

# West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor



**Quarter 3**

**JULY - SEPTEMBER, 2021**

## Table of Content

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Methodology .....	4
Incidents of Violations.....	4
Countries and Incidents of Violations .....	5
Perpetrators of Violations.....	6
Targets/Victims.....	7
Redress/Impunity for Violations .....	8
Other Key FOE Developments .....	9
Conclusion.....	10
Recommendations.....	10

## Executive Summary

From being heavily burdened with military dictators and long-serving civilian autocrats, West Africa gradually shed its dictatorship image from the mid-1990s to emerge as one of the most democratic sub-regional blocks in Africa by the late 2000's. The democratic revolution had a positive effect on the freedom of expression landscape of the sub-region. It led to an explosion in media outlets and torched off a flurry of civil society efforts to consolidate the nascent freedoms. Media pluralism and divergent public discourse on national issues has become a reality in most west African countries.

Popular participation in governance received a further boost with the advent of the internet. Increasing internet penetration as a result of improved access to mobile devices has enhanced the capacity of citizens to contribute to public debate and demand accountability, especially via social media. This has helped deepen democracy and improved the press freedom and freedom of expression environment.

The democratic gains have however begun to witness some reverses over the past few years. In Togo, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea, controversial constitutional amendments have been carried out to allow sitting Presidents to prolong their mandates beyond the traditional two terms. This has led to a military take-over in Guinea. Mali has been rocked by two coups d'état over the past one year. In Benin and Ghana which are often referenced as models of democracy and respect for press freedom, there is an outcry about repression and bullying among the media, civil society activists and critical intellectuals.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been monitoring and reporting on the freedom of expression (FOE) situation in West Africa and carrying out campaigns to seek redress for violations against the media and dissenting voices. The results of the monitoring have been published as the West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor, in short).

This report covers the third quarter of 2021 (July-September). The period under review recorded 12 in seven countries. It is among the lowest figures recorded in recent years and represents a 57% decrease of the second quarter (June-August) violations which stood at 28.

Guinea recorded the most violations (four) while Mauritania and Nigeria followed with two violations each. Ghana, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone recorded one each. Burkina Faso, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia and Senegal which were featured in the previous report, did not record any violations during the quarter under review.

Unfortunately, these violations were perpetrated with near absolute impunity. Meanwhile all the countries featured in the report are democratic states with constitutional provisions and other laws which guarantee press freedom and protect freedom of expression and assembly. They are also signatories to regional and international charters, treaties and covenants guaranteeing FOE rights. Also, the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity enjoins these countries to take steps to protect journalists and ensure justice for journalist victims of violations. In the light of the above, the MFWA urges

all stakeholders in the FOE continue to collaborate to promote freedom of expression and end impunity for violations against journalists.

## Introduction

West Africa has witnessed an impressive improvement in press freedom and freedom of expression generally over the past two decades. This progress has largely been credited to the sub-region's mass return to democracy from the 1990's to the 2000's after decades of military rule.

With democracy came a new culture of tolerance and respect for divergent opinion. This was evidenced by a boom in the media industry and the easing of restrictions on the work of the media and civil society organisations. Citizens' participation in national discourse has been enhanced. The advent of social media has further expanded the frontiers of freedom of expression (FOE), enabling many more people to access information, express their opinions and demand accountability for the resources entrusted to government and public service institutions.

The new-found liberty is however, not without threats and concerns. State and non-state actors often antagonise journalists who turn their scrutiny towards of their activities by the media often antagonise journalists. Some corrupt and autocratic governments still target critical journalists, civil society activists and dissenting citizens. These targets are often subjected to physical assaults, arbitrary arrests and detentions, threats and even killing.

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), in collaboration with its partner organisations in the various countries in the sub-region, has been actively engaged in advocacy around these threats to press freedom and freedom of expression generally. The organisation has been monitoring the freedom of expression landscape in West Africa and publishing the results of the monitoring as the Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor). The monitoring reports are meant to serve a reference material and an advocacy tool for promoting and protecting media and FOE rights in West Africa.

