

# FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION SITUATION IN WEST AFRICA

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September 2025 Overview

# INTRODUCTION

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been working to promote press freedom and media development to enhance the media's capacity to play its critical watchdog role in promoting good governance in the sub-region. As part of its Freedom of Expression programme, the MFWA monitors and reports on freedom of expression issues. It documents violations and potential threats to media freedom and the civic space and engages in advocacy to advance freedom of expression in West Africa.

Freedom of expression remains under persistent threat across West Africa, as governments and security institutions continue to employ legal, administrative, and coercive tactics to silence dissenting voices. During September 2025, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) recorded several incidents of arrests, detentions, censorship, and intimidation targeting journalists, activists, and citizens.

The cases, drawn from MFWA's monitoring network and verified reports, reflect a pattern of repression across both democracies and military-led regimes. The cases, reveal a troubling regional trend of the weaponisation of cybercrime and defamation laws, incidents of restrictions on protests, physical attacks on journalists, and the abduction of a dissenting journalist's father.

MFWA's September monitoring, supported by the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation, covered all sixteen West African countries, documenting violations recorded in nine (9) of them.



# FINDINGS

## Arrests, Detentions, and Sentencing



Across several countries, state authorities continued to target journalists and activists through arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and judicial harassment.

Sodiq Atanda, a Senior Reporter with the Foundation for Investigative Journalism (FIJ), was detained by the Ekiti State Police in Nigeria on September 9, 2025, after responding to an invitation regarding a petition from Vice Chancellor Abayomi Sunday Fasina of the Federal University Oye-Ekiti (FUOYE). Fasina accused Atanda and FIJ of cyberbullying and defamation related to reports of sexual harassment against him. Despite being accompanied by lawyers, Atanda was held for 11 hours and pressured to reveal his sources, which he refused. He was released later that evening, with the Police Commissioner later claiming ignorance of Atanda's journalistic status.

In Côte d'Ivoire, a political activist, Ibrahim Zigui, was arrested on September 1, 2025, after urging opposition PPA-CI supporters to prepare for protests related to an upcoming Constitutional Council ruling on presidential ballot qualifications. Armed men reportedly stormed his home in Abidjan and took him away, with no updates on his whereabouts since. His arrest raises concerns about freedom of expression in the lead-up to the October presidential elections, especially following the exile of opposition figure Dr. Boga Sako earlier this year.

Also, in Niger, investigative journalist Ali Soumana, editor-in-chief of the weekly newspaper Le Courier, was arrested on September 7, 2025, in Niamey by Niger's judicial police after a complaint by Prime Minister Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine. He was charged with "defamation and complicity in dissemination by press and electronic means" following a report published by Le Courier about customs fraud involving government officials. Soumana has faced previous pressure, having been detained in April 2025 under similar circumstances. His recent arrest raises concerns about the use of the justice system to intimidate journalists.

Similar issues were observed in Mali. Blogger and photographer Alhousseiny Traoré was arrested on September 12, 2025, in Timbuktu. He had reportedly criticised the surgical department of the Timbuktu Regional Hospital in a Facebook post which highlighted poor patient conditions, lack of action from surgeons, and illegal payment practices for faster treatment.

In Ghana, popular TikToker, David Kwodwo Prah Afful was arrested on September 12, 2025[ME1] . This TikToker is also popularly known as Kwame Nkrumah the Second. He was arrested for making death threats against government officials during a TikTok live session[ME2] [H3] . Afful was taken into custody and later appeared in court, pleading guilty to charges of threatening death and offensive conduct, resulting in a seven-month prison sentence. This incident follows the case of content creators [ME4] Prince Ofori (also known as Fante Comedy) and Yayra Abiwu (popularly known as Akosua Jollof), who were arrested on August 12, 2025 by the Ghana Police Service after a live TikTok session in which participants mocked victims of a fatal helicopter crash and wished harm on the President and the CEO of the Ghana Gold Board. Prince and Yayra were later granted bail.

Three months after the deadly June protests in Togo, repression of dissent persisted through a series of arrests targeting critical voices. Among them was former Defence Minister Essossimna Marguerite Gnakadé, who was arrested on September 17, 2025, after publicly criticising government policies and developments that further illustrates the intolerance of political criticism within the Togolese establishment.

