



**STATE OF  
SAFETY OF  
JOURNALISTS  
IN LIBERIA**

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## Introduction

The media plays a key role in building and consolidating democracies. As the fourth estate of the realm, the media serves as a counterweight to the overwhelming power and influence of government by ensuring that the actions of the latter are in the best interest of the people. This mediation role has however, often brought the media into conflict with some powerful state actors and their agents, partisan, ethnic or commercial interests and other individuals. As the most active players in the media space, media workers, particularly journalists, often end up at the receiving end of such conflicts. Journalists in Liberia are no exception.

Journalists in Liberia have faced series of violations perpetrated by political figures such as state officials, security agencies and individuals who are widely believed to be political party affiliates.

This report highlights incidents of press freedom violations in Liberia from January 2014-June 2019 in the light of the UN Plan of Action for the Protection of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Adopted on December 18, 2013, by the United Nations General Assembly, Resolution [A/RES/68/163](#) urged all member states to commit to preventing violence against journalists, to ensure accountability and bring to justice perpetrators of crimes against journalists and media workers. It further called on States to promote a safe and enabling environment for journalists to do their work without undue interference from any actors.

This report focuses on the safety of journalists situation in Liberia over the past five years.

Over the five-year period the MFWA documented 31 violations against journalists. The violations covering the five-year period include physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and/or detention, sentencing, as well as threats by individuals against journalists. The reports on these violations also mention the perpetrators who include, state security agents (particularly police), state officials and political party activists.

The report is based on information on press freedom violations, particularly, those directly targeting journalists and media outlets, which are supplied by the MFWA's correspondents and national partner organisation in Liberia, the Centre for Media Studies and PeaceBuilding ([CEMESP](#)). This information on press freedom violations is published as daily alerts on the MFWA's website. To ensure that as many violations as possible are captured, reports on violations in Liberia published by fellow members of the IFEX network are incorporated.

This assessment of incidents of media rights violations over such relatively long period is important because it reflects more closely the safety of journalists' situation in the country, thus offering a more reliable reference data for advocacy and policy interventions.

## Overview of Media & Freedom of Expression Environment

Liberia's media has witnessed significant growth and expansion as a result of the country's return to democracy after the devastating civil wars of the 1990's. In Monrovia alone, there are about 40 daily newspapers and over 15 radio stations, offering extensive space for vibrant and extensive debate.

Article 15 of the country's Constitution guarantees press freedom and freedom of expression, and this right was further boosted with the passage of an Access to Information law in 2010. The country is also a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter).

On July 21, 2012, then President of Liberia, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, committed to the core principles of a free press after endorsing the Declaration of Table Mountain in Monrovia. President Sirleaf said signing the table Mountain, was to "underscore our message loud and clear, to advance a free press and freedom of expression, not just in Liberia but the entire continent of Africa."

However the decriminalisation of libel was not until 2019. This followed a sustained advocacy by the media in Liberia and civil society organisations in and out of the country. In March 2014, a delegation from the MFWA, CEMESP and World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (or WAN-IFRA) held discussions with then Minister of Information, Lewis Brown, during which these organisations impressed on the Minister to scrap the criminal libel laws.

In line with the Minister's assurances, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf stated in her State of the Nation Address in January, 2015 that Liberia was ready to decriminalise press offenses and urged Parliament to approve the Bill as soon as it is submitted.

"After lengthy debates and reviews by stakeholders, we are ready to submit, and will urge you to speedily pass into law the decriminalisation of media offenses because it is the right thing to do," President Sirleaf said. The promised submission, however, had to wait for another two and half years before it was finally done on July 20, 2017.

On July 20, 2017, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf submitted to Parliament a Bill to decriminalise press offenses, particularly, libel titled "An Act to Amend the Liberian Codes Revised, Penal Law of 1978." This was however not passed.

In May 2018, President George Weah also introduced a Bill aimed at decriminalizing libel. On February 7, 2019, the Senate voted unanimously to scrap the repressive sections of Liberia's penal code.

President Weah subsequently on February 28, 2019, signed into Law the Bill to amend the Penal Law of 1978, sections 11:11, 11.12 and 11.14 of the criminal code which prescribed prison terms for a range of speech offenses. The law amended chapter 11 of the Penal law of 1978 repealing sections 11.11 on criminal libel against the president, sedition and criminal malevolence.

