



Freedom of Expression Situation in West Africa:

A June 2025 Overview

INTRODUCTION



Freedom of expression is a foundational pillar of democracy, empowering citizens, journalists, and civil society actors to engage in open dialogue, challenge authority, and contribute to national development. It plays a vital role in promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance. Yet, in many parts of West Africa, this right is persistently under threat.

Journalists and media professionals often face intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrests, and physical violence, especially when they demand accountability or criticise those in power. These violations are rarely investigated or punished, fostering a culture of impunity and self-censorship. As a result, critical voices are stifled, and the public is deprived of vital information that could drive social and political change.

This shrinking civic space does not only weaken democratic institutions but also erodes public trust in leadership and institutions. When dissent is silenced and independent media are suppressed, corruption flourishes, abuses go unchecked, and the needs of marginalised communities are ignored. Protecting freedom of expression is, therefore, essential not only for individual rights, but for the health and resilience of the burgeoning democracies in West Africa.

As part of interventions to support advocacy efforts and shape policies that protect freedom of expression and promote an open, participatory and accountable society, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) actively monitors, documents and reports on freedom of expression (FoE)-related incidents across West Africa. Through this process, the MFWA documents and highlights actions that restrict free expression (including activism and expression through protests) and call on relevant stakeholders to take reparative action.

The results of the monitoring conducted in the month of June 2025 is presented in this report. The report highlights snippets of freedom of expression abuses that MFWA's monitoring captured in the month under review. The abuses recorded include arrests, detention, physical attacks and suspension by media regulatory bodies all of which were intended to deter journalists, media outlets and dissenting voices from pursuing a particular narrative. There was, however, a significant court ruling in Senegal that challenged a suspension order by the Ministry of Communication, Telecommunications and Digital Affairs which sought to suspend over 380 media outlets.

FINDINGS



Principally, three categories of violations against the right to free expression were recorded in the month of June 2025 – arrests, detention and sentences; physical assault; and suspension of media outlets. Additional details on each of the three categories of violations are presented below.

Arrests, Detention and Sentence

June recorded a bloody protest in Togo. Unarmed Togolese who embarked on peaceful demonstrations were violently attacked on two separate occasions. In the first incident which took place on June 5 and 6, 2025, security forces in Lomé arrested and assaulted peaceful protesters demonstrating against recent constitutional reforms that give President Faure Gnassingbé new powers without term limits. By June 10, approximately 25 individuals remained in custody.

During follow-up protests held from June 26 to 28, 2025 on the same issues, the demonstrations which were largely peaceful turned violent and bloody when state security forces, reportedly aided by plainclothes militia, used brutal force to disperse the protestors. Many unarmed protesters were beaten, and numerous bystanders and local residents were arrested. Seven people were reported to have died, according to civil society organizations monitoring the protests, while the government maintains that the death toll stands at only five. Plus, more than 60 people arrested, and dozens injured as a result of the brutal force used to disperse the protestors.

In a related incident, French journalist Flore Monteau was detained and forced by police to delete footage she had captured on her phone while covering the protests in Lomé on June 6, 2025.

On sentencing, two separate cases of sentencing against activists were recorded in Benin and Mauritania. In both instances, the activists were charged for content published online. In the **Benin** case, digital activist Steve Amoussou was sentenced to two years imprisonment and fined two million CFA francs (USD 3,500) by the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism (CRIET). Amoussou was arrested in August 2024 in Lomé, Togo, and after several charges initially levelled against him, he was on June 2, 2025 convicted on two counts in relation to allegations that he created and managed a Facebook page called Frère Hounvi, an allegation he denied. The said Facebook page was reportedly sharing critical audio messages targeting the government of President Patrice Talon.

In the **Mauritanian** incident, activist Abdoulaye Bâ was convicted on June 12, 2025, and sentenced to one year in prison (with six months suspended). He was also fined 20,000 MRU (USD500). Bâ was arrested

on April 26, 2025, for a social media video in which he called on the Minister of the Interior to halt arrests and expulsions of irregular immigrants and Mauritians. For the said comments he made, Bâ was convicted on charges of incitement and spreading hatred.

