

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a protest. In the foreground, a man and a woman are looking directly at the camera. Both are wearing metal muzzles over their mouths and holding microphones. The man is wearing a brown jacket, and the woman is wearing a yellow headwrap and a black top. In the background, other people are visible, and a wall with barbed wire is in the distance.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION SITUATION IN WEST AFRICA

An August 2025 Overview

INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression is a key right enshrined in the constitutions of most West African countries which are also parties to various international and regional human rights treaties that endorse and safeguard this principle. However, despite these legal protections, both democratically elected governments and military regimes across the region have seen an increase in the erosion of civic freedoms.

Journalists, media organisations, civil society leaders, human rights defenders, and citizens who criticise corruption, misgovernance, or the abuse of power frequently face severe repercussions, including physical assaults, detentions, fines, threats, and, in tragic cases, deaths. This climate of fear and repression stifles open discussions and undermines the democratic ideals that these nations profess to uphold. The absence of accountability from perpetrators of these abuses enables human rights violations to occur with impunity. Consequently, many voices advocating for justice and reform are silenced, leaving citizens to cope within an environment where their rights are constantly threatened. This scenario requires a focus at both the local and international levels to ensure that the principles of freedom of expression are not just present in legislation but also actively defended and upheld in practice.

In response to the climate of repression creeping across the region, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), supported by the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation, documented cases of censorship, arbitrary arrests, detentions, abductions, and related constraints on media operations during August 2025. These violations were recorded through MFWA's monitoring network of national partners and correspondents throughout West Africa, supplemented by media reports, direct complaints from victims, and independent verification by MFWA's Freedom of Expression Team.

The monitoring initiative covers all 16 West African countries. Its primary aim is to bolster freedom of expression, media rights, and access to information across the region by documenting violations, analysing trends, and promoting accountability. In doing so, the project aims to provide trustworthy data for advocacy, encourage policy reforms, and create a safer environment for journalists, activists, and citizens to freely share their opinions.

This report highlights the violations recorded in August and situates them within the broader context of the region's shrinking civic space.

FINDINGS

Arrests, Detentions, and Sentencing



In Senegal, Doudou Coulibaly, a journalist, was detained on August 20 on charges of “insulting a foreign Head of State”, “insulting a person exercising the prerogatives of the President of Senegal”, and defamation. The journalist was summoned by the Special Division for the Fight against Cybercrime (DSC) before he was detained and sentenced. On August 25, he was found guilty on the first charge, given a suspended sentence and fined.

In Guinea, security agents arrested a reporter, Mamadou Boullere, while he was covering a landslide disaster in the country on August 24. Security officers seized Diallo’s cameras and phones before taking him to the Mobile Company 23 gendarmerie unit near the disaster site.

Another journalist, Shar Maturi from Sierra Leone, was detained on August 27 at the Criminal Investigations Department in Freetown under allegations of cyberbullying. In another instance, Thomas Josephus Dixon, a journalist, was also summoned by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) on August 20 over a story published in his newspaper based on allegations of “cyber-stalking”.

Meanwhile, in Mali, political tensions have deepened following the arrest on August 1, 2025 of former Prime Minister Moussa Mara, for allegedly “undermining the credibility of the state” as a result of social media posts he made about his visits to political prisoners.

Finally, in Togo, the repression of dissent continues, with the recent arrest of two activists, Armand Agblézé and Oséi Agbagno forming part of a broader clampdown on civil society voices critical of government actions. On August 22, 2025, the two activists and members of the citizens' movement Tournons la Page were arrested by the Central Service for Criminal Research and Investigation (SCRIC) while attending a meeting to plan protests against injustice and poor governance. Their detention, was further formalised on August 28 when they were charged with "aggravated public order disturbance" and transferred to Lomé Civil Prison.

Physical Attacks and Abductions



On August 12, 2025, Wontumi TV presenter Akyemkwaa Nana Kofi Asare was abducted in Ejisu Krapa, Ashanti Region, by unidentified armed men who fired warning shots and forced him into a vehicle before taking him to an undisclosed location. His whereabouts remained unknown until it was later revealed that he was being held at the Police Headquarters in Accra. The incident occurred days after Asare had accused President John Dramani Mahama on air of being linked to a fatal military helicopter crash. Following the abduction, Wontumi TV issued a public apology, disavowing the claims as unfounded and pledging disciplinary action against Asare.

Censorship and Suspension of Media Outlets

Mauritanian authorities have permanently shut down the Arabic-language news website Anbaa.info, accusing it of attempting to damage relations with Algeria. On August 25, 2025, the site's editor-in-chief was summoned by the Cybercrime Unit and informed of a complaint filed by the High Authority for Press and Audiovisual (HAPA) through the Attorney General's office. The complaint alleged that Anbaa.info had failed to comply with a July directive from the Ministry of Communication revoking its license. According to the authorities, analytical articles published by the site since 2022 had strained Mauritania-Algeria relations, prompting earlier sanctions in March 2024 when HAPA suspended the outlet for 60 days over "attacks against Algeria." The editor-in-chief, however, said they never officially received the ministry's decision and maintained that the site's publications adhered to journalistic ethics and relied on verified information. Despite the shutdown, Anbaa.info's management plans to contest the decision in court, seeking justice and the restoration of the outlet's operations.