Having decriminalised libel, and already passed a Right to Information Law in 2010, Liberia should ideally have a vibrant media and civil society empowered to demand accountability and efficient public service delivery.

However, the situation is far from encouraging. The influence and control of the government over the media also remains a challenge. Journalists face arrests, physical attacks, threats, intimidation etc. Journalists also face the challenge of consistent civil libel suits, which have threatened the sustainability and independence of the media. Some journalists have been arrested and detained following their failure to pay these excessive fines.

In 2013, journalist Rodney Sieh was sentenced to outrageous 5,000 years in prison for failing to pay a US\$1.5 million fine. Following a widespread condemnation, the government released him after he served 5 months of the five-century prison sentence.

Further on June 7, 2019, the Liberian government led by President George Weah, joined the growing list of African governments who violate the online rights of their citizens by turning off access to the internet/social media to quell anti-government protests. The government ordered Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in the country to block social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and messaging WhatsApp on mobile devices. That move cut off an estimated 4,028,418 Facebook subscribers in the country.

## Press Freedom Violations

Over the last 5 years, there have been 31 reported incidents of violations involving journalists and media outlets. The table below shows the reported incidents per year.

	Killing	Physical Attacks	Arbitrary arrests/ Detentions	Censorship	Seizure/ Destruction of Equipment	Ban/ Shutdown	Threats	Total
2019		2	1	2	2			7
2018		3			1	1	3	8
2017		1						1
2016		1	1			2		4
2015		2						2

2014		4	1	3		1		9
Total		13	3	5	3	4	3	31

Below are highlights of some of the violations recorded from January 2014-June 2019.

## Physical Attacks

Liberia has had a history of attacks on media outlets in response to criticisms of government or other political figures.

- In the latest incident which occurred at about 1:30 AM on March 5, 2019, some unknown assailants attacked Joy FM, a radio station based in Monrovia. The assailants disrupted the station’s transmission by cutting the cables connecting the antenna to the transmitter. The General Manager of Joy FM believes the attack was carried out or instigated by people who are affected by the station’s critical stands on certain national issues.
- The attack on Joy FM was the third act of violence against a radio station in Liberia in two months. On January 31, 2019, some unidentified gunmen [attacked](#) Roots FM, also based in Monrovia. They cut cables and destroyed some equipment, forcing the station off air for 24 hours. Roots FM was again attacked on February 10, 2019. This time, the attackers carried away two broadcast transmitters (100 and 500 watts), a 2-kilowatt amplifier, a mixer, and a receiver.
- On October 17, 2018, a suspected hit-and-run driver plunged into the *Daily Talk* newsstand, crushing the unique news chalkboard, which provides information to hundreds of citizens in Monrovia every day. The *Daily Talk* is a huge chalkboard established in May 14, 2000 by a journalist, Alfred Sirleaf, uses graphics, numbers and text to explain daily events to its audience. The concept has gained wide appeal among residents of Monrovia with its stories about corruption, nepotism, politics and other topical issues Liberia. Sirleaf believed the driver who rammed his vehicle into the newsstand and sped away targeted the chalkboard to purposely destroy it.
- Coalition for Democratic Change Representative (CDC) representative, Hon Munah Pelham-Youngblood of Montserrado County District, on February 9, 2018, verbally and physically assaulted Henry Karmo in open plenary in Parliament. The lawmaker accused the journalist of publishing a hostile story about her.
- On January 31, 2018, Abraham Morris of the *Inprofile Newspaper* and Austin Kawa of *Prime FM* were [beaten](#) by a policeman at the premises of the Liberian Senate on the alleged orders of Senator Nyongblee Karngar-Lawrence of Grand Bassa County.

