

The Media and Democratic Restoration in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso:

The Way Forward

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1. Introduction

Press freedom in West Africa is under attack as democracy retreats (MFWA, 2022). A contributing factor to such decline is the resurgence of coup d'états. Between August 2020 and September 2022, West Africa witnessed five successful coup d'états and two failed coup attempts. Mali and Burkina Faso recorded two (2) successful coups each and Guinea only one; Niger and Guinea Bissau witnessed one failed coup attempt each.

The resurgence and potential normalization of coups in the region (CIVICUS, 2022) demonstrate ongoing democratic backslide (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022), also known as "democratic recession or democratic erosion" (Fong, 2023). Africans yearn for a participatory democracy ensuring free and fair elections, and civil liberties (Cheeseman & Haefner, 2021); however, the democratic erosion within West Africa has affected civic governance, political participation, and press freedom (CIVICUS, 2022).

As democracy recedes, the media in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea are embroiled in a downward spiral of press freedom violations, and attempts to stifle freedom of expression through oppressive legislation, institutionalised censorship, and arbitrary arrests (MFWA, 2022).

In its bid to seek solutions to the democratic recession in the region and develop an approach for joint advocacy to address the issues of freedom of expression and of the press, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), held a two-day conference from 18th to 19th October 2022 in Accra, Ghana. The Conference was themed: **The Media, Press Freedom and the Democratic Recession in West Africa**. This paper presents highlights from one of the panels on the topic: **The Media and Democratic Restoration in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso: The Way Forward**.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three main parts. First, the paper conducts a contextual analysis of the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, and how the media is affected. Secondly, the paper highlights key inputs made by panellists during the conference including key learnings. The third section posits recommendations that could contribute to addressing the democratic recession in West Africa.

2. Coup d'états, and Stifled Freedom of Expression and of the Press

Coup d'états are contagious (Ncube et al., 2012), and spread into “an epidemic of coup d'états” (Maclean, 2022). A coup d'état is the sudden and violent takeover of an existing government (Britannica, 2023). In spite of their contagion, each country presents peculiar socio-political contexts. This sub-section provides a short contextual analysis of how the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea occurred, and a macro-level analysis of their impact on freedom of expression and of the press.

2.1. Mali

Since 2012, following the overthrow of then-president Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT), Mali has been embroiled in a profound political, security, and economic crisis (Cascais, 2022). The resurgence of terrorist groups since 2012 has exacted a heavy death toll on civilians, caused massive displacements, and sparked a humanitarian crisis (United Nations, 2023). The crisis affected Mali's statehood and worsened the state of already fragile institutions. The security crisis in Mali is both a symptom and a contributing factor to the two recent coups (in 2020 and 2021).

In 2020, Malians demanded the resignation of then-president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) amidst deadly protests over contested parliamentary election results. Protesters chanted “IBK must Go”, as they lost faith in democratic governance (Maclean, 2022), bemoaned chronic corruption among state institutions, and worsening insecurity (CIVICUS, 2022). Against this backdrop, in August 2020, a military alliance overthrew Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and established the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) to “build a new Mali”.

The smooth, internationally accepted, political setup in September 2020 saw retired Colonel-Major Bah N'daw appointed president of the transition and Colonel Assimi Goita as Vice President. Fast forward, in January 2021, Vice President Colonel Assimi Goita toppled Bah N'daw, in a second coup, for “violating the transition charter” and became president of the Transition.

2.1.1 The Coup and the Media: Growing Censorship and Accusations of Critical Journalists as Unpatriotic

The two successive coups sparked a wave of efforts to throttle media freedom and independence in Mali. The decline in press freedom observed in the country is two-

fold: First, attacks on the press, and second, a stifling environment gaging media freedom.

a) Attacks on Press Freedom

Since the advent of the military, Mali witnessed the expulsion of international journalists, the ban on international media broadcasting in the country, and the closure of a local media outlet. Other attacks against the media include death threats, physical assaults, arbitrary arrests, and detention (MFWA, 2023). An analysis of the violation trends in Mali over a period of six years before and after the coup reveals an increase of violations by twenty per cent (20%) with a high frequency of physical attacks, arrests, and detention as indicated in Figure 1.