In the Gambia, on September 15, 2025, police arrested five individuals, including activists Omar Saibo Camara, Public Relations Officer of the civil society organization combatting corruption "Gambians Against Looted Assets" (GALA) alongside three GALA member; Kemo Fatty, Alieu Bah and Mamadou Camara. Bakary Tamba, a journalist from the online media, Gambia Talents Promotion, was briefly detained but later released after screening, during a protest at the National Audit Office in Kanifing. The demonstration was in support of Auditor General Momodou Ceesay, who was forcibly removed by

police after rejecting his appointment as Minister of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration, and Employment. Eyewitnesses reported that some activists were peacefully engaging with journalists when they were detained, with police using tear gas to disperse the crowd. The Gambia Police Force accused the detainees of unlawful assembly and common nuisance, cautioning journalists against participating in activism while reporting.

In Mauritania, on September 2, 2025, two journalists from the independent news outlet Al Akhbar.info, Aboubakar Ould Mohamed Vall and Mohamed Abdallah Ould al-Moustapha, were arrested by gendarmes while covering a peaceful protest by gas distributors outside the headquarters of the state-owned gas distribution company called Société Mauritanienne des Gaz (SOMAGAZ). The journalists were taken to a police station where they were ordered to delete their recorded photos and videos. After refusing, they were detained for three hours before being released without charge. This incident follows the recent closure of another news outlet, Anbaa.info, highlighting growing concerns about press freedom in the country.

## **Harassment, Legal Intimidation, and Administrative Interference**

Beyond arrests and detentions, journalists continued to face judicial intimidation and bureaucratic interference designed to obstruct their work.

In Nigeria, on September 6, 2025, Nigeria's Department of State Services (DSS) demanded that X Corp. remove a post by political activist Omoyele Sowore and deactivate his account after he referred to President Bola Ahmed Tinubu as a "criminal." The DSS accused Sowore of spreading "falsehoods," citing the Criminal Code Act, the Cybercrimes Act 2025, and the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act 2022, alleging violations related to "misinformation," "hate speech," and "online harassment." Following this, on September 7, the DSS made a similar request to Meta regarding Sowore's Facebook account. The demands have faced criticism from organisations like Amnesty International Nigeria, which described the actions as a violation of freedom of expression, while Sowore's legal team and his political party, the African Action Congress (AAC), labeled the actions as unlawful harassment and intimidation.

Still, in Nigeria, Mai-Waya Kangiwa, another journalist, was arrested on September 10, 2025, in Kebbi State after releasing a viral video exposing the poor conditions at Kangiwa General Hospital. Instead of addressing the issues raised, the state government, led by Governor Nasir Idris, ordered his detention without providing a clear legal justification. This has drawn criticism from civil society groups, press freedom advocates, and opposition figures, with calls for his unconditional release.

75-year-old father of exiled Guinean investigative journalist and activist Mamoudou Babila Keita was abducted by security officers in N'Zérékoré on September 29, 2025, as he was leaving for dawn prayers, in what the journalist says is retaliation for his critical reporting on the military transition. According to Keita, who has lived in exile since July 2024 after evading multiple arrest attempts, the authorities, unable to locate him, have begun targeting his relatives, forcing his maternal uncle to flee following similar threats. This is a development that illustrates the lengths repressive regimes are prepared to go to carry out reprisals against dissenting voices.

## Attacks against Journalists



An attack against a journalist was recorded on September 25. Journalist Nana Kwame Essel of the Ghana News Agency was assaulted by illegal miners while covering a mining pit collapse in Twifo Mampong, Central Region, which had killed three people and trapped four others. The miners demanded he delete his footage, and when he refused, they attacked him and damaged his equipment. Essel was rescued with police help and treated at a local health centre. The incident reflects the growing risks journalists face from illegal mining, or galamsey, activities in Ghana, where reporting on such operations exposes them to harassment and physical attacks.

## REDRESS

Despite the widespread violations recorded during the period, a few positive developments offered limited hope for accountability and justice.

In Mauritania, environmental activist Ali Ould Bakkar was released unconditionally after spending two months in detention over social media posts alleging illegal fishing by foreign vessels in restricted waters. His arrest had drawn condemnation from press freedom and environmental advocacy groups, who argued that his detention was an attempt to silence environmental activism.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, two journalists who had been missing for over a year were finally released. Their disappearance had sparked widespread concern among local and international media watchdogs, who suspected they had been targeted for critical reporting on the country's military authorities. Their release, following months of advocacy and international appeals, was welcomed as a small but significant victory for press freedom and journalist safety in the region.