- A petrol bomb was thrown at the home of Smith Toby, a journalist with OK FM in Liberia in a suspected [arson attack](#) in the early hours of October 18, 2017. Fortunately, the device failed to explode.
- Some unidentified arsonists on August 29, 2017, set fire to Radio Joy Africa. The community radio lost equipment, its only generator and other valuable properties during the fire incident.
- A leading member of the opposition Liberty Party in Liberia, Darrius Dillon, on April 13, 2017, attacked a freelance journalist Joe K.S. Fineboy. The journalist had gone to the party's headquarters in Congo Town to seek information about a fleet of new vehicles paraded by the political party when Dillon took offense and assaulted him.
- On journalist Henry Karmo of FrontPage Africa was [beaten](#) by police officers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that houses the president's office. The journalist was flogged while photographing demonstrators who were protesting the imposition of a state of emergency declared by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as a response to tackling the deadly Ebola virus that had ravaged the country at the time. The police officers arrested, flogged and took the journalist to prison despite the fact that he displayed his identification card as an FPA reporter.

## Threats, Intimidation and Censorship

Liberia's media landscape has witnessed threats and acts of intimidations calculated to instill fear in journalists who are deemed critical of government, state officials and other powerful figures with the ultimate aim of causing the media to self-censor.

- In the last 6 months, some critical journalists in Liberia have reported receiving death threats from unknown individuals. Radio talk show host on Sky FM, T-Max Jlateh has said there is a plot by high-level officials to assassinate him and other journalists such as Rodney Sieh, and Henry Costa who are critical of the George Weah administration. Jlateh mentioned that the threats were made through phone-calls. The Ministry of Information in a press release on April 4, 2019, expressing concerns over the reported threats and promised to investigate threats made against the journalists.
- In a rather bizarre incident, the Liberian Parliament on February 21, 2019, [revoked the accreditation](#) of journalists for their "repetitive" coverage of proceedings of the House. The notice dated February 21, 2019 called on the respective media institutions to take note of the revocation of the accreditations of their parliamentary correspondents and to send their replacements. It added that the move was in line with "best practice that is intended to enhance aggressive media service of your reportage to the public." To enforce the decision, 18 out of 27 accredited journalists were barred from covering the lower House on February 21 by the Deputy Sergeant at-arms, who cited lack of space. Many believed the directive was particularly targeted at journalists who had been critical in their reportage against the House.

- A Member of Parliament for Montserrado County District #7 Solomon George on November 19, 2018 threatened to flog and slap journalists, Musa M. B. Kenneh, a reporter of Truth FM and one Trojan Kiazulu of Fabric Radio. The Member of Parliament who made the threats during a session of the House accused the journalists of unfair reportage. “I will flog you too and Musa for negatively insulting this body that we will not accept,” the Member of Parliament said. George then proceeded to inform the Speaker about the situation shortly before he left the hall to fetch some men to beat the two journalists. The speaker of parliament had to intervene to dissuade George.
- On December 17 2018, Minister of State for Presidential Affairs Nathaniel McGill threatened to jail journalist Rodney Sieh for a critical report *FrontPageAfrica*, published a story in which he reported an alleged “corruption, fiscal mismanagement, kickbacks and waste.” “Rodney Sieh will go to jail because I will not allow people to tarnish my reputation,” McGill said.
- In another development, Philibert Browne, journalist and editor of the *Hot Pepper* newspaper, received death threats following his reports on a missing container of sixteen billion Liberian dollars (about US\$ 104 million). In the incident, that took place on August 20, 2018, an armed man reportedly visited his wife’s store and made life-threatening comments, something that prompted the journalist to call Liberia’s Inspector General of Police to request protection. Following reports of the threats, the government set up a committee to probe the matter. There were also police officers stationed at Browne’s residence to protect him and his family.
- A journalist working for the FrontpageAfrica Newspaper was on August 15, 2018, [threatened with death](#) by a lawyer. The lawyer, Charles Abdullai, threatened to kill Bettie Johnson-Mbayo, as well as kidnap one of her children if she did not stop publishing stories about his client who was unknown. When confronted by the Management of Frontpage Africa, Abdullai admitted making the calls but insisted that it was a “prank.”
- On March 29, 2018, the Speaker of Liberia’s House of Representatives, Bhofal Chambers, called armed guards to drive away two journalists who had gone to seek some information from him. Nathaniel Daygbor of the *New Dawn Newspaper*, and fellow journalists, Jackson Clay and Austin Kiawah had gone to seek clarification from the Speaker following a public controversy surrounding his academic credentials.
- On March 22, 2018, President George Weah himself embarrassed a senior journalist and *BBC* correspondent, Jonathan Paye-Layleh, during a press briefing. The President responded angrily to a question posed by Paye-Layleh and angrily accused the journalist of working against his efforts to promote human rights. The incident forced Paye-Layleh to flee the country, claiming he felt insecure.
- In an act of intimidation, Director of the Executive Protection Force (EPS), Sam Gaye, wrote to the Press Union of Liberia asking them to “escort the living body” of some two journalists to his office for “questioning and self-explanatory assertions on Monday, July 24, 2017 at 10:00 AM.” The dreadful summon against the two journalists, Omasco Giago and