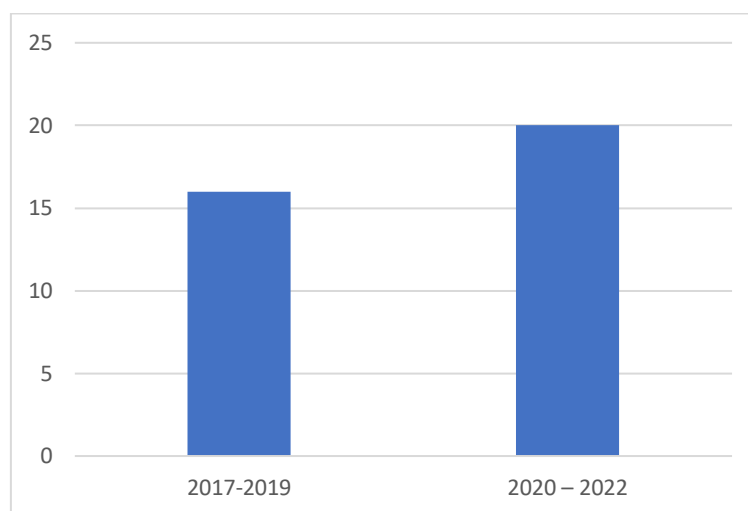


Figure 1: Comparison of Press Freedom Violations over six (6) years trend analysis in Mali before and after the coup d'état (Source: Author, based on Press Freedom Monitor from the MFWA)

b) A Stifling Environment Gaging Media Freedom

The media's ultimate right to independently collect, process, and disseminate information has come under attack as coup leaders attempt to silence critical media outlets and mainly favour those providing favourable coverage. The junta adopted repressive laws stifling freedom of expression and of the press, introduced media surveillance, restricted civil liberties, and a one ideology system where the media is to either support the transition or self-censor. This context favoured the accusation of critical journalists and media outlets as unpatriotic. The compounded effect of such developments is undermining media independence and creating a suffocating environment for press freedom (MFWA, 2022).

2.2. Burkina Faso

The political crisis in Burkina Faso stems from 2014 following the overthrow of then President Blaise Compaoré. The 2014 coup is considered a contributing factor that plunged Burkina Faso into a complex security crisis following the rise of radical Islamist groups who have conquered vast territories in the country and exacted a heavy death toll on civilian populations (Roth, 2022).

Amidst frustration, dissatisfaction, and growing uneasiness among the citizenry and the military about the government's approach in the fight against terrorism (BBC, 2022), on 24 January 2022, the army, led by Lt-Col Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba, deposed President Roch Kabore and established a transitional government.

Fast forward, on 30 September 2022, President Paul-Henri Damiba was overthrown by Captain Ibrahim Traore in a second coup. Once in charge, the new authorities dissolved the transitional government and suspended the constitution while agreeing to international agreements over organising elections for a return to civilian rule. While the country faces a multi-dimensional crisis, the military continues to record a heavy death toll on the frontline, and the state of democracy and press freedom has declined.

2.2.1 The Coup and the Media: Forced Civilian Enrolment in the Army, Citizens' Attacks against the Media, and Growing Censorship

Given the context of insecurity, and growing terrorist attacks, the media in Burkina Faso is confronted with new forms of threats suffocating freedom of expression and muzzling the press.

a) The Military and Citizens: New Culprits of Press Freedom

In Burkina Faso, just as in Mali, Military officials banned some international media from broadcasting in the country. Ever since the coups, the media recorded three new threats:

- **Citizens threatening the media:** independent journalists and media outlets in the country who criticize the military regime have witnessed the multiplication of death threats through anonymous messages from citizens.

- **Forced enrolment into the army:** Some activists who make critical statements about the military and its efforts in the fight against terrorism are kidnapped, and enrolled into the army to fight terrorism on the frontline.
- **Growing attacks on the press:** Since the coup, Burkina Faso recorded growing violations of freedom of expression and of the press from citizens and military officials. An analysis of the press freedom violation trends in Burkina Faso over a period of six years reveals an increase of violations by two hundred per cent (200%) in a span of one year from 2021 to 2022 as indicated in Figure 2.

Amidst such a context, self-censorship gagging freedom of the press has become rampant in the media landscape in Burkina Faso

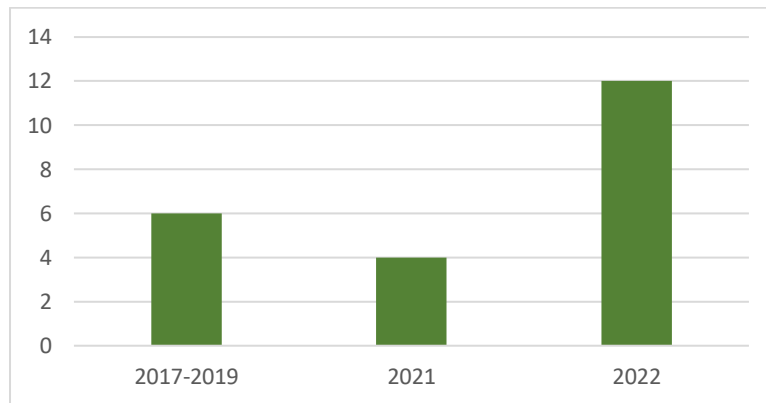


Figure 2: Trend analysis of Press Freedom Violations over six (6) years in Burkina Faso before and after the coup d'état (Source: Author, based on Press Freedom Monitor from the MFWA)

