

Freedom of Expression Situation in West Africa:

A November 2025 Overview

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, West Africa has witnessed what many press freedom advocates have described as a “democratic recession”; a reversal of two decades of steady progress toward open societies. Five countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea and Guinea Bissau) now live under military rule, and the contagion affects even established democracies, where elected governments increasingly borrow from the authoritarian playbook. This is not simply a story of freedom in decline. It is a story of how power, once seized through force or maintained through fear, inevitably turns against those who speak, question, or remember.

November 2025 was marked by alarming freedom of expression violations across West Africa: from the abduction and execution of a social media influencer in a public square, to a blogger arrested by the police, and to radio stations silenced.

The Media Foundation for West Africa’s November monitoring reveals not just violations, but patterns that tell us something essential about the fragility of civic space and the lengths to which both military juntas and elected governments will go to control the narrative.

This November 2025 report, put together by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with support from the 11th Hour Project of The Schmidt Family Foundation, seeks to draw attention to the freedom of expression situation in West Africa, provide evidence for advocacy and policy interventions.



The Numbers behind the Narrative



Six (6) violations were documented across four countries; Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania and Ghana, including the gruesome murder of a young TikTokker in Mali. This number of violations, especially in comparison with what was recorded in October, reveals the multifaceted nature of tactics deployed against freedom of expression in the region.

In November, we also observed how violations were perpetrated by the military in Guinea Bissau, the gendarmarie in Mali, and the police in Ghana and in Mauritania. In Mali, we also recorded a murder of a TikTokker by armed men, identified as members of the al-Qaeda-affiliated group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

Also in November, we saw a variety of victims (journalist, activist, content creator, protestors and a media organisation) much more than in October where majority of the victims of freedom of expression violation were journalists.

Mali: Where Speaking Can Cost Everything

Mali provided November 2025's most chilling incident. Mariam Cissé, a TikTok influencer, was abducted while filming a live video at a weekly market in Echel. Armed men, identified as members of the al-Qaeda-affiliated group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), took her away on a motorcycle. The next day, November 8, they brought her to Tonka's Independence Square and executed her publicly.

Mali also saw the arrest of Malick Aliou Maïga, a journalist with Radio Aadar Koïma in Gao, by gendarmerie on November 5 for reasons that remain unclear, and released the following day after spending one night in detention.

Ghana: Democracy's Slippery Slope

The two arrests in November deserve particular attention because they reveal how democratic backsliding often begins not with coups, but with the quiet expansion of laws that criminalise speech. Wendell Nana Yaw Yeboah, a mobilisation officer with Democracy Hub, a coalition of civil society organisations and activists in Ghana who champion accountability, social justice, and good governance. Wendell was arrested after accusing three regional ministers of being involved in illegal mining during a radio interview. Although he retracted and apologised the same day, acknowledging his claims lacked evidence, a pressure group, Ashanti Democrats submitted a petition to the CID on November 19. They pressed for an investigation and the Criminal Investigations Department of the Ghana Police Service subsequently took Wendell into custody.

Blogger Samuel Amadotor was arrested on November 20 over alleged publication of false information, following a complaint by a traditional leader and former media regulator. Under interrogation, Amadotor claimed he'd been contracted to publish the material.

Both cases rest on provisions in Ghana's Criminal Offences Act and Electronic Communications Act that criminalise the publication of false information. The provisions of these laws have the tendency to become instruments of censorship. Ghana repealed its criminal libel law, yet these arrests demonstrate how other statutes can serve the same silencing function. The threat isn't just to these individuals; it's the effect on accountability journalism and civic participation.

Guinea-Bissau: The Fifth to Fall

In November, we witnessed West Africa's latest coup, as General Horta N'Tam seized control just as election results were about to be announced. This pattern is now familiar: suspend state institutions, freeze the electoral process, silence the airwaves. Following the takeover, the junta ordered several radio stations off the air. Beyond shutting down radio stations, the junta briefly imposed restrictions on major social media platforms, effectively cutting Guinea-Bissau off from the digital public sphere. Guinea-Bissau becomes West Africa's fifth military-ruled state, joining Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea.

Mauritania: Mass arrest of protestors during the commemoration of the Inal Massacre

On 28 November 2025, Mauritanian activists and militants were arrested in Nouakchott during a demonstration on the country's Independence Day. What was supposed to be a peaceful protest to commemorate one of the country's most tragic events, the Inal Massacre of 1990, turned out to be a violation of the right of dozens of citizens; activists and civil society leaders, joined by other supporters and some family members of the Inal massacre victims, who only wanted to demand justice and reparations. Although most protestors were released a day after their arrest, nine prominent civil society leaders were remained in police custody and subsequently arraigned before the Nouakchott West Court on 2 December. They were charged with "disturbing public order" and "participating in an unauthorised demonstration."

Mauritania’s ongoing tensions between activists and human rights defenders with restrictions on the freedom to protest and speak critically, particularly on sensitive political and social issues such as racial discrimination.

November Patterns and Implications

The violations recorded in November do not only tell individual stories of violations. They reveal a pattern that highlights how power is used against those who speak, and question authorities. Beyond the individual cases, three patterns emerge in November.