Physical Attacks

Two incidents of physical attacks were recorded in Sierra Leone and Guinea. Whereas the Sierra Leonean case involved a journalist, the Guinean incident involved a former president of the Guinean Bar Association. Snippets of the incidents are presented below.

On June 15, 2025, journalist Mohamed Tamba Mattia, head of programmes at Eastern Community Radio, was assaulted and stabbed in the arm by three unidentified police officers at the First Lady's residence, in Koidu City, Kono District in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. Mattia had gone to the residence of the First Lady to seek clarification on district elections and compensation plans when he was confronted by the ruling party, Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), supporters and later attacked by three police officers. He lost two mobile phones in the process. He later filed a complaint with the police, and the Mayor of Koidu, accompanied by police commanders, paid him a visit and offered an apology.

In Guinea, lawyer and former president of the Guinean Bar Association, who is also a former member of the National Transitional Council (CNT), Mohamed Traoré, was abducted and brutally assaulted between the late hours of June 20 and the early hours of June 21, 2025. Hooded assailants took him from his residence, assaulted his daughter in the process, and subjected Traoré to severe physical assaults. The thugs told him the assault was a warning in retaliation for his resignation from the CNT and public commentary. Unfortunately, even though the Attorney General's Office has announced the launch of a judicial investigation

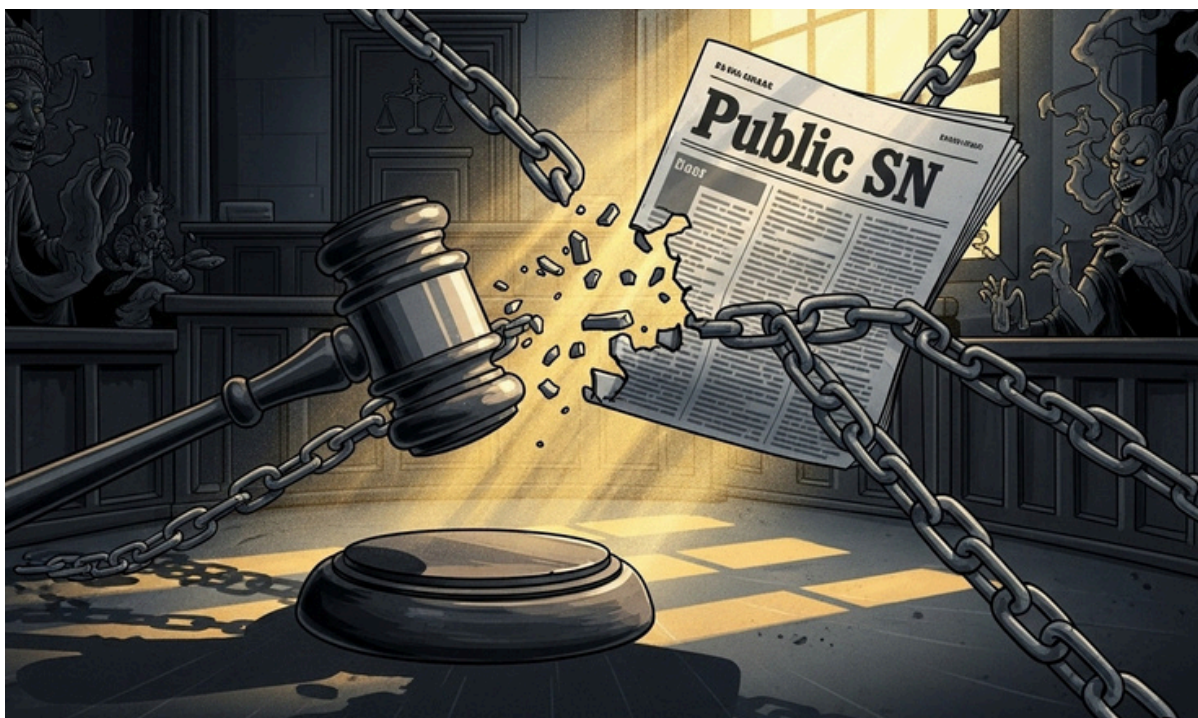
into the case, Traoré on June 23, 2025 announced that he would step away from professional activities, citing risks to his loved ones as the reason.