The rights that have been violated as contained in this report are guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, to which all the twelve countries featured in this report have subscribed. These violations of FOE rights violations recorded in the region infringe these protocols. The impunity surrounding the violations also underlines a persistent culture of impunity that calls for a sustained collaboration among stakeholders to help combat it.

## Methodology

This report is based on daily Alerts and Analysis received from the MFWA's correspondents in all 16 countries of West Africa who monitor FOE developments in their assigned countries. The daily alerts, which are published on the MFWA website, are collated, analysed and published on a quarterly basis as The Monitor. Sometimes, like the case with this report, relevant materials and alerts published by our national partner organisations are incorporated in the Monitor.

The findings in this report are discussed under six sections: incidents of violations, perpetrators of violations, targets/victims of violations as well as redress. Also highlighted in the report are some key trends and developments in the FOE landscape in the region that are not necessarily violations. The report ends with a series of recommendations to relevant stakeholders on measures to take to improve the FOE situation in West Africa.

## Incidents of Violations

Twelve violations were recorded in the course of the MFWA's monitoring of the FoE landscape in West Africa over the period of July to September, 2021. The violations were in six different categories and were recorded in seven countries. Physical attacks were the dominant type of violation, recording four cases with the mobile phone of a journalist being damaged during an altercation. Three incidents of arrest/detention were also recorded in which a journalist's phone was seized. Table 1 below illustrates the types and number of violations recorded in each country.

**Table 1. Countries and Types of Violations**

Country	Types of Violation						
	Physical Attack	Arrest/ Detention	threat	Seizure/ Destruction of equipment	Interrogation	Censor	Total
<i>Guinea</i>	3			1			4
<i>Mauritania</i>		2					2
<i>Nigeria</i>	1				1		2
<i>Ghana</i>			1				1
<i>Mali</i>		1					1
<i>Liberia</i>		1					1
<i>Sierra Leone</i>						1	1
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12</b>

## Countries and Incidents of Violations

Twelve violations were recorded in seven countries in this report as against 28 violations in nine countries in the preceding quarter. There was no incident of killing, unlike the previous quarter that recorded the killing of two foreign journalists by armed terrorists in Burkina Faso, a social media activist and a protester in Ghana.

Four incidents each of physical attacks and arrests/detentions were recorded. One case each of threat, interrogation, censorship and destruction of a journalist's equipment. Some of the violations are presented below:

On August 12, 2021 a local councillor of the District of Mamou, Alpha Saliou Barry, stormed the studio of Global FM radio station and [assaulted three presenters](#), amidst threats and insults. The councillor was angered by comments by one presenter which he considered as an indictment on his performance as the councillor in charge of sanitation in the district. He also destroyed a mobile phone of one of the presenters.

On the evening of September 5, 2021, during the military coup d'état against President Alpha Conde, some unknown persons [stormed](#) the offices of the state-owned *Horoya* newspaper and carried away office furniture and computers. A similar attack was carried out at the National Directorate of Rural Radio and the premises of the Ministry of Information and Communication in Conakry.

### **Mauritania**

On July 9, an activist and blogger Alioune Ould El Hassen Ould M'barek, was arrested at Nouakchott's Oumtounsy international airport on charges of having broadcast audios described as “incitement to racism.”

On July 12, the a social media activist, Neny Ould Ahmed Ould Kerkoub, was [detained](#) and in the civil prison of Nouakchott for signing and distributing on social platforms (Whatsapp, Facebook) a communiqué described as the authorities as encouraging secessionism.

### **Nigeria**

On August 24, Nigeria's broadcast regulator National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), summoned Chamberlain Usoh and Kayode Okikiolu, presenters at the privately-owned *Channels Television* and [interrogated](#) them over an interview they granted to a Governor and critic of President Muhammadu Buhari.