2.3. Guinea

The Republic of Guinea, a resource-rich, yet poor West African nation, has on September 5th, 2021 recorded its 3rd coup d'état since gaining independence in 1958 (Aljazeera, 2021). Guinea has notoriously established a track record of endemic corruption (Schmidt, 2021), authoritarian rule, nepotism, poor governance, etc. (The World Bank, 2018).

The coup occurred following a spiral of deadly clashes between citizens and security forces amidst protests against the third-term mandate of then-President Alpha Condé. The issue stems from March 2020 when Guineans went to the polls in a controversial referendum to revise the Constitution which enabled Alpha Conde to seek a third term.

Public protests by opposition parties, civil society groups, and trade unions ahead of the controversial referendum were met with deadly crackdowns. At least 42 people were killed during clashes between protesters and security officers from June 2019 to March 2020 (MFWA, 2020).

In October 2020, Mr Conde was re-elected for a third term amidst electoral irregularities. The opposition boycotted the polls and rejected the results citing widespread fraud, and national and international organisations withdrew from the election observation. Amidst the political turmoil, armed forces, claiming to “save the country” arrested Conde, dissolved his government, and established a caretaker transitional administration to “entrust politics to the people” (Aljazeera, 2021).

2.3.1. The Coup and the Media: A New Bogeyman

The infringement on press freedom has long remained constant in Guinea, particularly in 2019 and 2020. As the fight for free and independent media persists in the country, press freedom has come under pressure. Despite early guarantees by the military towards democratic principles, the regime became increasingly violent with a heavy crackdown on democratic freedoms as journalists and media workers are attacked, and arrested mainly by military forces.

From 2021 to 2022, violations of press freedom in Guinea increased by two hundred percent (200%) as indicated in Figure 3. Amidst such a context, public protests are met with deadly violence causing the death of activists. New developments following the coup suggest the press in Guinea is facing a new Bogeyman.

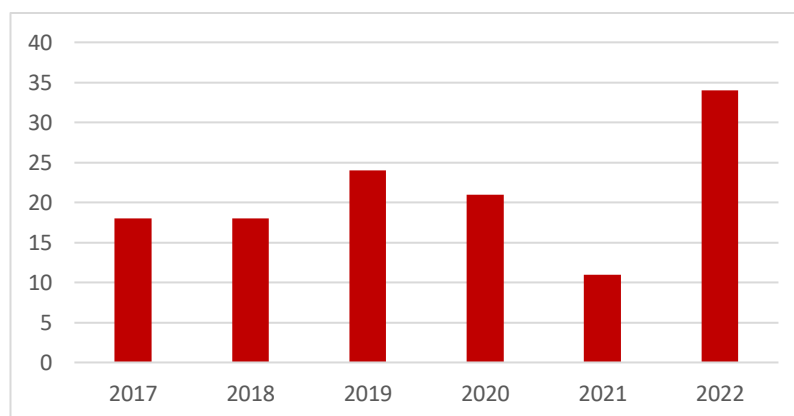


Figure 3: Trend analysis of Press Freedom Violations over six (6) years in Guinea - before and after the coup d'état (Source: Author, based on Press Freedom Monitor from the MFWA)

3. A Suffocated Civic Space

The coup d'états in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea further worsened the already declining democratic ratings in the region. One of the negative effects of the coups has been the stifling of civic space and the limitation of individual freedoms. In Guinea, the government adopted legislations banning public protests for 36 months (CIVICUS, 2022), therefore limiting avenues for citizens to express themselves. In Burkina, such legislation was also adopted, while in Mali, all civil society organisations with funding from France were ordered to stop operating in the country. The civic space in Mali and Guinea are "Repressed" and in Burkina Faso "Obstructed" (*Civicus Monitor*, 2023). Regarding political rights, and civil liberties, all three countries were considered "Not Free" (Freedom House, 2023).

3.1. Panel Discussion

The conference empanelled discussants from Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso to elicit personal experiences. The panel of four comprised Talata Maiga of Maison de la Presse, Mali; Ouedraogo Inoussa of the Bendri newspaper in Burkina Faso; Moussa Iboun Conte of Association Guineenne des Editeurs de la Presse Independent (AGEPI) of Guinea and Emmanuel Ogbeche of the Nigerian Union of Journalists, for a neutral perspective.