Suspension of Media Outlets

The media regulators of Togo and Guinea caused a media outlet each to cease operation in their respective countries. In **Togo**, the Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication (HAAC) suspended the broadcast of the French public media outlets RFI and France 24 for three months, effective June 16, 2025. The HAAC accused the stations of airing inaccurate and biased content that allegedly undermined the country, although no specific examples were provided.

In the case of **Guinea**, the High Authority for Communication (HAC), on June 2, 2025, ordered the removal of West Africa TV (Web TV) channel from national broadcast packages. The decision followed unsavoury remarks made during the May 30, 2025 edition of the Star en ligne programme aired on the Web TV. Although the sanction of a removal was deemed disproportionate by many, the HAC cited Article 44 of Guinea's Press Freedom Law to justify its decision.



Redress

The month of June 2025 recorded some positive developments regarding reparations of some violations cited in the month and others cited earlier in the year. In addition to the apology rendered to Sierra Leonean journalist, Mohamed Tamba Mattia, by the Mayor of Koidu in the company of police commanders following the physical assault against him by some police officers, other notable developments were also recorded.

In a significant development for the Senegalese media industry, the Senegal Supreme Court, on June 12, 2025, overturned a suspension order issued by the Ministry of Communication, Telecommunications and Digital Affairs against the online news outlet, Public SN. The Ministry's April 22 directive had ordered the outlet, along with 380 others, to cease all activities as part of a broader clampdown on media outlets deemed non-compliant with Senegal's press code. Following the cessation notice served to Public SN, the director appealed to the Supreme Court arguing that her outlet had submitted all the required documents under Article 178 of the press code and was fully compliant.

In Niger, one of three Sahara FM journalists, Massaouda Jaharou, was granted provisional release by the Niamey Military Court on June 13, 2025, although her colleagues, Hamid Mahmoud and Mahamane Sani, were formally remanded into custody on the same day.

Other developments

In other developments on freedom of expression (including press freedom, environmental activism and protests), a Togolese rapper, Tchala Essowè Narcisse, popularly known as Aamron, who was arrested on May 26, 2025 after criticising President Faure Gnassingbé's administration and calling for a satirical mobilisation, appeared in a viral video on June 5 as a mentally unfit person. In the video, Aamron expresses regret for insulting the President, apologises and asks for his forgiveness. Aamron also disclosed that he had been transferred to a psychiatric facility. It is not clear what was done to the rapper/activist during the one week in detention that made him backtrack from his earlier position, but at least his relatives rejection of this new narrative, insisting his arrest was due to his activism suggests that Aamron may have been forced to change his earlier narrative. Although the details are not known yet, what has happened is a serious development that could chill people from expressing dissent in the country.

Dr. Boga Sako Gervais, a prominent Ivorian activist, fled into exile after facing threats from top police officials following his criticism of President Ouattara's alleged fourth-term bid. His departure came days after a press conference warning of electoral irregularities. The police issued informal summons and intimidation tactics, prompting fears for his safety. The incident highlights growing repression of dissent in Côte d'Ivoire.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION



The incidents of physical attacks; arrests, detentions and sentencing; and media suspensions recorded in June 2025 are highly regrettable as they continue to limit spaces for civic expression. Urgent action is, therefore, needed to ensure that attacks against expression are redressed to create an enabling environment that encourages all to freely and openly contribute to governance processes in their respective countries. To this end, the Senegalese Supreme Court's lifting of the suspension imposed on the Public SN media outlet is very significant to media development and freedom of expression in Senegal and across the region.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), calls on the governments and regulatory bodies in the countries cited in this report to take prompt and meaningful steps to address the violations highlighted. These actions should aim at promoting accountability, safeguarding the right to freedom of expression, and ensuring that public discourse remains open, inclusive, and protected across the region. Specifically, the MFWA calls on:

Authorities in Benin to review the case of Steve Amoussou and drop all charges against him, and ensure that digital rights and freedom of expression are fully respected across the country. Expressing critical

opinions about the government or managing a digital platform that criticises government or authorities should not be a criminal offence.