## Liberia

In Liberia, Police in Monrovia [arrested and detained](#) Nyantee Togba, a reporter for Ok FM on the orders of a Member of Parliament. The journalist had gone to cover a demonstration at the home the MP, Representative Hanson Kiazolu of Montserrado District #17.

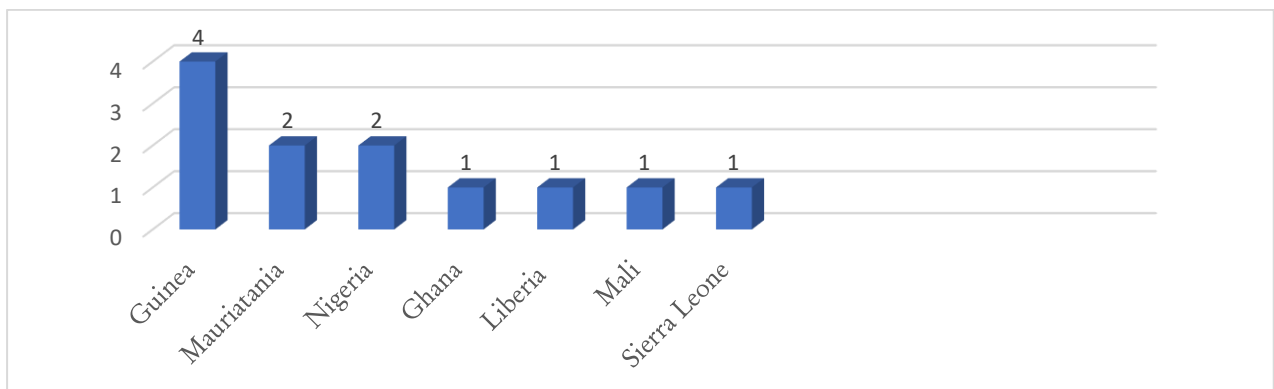
## Ghana

The Member of Parliament for Assin Central in Ghana, Kennedy Agyapong, verbally abused, [threatened](#) Erastus Asare Donkor, a journalist with Luv FM. “That boy should be beaten seriously. He is so annoying. For the foolish submissions he made before the Committee, we have to beat the hell out of him. If I were the President, I would have ordered this boy to be whipped”, the lawmaker said in an interview on July 9, 2021, on Net2 TV, which he owns.

The summary narrative of all the violations recorded during the third quarter can be read [here](#)

The number of violations recorded in each of the seven countries are presented in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Countries and number of violations recorded



## Perpetrators of Violations

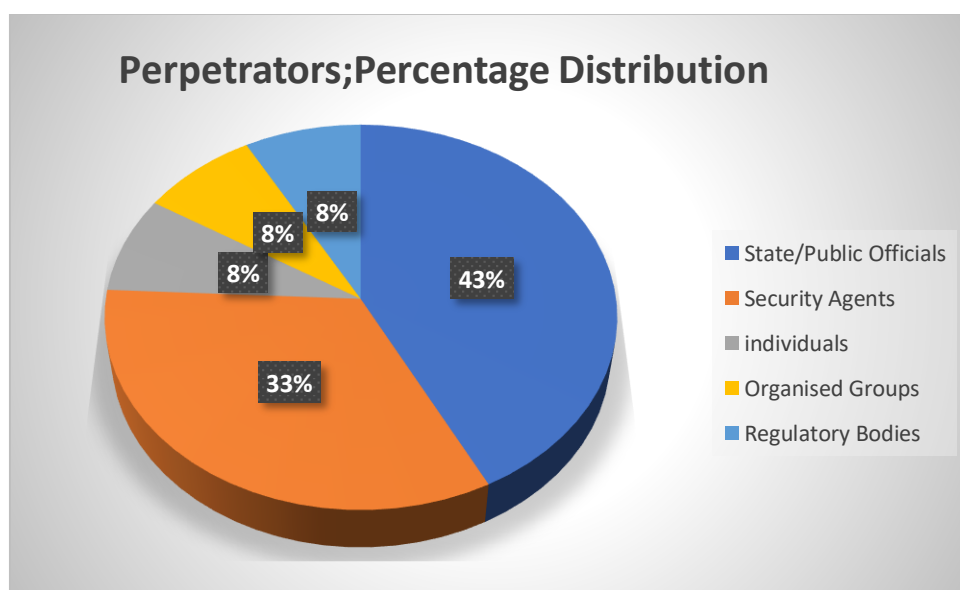
The 12 violations were perpetrated by five types of perpetrators, of which state/public officials were the biggest. Between them, the two accounted for nine (75%) violations. Table 2 below provides more information on the types of perpetrators and the number of violations they perpetrated in each country