- **The Coup-to-Censorship Pipeline**

Military takeovers in West Africa now follow a playbook: seize power, suspend institutions, silence media, restrict digital platforms. Guinea-Bissau’s November coup executed this sequence with practiced efficiency. Each new junta learns from predecessors, and each becomes more sophisticated in controlling information flows.

- **The Normalisation of Criminal Speech Laws**

We also observe in November how governments are increasingly normalising the criminalisation of free speech. In Ghana and military-ruled Mali, criticising the powerful can land one in jail. With varying existing laws like the criminal libel, false information, insulting heads of state, the effect is often similar, journalists, activists, and citizens self-censor rather than risk prosecution.

- **The Expanding Target List**

Unlike in October where many victims of violations were journalists, this month, we recorded violations against different victims; journalist, activist, content creator, and a media organisation. This reveals how freedom of expression violations is recording an expansion in the list of targets. Violations no longer target only traditional journalists. Mariam Cissé was a TikTok influencer. Samuel Amadotor is a blogger. The definition of “dangerous speech” has expanded to include anyone with an audience, anyone who might shape public opinion, not just media workers. In an age of social media, everyone is potentially a publisher, and thus potentially a target.

Other Developments

Beyond individual violations recorded, November saw institutional actions that reshaped the media landscape.

In Benin, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication (HAAC) withdrew professional press cards from 130 journalists and suspended eight media outlets on November 13. The regulator framed this as “cleaning up” the sector, citing journalists who failed to respond to verification letters or lacked proper qualifications. Additionally, three TV stations also had their broadcasting licences revoked due to persistent unavailability or intermittent airing of content.

Ghana is set to roll out a new digital governance framework with 15 proposed bills aimed at tackling misinformation, cybersecurity threats and other issues. Some of these bills contains provisions that risk undermining the very freedoms they claim to protect.

While acknowledging the importance of tackling misinformation, cybersecurity threats, and gaps in digital infrastructure, MFWA warns that aspects of the proposed laws, particularly the MDHI, Cybersecurity (Amendment), and Ghana Domain Name Registry Bills, risk undermining freedom of expression, media independence, privacy, due process, and institutional independence through overly broad definitions, criminalisation of speech, executive control of enforcement, weak safeguards, and limited accountability for digital platform owners.

The MFWA urges comprehensive redrafting to ensure the laws are narrowly tailored, rights-respecting, and aligned with international best practice, calls for stronger multi-stakeholder governance and explicit human rights safeguards.

Redress: Gradual Victories in a Larger War

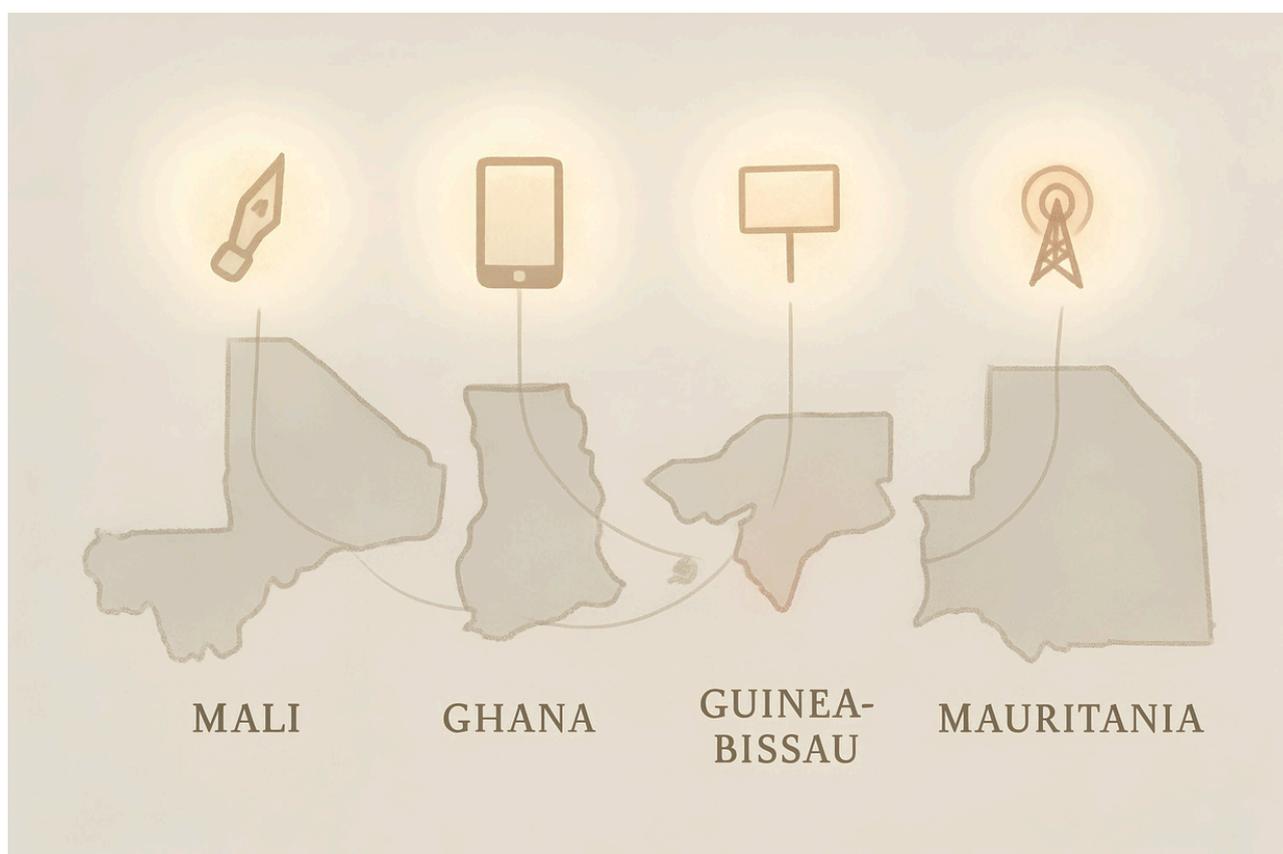
Not everything that happened in November points towards regression. Three cases of release offered glimpses of justice, however delayed.