Authorities in Côte d'Ivoire must guarantee an environment where freedom of expression and democratic pluralism are fully respected. The government is further urged to ensure Dr. Boga Sako Gervais's safe return and protection upon his re-entry into the country.

Guinean Authorities to ensure that the investigations into the assault on Mohamed Traoré are carried out thoroughly and transparently, all perpetrators are held accountable, and the report is made public. The authorities should also ensure that all freedom of expression violations are given equal prominence and fully resolved to restore trust in government and government institutions.

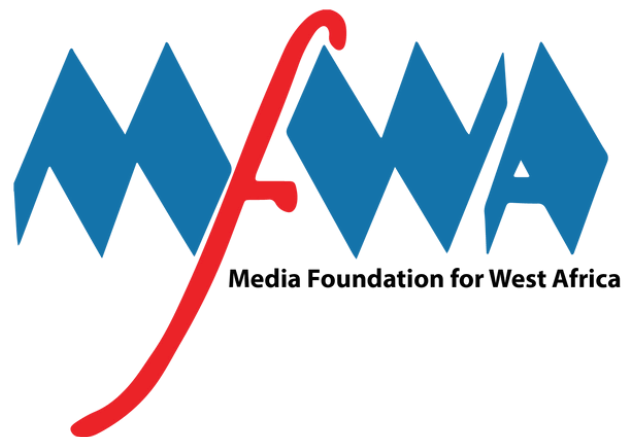
Mauritanian Authorities to respect the civil liberties of its citizens. In particular, the MFWA calls on the authorities to drop all charges against activist Abdoulaye Bâ who was only sharing his perspectives about how the Mauritanian Ministry of Interior should be addressing immigration concerns in the country. Such commentary should not be criminalised, let alone attract a disproportionate sentence of a year in prison (whether part of it is suspended or not). Mauritania should also repeal or review the controversial Protection of National Symbols Law, which is often used to suppress dissenting voices in the country.

Niger: The authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Hamid Mahmoud and Mahamane Sani and completely drop all charges against Massaouda Jaharou. The MFWA urges the authorities to respect press freedom and civil liberties as guaranteed by the Nigerien Constitution.


Senegal: The Ministry of Communication, Telecommunications and Digital Affairs should be guided by the Supreme Court's ruling regarding Public SN and hasten slowly in the implementation of its suspension order against media outlets. The MFWA recommends halting further suspensions and instead engaging in dialogue to agree on compliance plans, alongside rolling out capacity strengthening interventions to improve professionalism in the media sector. Shutting down a substantial number of media outlets in the country (more than half of the media outlets supposedly audited) is tantamount to denying Senegalese citizens access to information and engagement platforms.

Sierra Leone: Authorities must take urgent steps to identify and hold accountable those responsible for the assault on journalist Mohamed Tamba Mattia. Freedom of expression must be protected, and violence against media professionals must not go unpunished.


Togo: The Togolese authorities must lift the suspension of RFI and France 24 broadcasts and uphold the country's obligations under national and international framework protecting freedom of expression (including expression through protests) and media pluralism. The MFWA also urges the authorities in Togo to drop all charges against Aamron and cease all forms of harassment and intimidation against him and other critical voices. Furthermore, all detainees from the June 5-6 and June 26-28 protests should be immediately and unconditionally released; the people's right to express their concerns through peaceful assembly must be respected at all times.



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