Table 2 below provides more information on the types of perpetrators and the number of violations they perpetrated in each country.

## Countries and Types of Perpetrators

Country	Types of Perpetrators					Total
	Security Agents	State/Public Officials	Individuals	Organised Group	Regulatory Bodies	
<i>Guinea</i>		2	1	1		4
<i>Mauritania</i>	2					2
<i>Nigeria</i>	1				1	2
<i>Ghana</i>		1				1
<i>Liberia</i>		1				1
<i>Mali</i>	1					1
<i>Sierra Leone</i>		1				
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12</b>

Figure 2 below shows the percentage distribution of the violations per type of perpetrators



## Targets /Victims of Violations

In terms of the distribution, eight (8) of the violations were targeted at journalists with two (2) each targeted at activists and media houses. However, in absolute terms, 15 individual victims were identified. Eleven (11) individual victims were involved the eight (8) violations targeted at journalists. The rest were two activists and two media organisations. It is important to note that one incident can result in multiple violations against the same victim or against many victims.



Table 3 below illustrates the violations/victims distribution.

**Table 3: Violations and Victims**

Country	Types of Victims			
	Journalists	Media Organisation	Activists	Total
<i>Guinea</i>	2	2		4
<i>Mauritania</i>			2	2
<i>Nigeria</i>	2			2
<i>Ghana</i>	1			1
<i>Liberia</i>	1			1
<i>Mali</i>	1			1
<i>Sierra Leone</i>	1			1
<b>Total</b>	8	2	2	12

## Redress

In Guinea, the Management of Global FM withdrew the case of assault from court for amicable settlement. This followed a written apology from the Mayor of Mamou Elhadj Amadou Tidiane Diallo, on behalf of Councilor Barry who had stormed the radio station and assaulted its presenters. The intruder had also destroyed a phone belonging to one of his victims. The station cited “interventions by social, religious and administrative actors in Mamou” for its decision to seek an amicable settlement of the issue.

On July 9, 2021, the ECOWAS Court of Justice ordered the Nigerian government to pay journalist Agba Jalingo the sum of 30 million naira (USD 73,000) as [compensation](#) for subjecting him to dehumanising treatment in detention. The Editor of the CrossRiver Watch online newspaper was arrested and detained for months in 2019 after he published a story alleging the misappropriation of public funds intended to establish a bank.

On September 17, 2021, Ghana’s Minister for National Security, Honourable Albert Kan-Dapaah, engaged officials of the MFWA) and other stakeholders in the media sector including some victims of press freedom violations to discuss ways of promoting the safety of journalists in Ghana. At the meeting held in the office of Minister the Minister expressed regret over recent abuse of journalists in Ghana. He also affirmed his personal commitment to ensuring redress for violations against journalists, particularly those committed by National Security operatives.

The Honourable Kan-Dapaah called the meeting after the MFWA on July 19, 2021, [mobilised 442 journalists](#) and supporters of press freedom calling on his Ministry and Parliament to act to end a wave of attacks on journalists in the country.

## Other Key Developments

On July 12, scores of newspapers in Nigeria boldly printed ‘Information Blackout’ on their front pages in protest at the proposed Nigeria Press Council (NPC) and National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Amendment Bill. The protest banner was displayed as chyrons on television stations and lead graphics on online media while radio stations promoted the protest with jingles. A day after the “Information Blackout protest”, lawmakers succumbed and suspended consideration of the Bills.