Journalists Aboubakar Ould Mohamed Vall and Mohamed Abdallah Ould al-Moustapha, arrested on September 2, 2025, by gendarmes while covering a peaceful protest by gas distributors outside the headquarters of the state-owned gas distribution company. Société Mauritanienne des Gaz (SOMAGAZ) in Nouakchott, were released on the same day.

In Burkina Faso, journalists Adama Bayala and Alain Traoré were released on September 16, 2025, after going missing under unexplained circumstances for over a year. Bayala, a commentator on BF1, disappeared on June 28, 2024, and Traoré, host of Radio Oméga's program Le Défouloir, was abducted from his home on July 13, 2024, by armed men claiming to be agents of the National Intelligence Agency. Their disappearances occurred amid a troubling trend of abductions targeting media professionals, including the ongoing detention of Serge Atiana Oulon, publisher of L'Événement, who has been missing since 2024. The lack of information regarding the circumstances of these cases and the treatment of the journalists raises significant concerns about freedom of expression and the safety of media personnel.

## OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

In other developments, one of the main developments to highlight first is related to the prominent case of the late young journalist from Nigeria, Pelumi Onifade. Ayomide Eweje, a journalist with BONews, filed a lawsuit against Ikorodu General Hospital and its Medical Director for allegedly withholding information about the death of Pelumi Onifade, a 20-year-old reporter who died after being arrested during the 2020 #EndSARS protests. Eweje submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request on July 31, 2025, seeking documents related to Onifade's remains and mortuary protocols, but the hospital failed to respond, violating the FOI Act. A Lagos State District Coroner has instructed the hospital to release documents about Onifade's body. Eweje seeks a court ruling on the unlawfulness of the hospital's actions and permission for a judicial review.

In Ghana three students of Tamale Technical University (TaTU) and three police officers were injured on September 16, 2025, when a protest organised by the Graduate Students' Association of Ghana (GRASAG) and TaTU's SRC to highlight long-standing student grievances turned violent. Although witnesses said the demonstration began peacefully, tensions escalated after police intervened with warning shots, tear gas and hot water, citing the protest as unlawful and alleging stone-throwing by students. The clash has raised concerns about heavy-handed policing during public demonstrations in Ghana.

Mauritanian environmental activist and blogger Ali Ould Bakkar was released unconditionally on September 18, 2025, after spending two months in detention following his arrest on July 22 in Nouadhibou by the Mauritanian gendarmerie. He had been accused, following a complaint by the Coast Guard, of spreading false information after reporting on alleged illegal fishing by Turkish vessels in restricted waters, claims authorities said undermined the state and its foreign relations. His family denounced the arrest as arbitrary and politically motivated, linking it to accusations that he was aligned with supporters of former President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz.

RFI and France 24 remain suspended in Togo despite the expiration on September 16, 2025, of a three-month ban imposed by the media regulator, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC), which accused the outlets of biased and inaccurate reporting without providing specific examples. While the broadcasters expected their signals to be restored, the HAAC has since linked the delay to legal issues, including the non-renewal of RFI's operating agreement since 2022, now making resumption conditional on a new authorisation. France Médias Monde has expressed surprise at the continued suspension, noting that efforts at dialogue were hindered by visa issues and lack of engagement from authorities.

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In Sierra Leone, two organisations, Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL) and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights petitioned the ECOWAS Community Court on behalf of journalist Umu Thoronka, who was dismissed from the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) after posting a TikTok video critical of President Julius Maada Bio. WIMSAL argues that Umu's firing followed multiple episodes of gender-based harassment and discrimination at SLBC since 2017. Following her dismissal, Thoronka faced threats and harassment, prompting her to seek safety in exile. The petition claims SLBC violated human rights laws and seeks justice for Thoronka and women experiencing similar issues. The petition also demands the reporter's reinstatement and stronger anti-harassment measures in the media.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



The cases documented in September 2025 demonstrate a pattern of state and non-state interference with freedom of expression and civic space across West Africa. Journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens continue to face arrest, detention, intimidation, physical attacks, and administrative reprisals for carrying out journalistic work, expressing political opinions, or organising protests. These practices, often justified through the misuse of criminal law, cybercrime legislation, and public order regulations, have contributed to a climate of fear and self-censorship that undermines democratic accountability and weakens public trust in state institutions.