Issa Kaou N'Djim walked free from a Bamako prison on November 13, exactly one year after his arrest for comments about Burkina Faso's military authorities. Malian prosecutors charged the political commentator with publicly offending a foreign head of state and using an information system to spread offensive statements. Isaa, who also doubles as the former vice-president of Mali's National Transitional Council had questioned whether Burkina Faso had actually foiled a coup attempt, a question that cost him a year of freedom.

Seydou Oumar Traoré, managing director of Radio Baoulé FM, completed his prison sentence on November 26, having been jailed for accusing Guinea's transitional president of collaborating with Western powers. Whether his accusation was true or false should not determine whether his imprisonment; that's the fundamental point that criminal speech laws miss. While we resist criminalisation of speech, we encourage publication of rejoinders, civil suits, non-custodial sentencing regimes for persons who have objections with publications made about them. MFWA reiterates its opposition to the criminalisation of speech and urges authorities to instead consider more proportionate remedies: the right of reply for those who may have issues with published content, civil litigation and non-custodial sentences.

Senegalese journalist and SEN TV commentator Abdou Nguer, released after seven months in detention, represents perhaps the most troubling case. Police identified another individual as the author of the offensive TikTok post, yet Nguer was convicted of insulting the Head of State. He served three months for words he apparently didn't write, showing how prosecutions often prioritise punishment over truth.

Arrested in April 2025, Nguer was charged alongside Pape Amadou Ndiaye Diaw with spreading false news, insulting the Head of State, and promoting crime; prosecutors sought heavy prison sentences. In its final ruling, the court acquitted both men of spreading false news and promoting crime but convicted Nguer of insulting the Head of State, sentencing him to six months in prison, including three months to be served, and a fine, leading to his immediate release due to time already spent in pretrial detention. The case has renewed concerns among press freedom advocates over the criminalisation of speech and the prolonged detention of journalists and social media users in Senegal.



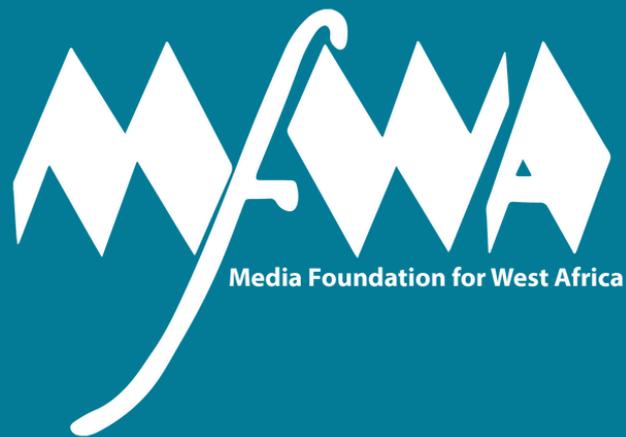
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION



From the suspension of media as a result of the military coup in Guinea-Bissau, to the continued reliance on criminal law to silence speech in Ghana, and the brutal killing of Mariam Cissé in Mali, the incidents recorded in November is disturbing. These incidents first illustrate how state actors continue to use legal instruments, and also how extremist groups use violence, with the ultimate objective to silence critical voices, restrict access to information, and deter public participation.

The findings of this report emphasise the urgent need to governments to align their laws and policies with international obligations to end the criminalisation of speech, and to ensure accountability for abuses. More specifically, the MFWA calls on Ghana's government to abandon the use of criminal law to police expression. Repeal or radically narrow statutes that criminalise speech, including those used against Wendell Nana Yaw Yeboah and Samuel Amadotor. Redraft the proposed digital governance bills with robust human rights safeguards and genuine multi-stakeholder input.

The MFWA urges the Malian transitional authorities to conduct a full, transparent investigation into the arrest of Malick Aliou Maïga and the killing of Mariam Cissé to bring the perpetrators to justice. The MFWA calls on the government to guarantee the safety of all citizens exercising their right to free expression, both offline and online.



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