of the 14 countries is presented. It also features the different types of violations recorded in the respective countries cited.

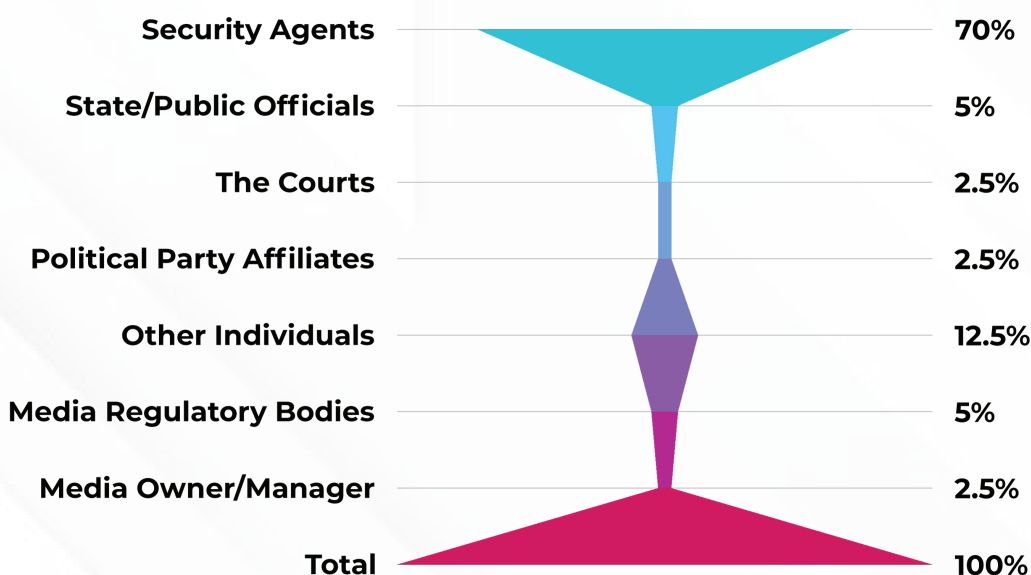
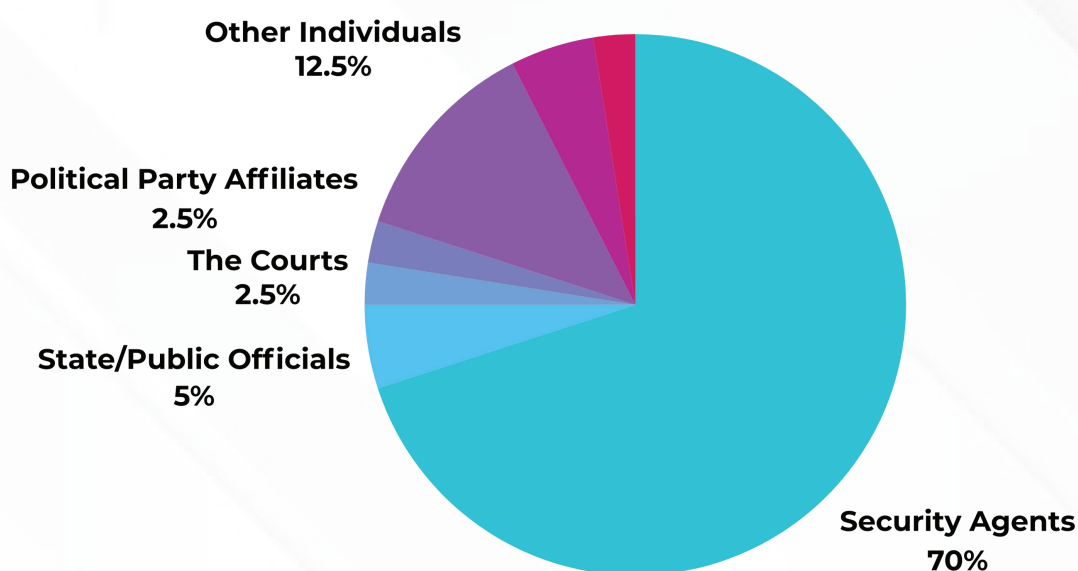
*Table 1: Countries and Types of Violations*

COUNTRIES	PHYSICAL ATTACK	ARREST/ DETENTION	SUSPENSION	SENTENCE	THREATS	KILLING	DISAPPEARANCE	CENSORSHIP	MEDIA SHUTDOWN	INTERNET SHUTDOWN	SEIZURE/ DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY	TOTAL
NIGERIA	4	11				1		1			2	19
GUINEA-BISSAU	2	2						2				6
SIERRA LEONE			1		1							2
MALI									2			2
COTE D'IVOIRE		1		1								2
NIGER		1										1
BURKINA FASO							1					1
GUINEA		1										1
SENEGAL		1										1
TOGO	1											1
GHANA		1										1
BENIN		1										1
MAURITANIA										1		1
THE GAMBIA		1										1
TOTAL	7	20	1	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	2	40

# Perpetrators of Violations

The 40 violations recorded over the three-month period were carried out by seven categories of perpetrators. State security agents accounted for 27 violations, media regulatory bodies and state/public officials accounted for two violations each.