In Nigeria, the Media Foundation for West Africa urges the authorities to end the misuse of law enforcement and security agencies to harass journalists and political activists. This is evidenced by the detention of Sodiq Atanda, the arrest of Mai-Waya Kangiwa for exposing poor healthcare conditions, and the attempts by the Department of State Services to pressure social media platforms into silencing Omoyele Sowore. The MFWA calls on the Nigerian authorities to respect journalists' right to protect their sources, refrain from invoking cybercrime and terrorism laws to criminalise speech, and ensure that grievances against media reporting are addressed through civil remedies rather than coercive policing. Lagos State is also urged to fully comply with the Freedom of Information Act, including the immediate disclosure of records related to the death of Pelumi Onifade, in line with the directive of the Lagos State District Coroner.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the MFWA calls on the authorities to immediately clarify the whereabouts of political activist Ibrahim Zigui and ensure his release or prompt appearance before a competent court. His arrest, reportedly carried out by armed men without due process, raises serious concerns about enforced disappearance and the shrinking of civic space ahead of the October presidential elections. The authorities must guarantee the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, particularly during electoral periods, and refrain from using security measures to suppress opposition voices.

In Niger, the MFWA urges the authorities to stop using defamation laws and the criminal justice system to intimidate investigative journalists. The arrest of Ali Soumana, following reporting on alleged customs fraud involving public officials, shows there is the need for legal reforms to decriminalise press offences and protect journalism that serves the public interest. The MFWA calls for Soumana's release and for legal safeguards to prevent the repeated targeting of journalists through complaints lodged by senior government officials.

In Mali, the MFWA calls on the authorities to release blogger and photographer Alhousseiny Traoré and to desist from arresting individuals for online criticism of public services. The authorities must ensure that citizens can raise concerns about public services without fear of reprisal.

In Ghana, the MFWA urges the authorities to apply criminal law in a manner that is proportionate and consistent with international standards on freedom of expression, particularly in cases involving online speech. While acknowledging the need to address genuine threats, the Foundation cautions against responses that risk creating chilling effects, as seen in the prosecution of content creators for what may be deemed as offensive or inflammatory speech. The MFWA further calls on the government to strengthen protections for journalists covering illegal mining activities, following the assault on Nana Kwame Essel, and to implement coordinated security measures that prevent attacks by illegal miners. In addition, the authorities must review policing practices during public demonstrations to ensure that crowd control measures are lawful, necessary, and proportionate, in light of injuries sustained during the Tamale Technical University protest.

In Togo, the MFWA calls on the authorities to immediately release former Defence Minister Essossimna Marguerite Gnacadé and to end the ongoing campaign of arrests against critics of government policy. The continued suspension of RFI and France 24, despite the expiry of the regulator's initial ban, raises serious concerns about arbitrary media regulation and the suppression of independent information. The authorities must restore the broadcasters' signals without further delay and ensure that media regulation is transparent, lawful, and free from political interference.

In The Gambia, the MFWA urges the authorities to respect the right to peaceful assembly and to refrain from using public order offences to detain activists and journalists covering demonstrations.


In Mauritania, the MFWA calls on the authorities to guarantee journalists' right to cover protests and public demonstrations without interference. The arrest of Al Akhbar.info journalists and the coercive demand for content deletion constitute a direct violation of press freedom. The organisation also urges the authorities to refrain from criminalising environmental activism and reporting, as illustrated by the detention of Ali Ould Bakkar, and to ensure that allegations of false information are not used to suppress reporting on matters of public interest.


In Guinea, the MFWA strongly condemns the abduction of the father of exiled journalist Mamoudou Babila Keita and calls on the authorities to immediately account for his whereabouts and ensure his safety. Targeting family members as retaliation for critical reporting represents a grave violation of human rights. The authorities must end reprisals against relatives of journalists in exile.


The Media Foundation for West Africa reiterates its commitment to monitoring freedom of expression violations across the region and to supporting journalists, activists, and citizens in their efforts to seek justice, accountability, and the full protection of their fundamental rights.



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