On August 15, 2025, Guinea-Bissau authorities abruptly suspended the operations of Portuguese media outlets RTP África, RDP África, and Agência Lusa, ordering their representatives to leave the country by August 19 without explanation. The move, condemned by Portugal and press freedom groups as arbitrary and repressive, reflects a worsening climate for journalism marked by attacks on reporters and restrictions on media coverage. Coming ahead of Guinea-Bissau's upcoming elections, the decision raises serious concerns about transparency, democratic integrity, and citizens' access to independent information.

Harassment and Intimidation

On August 11, 2025, two journalists from The Fourth Estate, the MFWA's investigative journalism project, were forced to abort an agreed interview with Ghana Health Service Acting Director-General Dr. Samuel Kaba Akoriyea after he called National Security officials, who then ordered them to leave. The journalists, investigating a major health sector scandal, later filed a police complaint, citing threats to their safety. The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) condemned the incident as a violation of press freedom and the Ghanaian Constitution, noting a troubling pattern of National Security interference in journalistic work, including recent harassment of reporters from the Multimedia Group and the Current Issues newspaper.

Restriction of Assembly

Public frustration in Togo over recent constitutional reforms and rising living costs has been met with a heavy-handed response from authorities. A planned peaceful march in Lomé on August 30, 2025, to protest these issues and demand justice for a June crackdown was blocked by massive security deployments. Activist-musician Aamron and his supporters were intercepted by soldiers and forced to return home, former defence minister Essissomna Marguerite Gnacadé was stopped shortly after setting out, and opposition leader Brigitte Kafui Adjamagbo-Johnson was effectively placed under house arrest as soldiers surrounded her home overnight. These incidents reflect the government's growing intolerance of dissent amid deepening public discontent.

REDRESS

Despite the troubling incidents, there were a few positive outcomes. In Mauritania, the Court of Appeals lifted the sentence of Mauritanian human rights activist Ahmed Ould Samba, who had been previously convicted, offering partial relief.

Shar Maturi, a senior reporter with the *Standard Times Newspaper* in Sierra Leone, detained on August 27, 2025 by officers at the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) in Freetown, was released on the same day.

Guinean journalist Mamadou Boullère Diallo, arrested on Sunday, August 24, 2025, was released a day later. Such developments, however, remain rare in comparison to the high number of violations that have been recorded.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Daouda Bah, a presenter with Guinea's national television channel RTG, had his left eye injured after he was violently assaulted by demonstrators in Conakry on August 25, 2025. Daouda Bah was riding his motorbike home from work when a group of young protesters intercepted him. Witnesses said the assailants seized his motorbike and one stabbed him in his left eye.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



From the documented cases recorded in August 2025, it is evident that freedom of expression and civic space in West Africa remain under attack. The continued use of criminal prosecutions, arbitrary detentions, violent abductions, media shutdowns and other forms of censorship reveal the fragility of democratic safeguards across the region. These violations compel journalists, activists and citizens to resort to self-censorship, thereby undermining transparency and accountability in West Africa's relatively nascent democracies. Urgent and decisive actions are therefore required to reverse these regressive trends and safeguard fundamental freedoms in the region.

Accordingly, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) calls on the Senegalese authorities to drop all criminal defamation and insult charges against journalists and to ensure that the justice system is not weaponised to silence dissenting voices. The organisation also urges the Ghanaian authorities to thoroughly investigate the journalist abduction, hold the perpetrators accountable, and ensure that national security operatives desist from interfering with legitimate media work.

The MFWA further calls on the Mauritanian authorities to immediately end the practice of shutting down media outlets on vague grounds such as “damaging diplomatic relations” and to guarantee activists’ rights to advocate for environmental and civic causes without fear of reprisal.

In Guinea, the MFWA urges the authorities to stop the arbitrary arrest of journalists in the course of their professional duties and to guarantee their safety, particularly during the coverage of emergencies and disasters.


The MFWA also calls on the authorities in Guinea-Bissau to reinstate the suspended Portuguese media outlets and uphold citizens’ right to access diverse and pluralistic sources of information.

In Mali, the MFWA urges the authorities to release journalists and political opponents detained for exercising their right to freedom of expression and to ensure that the judiciary is not used as an instrument of repression.

Finally, the MFWA calls on the Togolese authorities to end the campaign of arrests against activists and respect citizens' rights to peaceful assembly and expression, while urging the Sierra Leonean authorities to cease the misuse of cybercrime laws and Criminal Investigations Department (CID) summons as tools to intimidate and harass journalists.



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