The courts, political party affiliates, media owners/managers and other individuals accounted for the remaining violations (13) violations as illustrated in Figure 2 below.



In Nigeria, where 19 of the 40 violations occurred, security agents were found to be the major perpetrators. They were responsible for 15 (mainly arrests/detention) of the 19 violations recorded in the country. Table 2 below provides more information about the frequency of violations committed by the various perpetrators in the respective countries.

*Table 2: Countries and Perpetrators*

Countries	Security Agents	State/Public Officials	The Courts	Political Party Affiliates	Other Individuals	Media Regulatory Bodies	Media Owner/Manager	Total
Nigeria	16			1	2			19
Guinea-Bissau	5	1						6
Sierra Leone					1		1	2
Mali						2		2
Cote d'Ivoire	1		1					2
Niger	1							1
Burkina Faso	1							1
Guinea	1							1
Senegal	1							1
Togo					1			1
Ghana	1							1
Benin					1			1
Mauritania		1						1
The Gambia	1							1
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>40</b>



# Targets / Victims of Violations

The 40 violations recorded were targeted at four different groups. Out of the 40 violations, 29 of them were targeted at journalists and media workers, two were targeted at media organisations, another two were targeted at activists and 7 were targeted at ordinary citizens. In terms of the victims, however, 64 journalists and media workers were the direct victims of the 29 violations targeted at them. Two media houses and two activists were the direct victims of the four violations targeted at them respectively. For the seven violations targeted at ordinary citizens, a total of 64 people, mainly protesters and other individuals directly suffered from those violations. The monitoring, however, could not capture the number of indirect victims the 40 violations might have impacted.

That said, it is worth noting that the exact number of direct and indirect victims of violations such as crackdowns on protests, closedown of media outlets and internet shutdowns cannot be established. That is to say, a violation such as the closedown of a media outlet will directly affect its audiences (which can only be estimated) as they will be denied access to information, and its journalists and other workers. However, the dependants of those journalists and other media workers whose salaries would be affected as a result of the closedown may not be factored into an analysis even though they will equally suffer from closedown of the media outlet.

Table 3 below illustrates the distribution of violations and victims, as well as the specific targets in each of the respective countries.

COUNTRIES	JOURNALISTS/ MEDIA WORKERS	OTHER INDIVIDUALS	ACTIVISTS	MEDIA ORGANISATIONS	PROTESTERS/ DEMONSTRATORS	TOTAL
NIGERIA	17	2				19
GUINEA-BISSAU	6					6
SIERRA LEONE	2					2
MALI				2		2
NIGER	1					1
COTE D'IVOIRE		2				2
BURKINA FASO	1					1
GUINEA			1			1
SENEGAL	1					1
TOGO	1					1
GHANA					1	1
BENIN			1			1
MAURITANIA		1				1
THE GAMBIA	1					1
TOTAL	29	6	2	2	1	40

# Redress for Violations/Impunity

The UN Plan of Action for the Safety of Journalists emphasises preventive mechanisms. However, authorities' responses to FOE violations are an equally important indicator of commitment to promoting the safety of journalists in particular, and the respect of the right to free speech in general. Unfortunately, however, violations against FOE often go without any redress (be it reparation or punishment). In the quarter under review, for instance, out of the 40 FOE violations cited, only one received a redress.

On July 24, after 22-days of internet blackout, the Mauritanian government restored access to internet connection on all mobile devices. The government shut down access to the internet on July 2, 2024, claiming it was an attempt to stifle massive protests across the country over the results of the presidential election held on June 29, 2024.

## Other Key FOE Developments

The freedom of expression landscape in West Africa has been shaped by various events during the quarter under review. From Benin to Senegal, and beyond, media regulatory bodies have been actively addressing concerns over ethical practices, press freedom, and the impacts of governmental pressure on journalism. Various developments across the region have shown how governments, media professionals, and regulatory bodies are navigating these complex dynamics.