The suspension of the bills came amidst a second day of protests in the media, with the leading newspapers focusing their editorials on the dangers of the proposed bills.

The Media reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) MFWA’s national party organization in Sierra Leone, on July 2, launched a Report on “The State of Media Freedom in Sierra Leone.” The [report](#) which was produced by the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG) in collaboration with the MFWA, focused on press freedom under the three-year-old regime of President Julius Maada Bio. The report named as the leading perpetrators of press freedom the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), political party operatives, military officers, Presidential guards and violent youths. In terms of redress, the data showed that 16 violations were concluded, resolved, dropped or abandoned because of lack of progress; four were in court, and nine were under police investigation/inconclusive/stalled.

On August 23, 2021, a British journalist, Syed Taalay Ahmed, was [killed by armed robbers](#) in Northern Ghana, where the 31-year-old was shooting a documentary for the London-based Muslim Television Ahmadiyya International (MTA). Though Taalay Ahmed was not targeted because of his work, it is sadly relevant that he was killed while he was carrying out his journalistic duties.

The MFWA) and its partner in Burkina Faso, Centre national de presse-Norbert Zongo (NP –NZ) on August 30, 2021 organised a [Forum](#) on the safety of journalists in Ouagadougou. Held under the co-presidency of Messrs. Maxime Koné and Ousseini Tamboura, the Burkinabe Ministers for Security and for Communications respectively, the Forum discussed the security challenges faced by the media in the face of armed rebellion in most parts of the country. It ended with recommended with recommendations to the various stakeholders on the roles each can play to protect the safety and security of journalists in Burkina Faso. The event was organised with the financial support of IFEX.

In a major push against impunity, the ECOWAS Court of Justice on July 9, 2021, ordered the Nigerian government to pay journalist Agba Jalingo the sum of 30 million naira (USD 73,000) as compensation for subjecting him to dehumanising treatment in detention. The Editor of the CrossRiver Watch online newspaper was arbitrarily detained for months in 2019.

## Conclusion

The continued abuse of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly under what is supposed to be democratic governments is disturbing. Arrest and detention instantly deprives journalists of the ability to carry out their journalistic duties, and is therefore, one of the worst forms of press freedom violations.

Unfortunately, ten cases of arrest and detention, six of them against journalists, were recorded during the quarter. Similarly, out of nine cases of physical attacks, six were against journalists and two against the media. The impunity with which the majority of these violations were perpetrated gives further cause for concern, as it can lead to widespread self-censorship and stifle healthy intellectual debate which is critical to building a progressive and democratic society.

There is therefore, the need for governments and civil society in West Africa to work harder and more collaboratively to address the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly issues in the region.

To this end, the MFWA wishes to make the following recommendations for improving the freedom of expression environment in the region.

## Recommendations

### **To Media Organisations and Journalists**

- Work with high standards and professionalism at all times.
- Media managers must commit to using all legal means to ensure justice for media persons whose rights are violated in the line of duty.
- Provide journalists covering the COVID-19 with safety training and protective equipment

### **To Governments in West Africa**

- Ensure that both state and non-state actors respect and protect the FOE rights.
- Promote the safety and protection of journalists and media organisations.
- Train security agents to appreciate the work of the media in democratic societies and to collaborate with them.

### **To ECOWAS**

- Hold accountable culprits (both state and non-state actors) of freedom of expression violations through criminal, civil, administrative, or other sanctions to combat impunity.
- Encourage member states to “ensure respect for the rights of journalists” as stated in Article 66 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty.
- Impose and enforce sanctions on Member States that persistently flout statutory obligations.

**To the African Commission Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information**

- Encourage all Member states, particularly Nigeria, to take steps to end the serial violation of FOE rights in the country

**To the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion**

- Call on the governments in West Africa severe violations have been recurring, to respect and protect freedom of expression rights.
- Include more West African countries in fact-finding missions.



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