Octavian Williams, Acting Managing Editor and Publisher of the Nation Times newspaper, respectively, followed an article published by the newspaper which raised an alarm that President Johnson Sirleaf was being targeted for attacks.

- On January 23, 2017, Liberia's Information Minister, Eugene Nagbe, [molested](#) a female journalist during a press conference in the capital Monrovia, repeatedly yelling at her to “go and ask her boyfriend, Representative Moses Kollie.” The Minister flared up when Estelle Liberty Kemo from Power TV asked to know the cause of a recent row between him and the said Moses Kollie, an opposition member of parliament.

## Arrests and Detentions

During the period under review, there were a few incidents of arbitrary arrests and detentions.

The violations are listed below:

- Police officers on June 10, 2019 [arrested](#) Cassell Webster, editor of the *INQUIRER* newspaper, on instructions from the Vice President of Liberia's Football Association, (LFA) Wilmot Smith. They accosted Webster at the Tubman Stadium in Monrovia and insisted that the journalist follows them to their office for questioning. Despite the intervention of the President of the Liberia Football Association, Smith insisted on the arrest. In a related incident, the LFA Vice President also caused the arrest of Michael Solomon, a reporter of *Prime FM* whom he accused of “wrongfully discussing him on a live sports program. A police officer also forcefully deleted pictures Solomon had taken as the police attempted to arrest Cassell Webster. Upon his refusal to delete the pictures, one of the officers “forcefully” got a hold of his phone and deleted the pictures.
- Sheriffs of the Civil Law Court in Monrovia on April 9, 2018 [arrested staff](#) of FrontPageAfrica (FPA), were shut down its offices. The action was in connection with a defamation suit filed by Henry A. K. Morgan, and Moses T. Konah, in which they are seeking an amount of US\$500,000 as special damages, US\$1,000,000 for general damages and US\$350,000 as punitive damages against the paper. Seven members of staff were held for some three hours before Judge Yamie Quiqui Gbeisaystaff released them on US\$350,000 bail bond. The judge also ordered the sheriff to impound properties, including vehicles, equipment and any other assets of FPA against the bond.
- In September 15, 2016, Festus Poquie, a journalist and editor of *New Democrat*, a newspaper in Monrovia, was [arrested](#) and taken to the headquarters of the Liberian National Police where he was detained for several hours before being released. Poquie's detention was as a result of a story republished by his newspaper on September 13, 2016 about the President of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema.

## Banning and Closure of Media Outlets

The period also witnessed the controversial banning and closure of some media outlets.

- The Government of Liberia [suspended](#) with immediate effect the operating licenses and authorizations issued to media operators from January 1-June 18, 2018. Liberia's Ministry of Information, Culture Affairs and Tourism announced the decision in Monrovia on June 18, 2018, prompting public outcry and huge condemnation on radio stations and social media. The government argues, the new measure was to allow a new revision and regulatory regime due to "technical and administrative anomalies including duplication of frequencies to radio and television operators, and incorrect designations and submissions."
- On August 13, 2016, the government of Liberia [shut down](#) the privately-owned Radio LIB24. Officers of the Police Support Unit and the National Security Agency of Liberia barricaded the premises of the radio station to effect the shutdown.
- On July 4, 2016, the Liberia Telecommunication Authority (LTA) [temporarily shut](#) Voice FM 102.7 Radio Station for its "failure to obtain operating permit over the last couple of years." The attempt was regarded as an attempt to silence the radio station which was very critical of the government. radio station

## Excessive Fines

The media in Liberia has witnessed a period of excessive fines meted out to it in cases of defamation filed against journalists by individuals who are mostly politicians and political figures.