In a move to strengthen journalistic standards and caution the media from engaging in unethical practices, the Observatoire de la déontologie et de l'éthique dans les médias (ODEM) in Benin, on July 15, 2024, warned newspapers to desist from violating the code of ethics. ODEM condemned the rise of ethnocentric and regionalist publications

concerning neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Togo, which circulated on social media. ODEM's President, Ulrich Ahotondji, denounced such unethical content being published and urged journalists to exercise professional rigour and caution, emphasising the importance of responsible journalism in maintaining peace and social cohesion, which are crucial for sustainable development.

On July 22, 2024, President Patrice Talon of Benin officially inaugurated new members of the media regulator, the Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication (HAAC), at a ceremony at the Palais de la Marina. The HAAC is responsible for ensuring fair and ethical journalism and providing equitable access to public service media.

Media professionals expressed the high expectations they have of the nine members of the HAAC, particularly regarding press card benefits and improving working conditions. Zakiatou Latoundji, President of the Union des Professionnels des Médias du Bénin, stressed that the HAAC should be seen as a supportive institution, not a punitive one, dedicated to safeguarding press freedom. This sentiment was echoed by the HAAC President, Edouard Loko, who emphasised the need for the institution to remain strong and committed to improving the media environment.

In Senegal, the media observed a news blackout on August 13, 2024 in response to repressive measures imposed by the new government. As a result of the blackout, 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’s 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, particularly among media owners.

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 Togo, the newspaper, *L’Alternative*, reported on August 7, 2024 that an international arrest warrant had been issued for its publisher, Ferdinand Ayité. According to the media, the Togolese government accused Ayité of plotting to undermine state security and being one of the masterminds behind a terrorist attack in northern Togo. Ayité had been facing legal harassment and threats in the country, a situation which 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 protesting against the Gnassingbé’s extended rule, which has lasted since 1967. The authorities suspended *L’Alternative* in 2020 and 2021 due to its critical coverage of government officials.

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.

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.

In Nigeria, a court in northern Bauchi State issued on September 3, 2024, 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 reporter Yawale Adamu, who authored the article face up to five years in prison for defamation and falsehood, with an additional two years for mischief under the Bauchi state penal code.



Prosecutors in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger launched on September 25, 2024, 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 this region, often referred to as a “black hole of information.”



## Conclusion

During the period under review (July – September 2024), the monitoring and documenting of FOE violations across the 16 countries in the West Africa region recorded a total of 40 violations in 14 countries. Arrests and detentions, physical attacks, and the censorship of selected media houses were the dominant violations cited. The implications of such violations on the physical integrity and morale of the victims cannot be quantified, but can be very devastating, and can sometimes result in self-censorship. In spite of this reality, impunity remains widespread. For instance, out of the 40 violations reported, only one received redress.

This level of impunity often emboldens perpetrators, leading to further attacks against journalists, media outlets, activists and other dissenting voices, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of repression. The resultant climate of fear risks encouraging widespread self-censorship, undermining democratic governance in the region. The involvement of state actors, especially state security forces and public officials, as principal perpetrators of abuses also feeds into the impunity being witnessed across the region.

In light of the findings presented in this report, the MFWA offers the following recommendations to create a more conducive environment for freedom of expression in the region.

# Recommendations

## To Governments in West Africa

- Advocate for the safety and protection of journalists and media organisations.
- Ensure that both state and non-state actors respect and protect FOE rights.
- Provide training for security personnel to enhance their understanding of the media's role in democratic societies and to foster productive collaboration with journalists.
- Guarantee that those responsible for violations of FOE rights are held accountable, and that victims receive adequate compensation.

## To ECOWAS

- Hold accountable perpetrators of freedom of expression violations (both state and non-state actors) through civil, administrative, or other sanctions to address impunity, in accordance with the Supplementary Act A/SP. 13/02/12 on Sanctions Against Member States that Fail to Honour Their Obligations to ECOWAS.
- Encourage Member States to uphold their commitments under Article 66 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty, which requires them to "ensure respect for the rights of journalists."
- Impose and enforce sanctions on Member States that repeatedly violate statutory obligations to protect press freedom and freedom of expression.
- Collaborate with military authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea to ensure the respect of FOE rights and facilitate a return to constitutional governance, thereby preventing any further human rights violations, including infringements on the rights to expression, association, assembly, and access to information.

## To the African Commission Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information

- Encourage all Member states, particularly Senegal, Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso, to take steps to end the serial violation of FOE rights in these countries.

## To the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion

- Urge the governments of West African countries, including Nigeria, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali - where severe violations have been recurring - to uphold, respect, and protect freedom of expression rights in line with their national and international obligations.

## To Media Organisations and Journalists Consistently uphold the highest standards of professionalism.

- Media managers must be committed to utilizing all legal resources to ensure justice for media professionals whose rights are violated in the course of their work.



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