The country's courts often impose crippling fines and excessive prison sentences for failure to pay the fines, leading to widespread self-censorship and severe economic difficulties for journalists and media outlets. While seeking remedies for media infractions in court is not a violation, this has been weaponised by politicians and powerful people to cripple the media and censor critical voices.

Below are a few of such court fines and suits demanding ridiculous amounts:

- In January 2019, Liberian lawmakers filed a US\$ 2 million [lawsuit against](#) Philibert Browne, the publisher of the private newspaper Hot Pepper and his media house over allegations of corruption and bribery the newspaper had published against the parliamentarians. Browne was sued for alleging on a private radio station in December 2018 that some former and current members of the House of Representatives were given various sums of money to induce them to approve the printing of Liberian \$15 billion banknotes by the government.
- On October 7, 2016, a Member of Parliament, Prince Moye, filed a US\$1.5 million libel lawsuit against Philipbert Browne, the publisher of Liberia's *Hot Pepper* newspaper. Browne was subsequently [arrested](#) and jailed without trial at the Monrovia Central Prison. The

journalist's ordeal followed an article he wrote which was based on an interview with a lady allegedly raped by Brown.

- On July 2015, Tony Lawal, a construction mogul, sued the publisher of the *Nation Times*, Octavin Williams for US\$4 million in damages for an alleged defamatory article. The journalist was held in pre-trial detention for eight days.

## **Towards Protecting the Safety of Journalists in Liberia**

The need to guarantee press freedom and protect journalists' safety cannot be overemphasized because of the media's central role in promoting good governance and accountability.

The media promotes good governance and inclusiveness by mediating and enhancing public discourse on issues affecting the body politic. It informs the public and provides a platform for citizens-authorities engagement on development issues. Journalists probe government action and the quality of public service to demand value for money on behalf of the citizens.

Additionally, the media ensures national cohesion and social peace by upholding the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups. The media brings situations that could undermine peace or compromise the quality of life to the attention of citizens and the authorities for redress.

Because of the watchdog and gatekeeping role of the media, the safety and cohesion of society is closely linked to the professionalism and efficacy of the media. Meanwhile, the media cannot be professional and vibrant if it is subjected to harassment, attacks, intimidation and censorship, hence the need for it to be protected.

To ensure a solid safety of journalists mechanism aimed at promoting and protecting the safety of journalists in Liberia, it is imperative for the authorities to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to preventing press freedom violations and combatting impunity by punishing crimes against journalists.

In view of the above, the following recommendations are proposed:

### **To UN Agencies in Liberia**

- Build the capacity of CSOs on the importance of journalists' safety and related issues
- Increase collaboration with media actors and CSOs to implement programmes to promote journalists' safety
- Mainstream issues related to journalists' safety and impunity into broad programme areas
- Develop and disseminate best practices on journalists' safety
- Set up emergency response mechanisms for embattled journalists
- Follow up on media violation reports to ensure that justice is served

### To Government of Liberia

- Create mechanisms to monitor and report on journalists' safety
- Create mechanisms to specifically address violence against journalists
- Conduct immediate and effective investigations into incidents of violence against journalists
- Develop and implement frameworks to protect journalists' sources
- Cease public denigration of journalists in media which has the tendency to erode public confidence in, and support for the media

### To Security Agencies in Liberia

- Train officers on press freedom and safety of journalists
- Investigate promptly and thoroughly all incidents of physical attacks on the media including the recent attacks on Roots FM and Joy FM
- Investigate death threats against journalists and protect the targets of such threats

### To Civil Society Organisations and Academia

- Increase programmes to build capacity of journalists on safety precautions and practices
- Incorporate journalists' safety training into academic and journalism training programmes
- Mainstream gender and the specific types of violence faced by female journalists into broader programming
- Build capacity of journalists in online safety

### To Media Actors

- Provide general safety training for journalists including safety for women journalists and online safety
- Develop and implement guidelines on safety of journalists
- Support media houses in developing and implementing safety policies
- Media owners, managers and editors should prioritise professional standards over commercialisation and partisanship
- Increase monitoring and reporting of violations against journalists and ensure follow-ups



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