3.1.1. Democracy on the Backseat

Developments in Burkina Faso suggest that the population is more preoccupied with battling terrorism than press freedom and democratic principles. The establishment of a binding roadmap towards a return to civilian rule has, thus, shifted to the backstage.

In Guinea, after a one-year delay, the junta agreed to organise elections within 24 months. However, the suspension of cross-party dialogue and the limited involvement of civil actors could affect the effectiveness of the agreement.

3.1.2. Limitations of Media Freedoms

In Burkina Faso, the country suffered a recession of freedom of expression and of the press amidst repressive laws and a shrinking civic space as there are fewer spaces for free expression in the country. The media is witnessing the limitation of discourse as discussion topics must be favourable to the junta, and heavy censorship.

In Guinea, since the toppling of Alpha Conde, the state of press freedom has not changed. Rather, the number of violations towards media workers and activists worsened, and accessing information remains a challenge.

3.1.3.Citizens: The New Attackers of Press Freedom

In Mali, the political environment is hostile to journalists and press freedom. Media criticism of the military junta has been met with threats and arrests. Consequently, the media has generally shifted online with a focus on citizen journalism. However, citizens are increasingly supported by the junta to attack and undermine the work of journalists who do not sing the praises of the military.

Again, in Mali, towns like Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, and Mopti have become too hostile for journalists as a result of the coup and terrorism. As such, some journalists have abandoned their vocation while a few are forced to relocate to other towns.

4. Key Learnings

The following learnings were harvested at the end of the panel:

- a. Citizens in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, have been ambivalent about the military takeovers. Though people want democracy, there is a sense that past democratic experiments have not met expectations. As such, citizens are generally nonchalant towards the coups.
- b. Citizens are indifferent to the coups. Rather, they are largely concerned with livelihoods.
- c. In all three countries, even though the military juntas promised to return to democratic governance, such promises are yet to come true.
- d. In Mali and Burkina Faso, raging terrorism poses a threat to democracy and media freedom, even after the return of civilians to power.
- e. Journalists are among the main victims of the democratic recession in the three countries. This has affected the watchdog role of the media and civil society organisations.
- f. Although journalism is under attack in all three countries, the impact on traditional and online media varies from one country to the other. While the traditional media seem to be the hardest hit in terms of news coverage and reporting as a result of censorship, online rapportage by professional and citizen journalists is comparatively less victimized and attacked.

5. The Way Forward: Recommendations to Key Stakeholders

The resurgence of coup d'états in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, and growing attacks against the press are contributing factors to the democratic retreat in the region. Turning the tide to restore democratic principles in West Africa remains critical to addressing growing concerns of participatory governance, and ensuring the respect for human rights, including freedom of expression and of the press while safeguarding the rule of law. Achieving such ideals requires free and independent media. Deliberations during the conference converged towards the following recommendations:

- To the Media:

- a) **Form a Sub-regional Media Alliance for Democracy and Press Freedom:** A critical aspect of press freedom violations is the high impunity particularly when perpetrators are security forces. This creates a vicious circle of attacks, arbitrary arrests, and broad violations of media rights, thus contributing to democratic erosion. By forming an alliance beyond national borders, media organisations can collectively name and shame perpetrators of violations, denounce undemocratic practices, and engage in broader cross-country advocacy initiatives which could pressure public officials towards taking action on ending impunity. This would contribute to safeguarding democratic freedoms, expanding the civic space, and serve as a cross-country advocacy arm for the media.
- b) **Engage and Collaborate with Activists and Civil Society:** Violations of democratic freedoms affect both media and CSOs. Freedoms interwoven in the openness of the civic space. Thus, it is recommended that media, activists, including human rights campaigners, and CSOs collaborate by joining forces. This would multiply their bargaining power and leverage in advocacy for the safeguarding and respect of democratic principles. This would help improve freedom of expression and of the press and enable the media to better inform the citizenry, and adequately play its watchdog role. This would also allow CSOs to better mobilise citizens for participatory governance.

- To Civil Society Organisations (CSO):

- a) **Engage Regional and International Institutions:** Despite the awareness that CSOs and activists in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea face challenges, regional coalitions, and institutions may have limited information on idiosyncratic

headwinds. In 2020 the MFWA created the West Africa Coalition for Media Freedom and Good Governance to drive advocacy efforts toward democratic restoration and work with ECOWAS in developing a protocol for the protection of journalists in countries under military rule. By joining such coalitions, CSOs can voice local issues which could be communicated by the MFWA to ECOWAS. This would help in developing tailored and need-based protocols for the protection of journalists and CSOs. Such protocols could contribute to addressing the oppressive legislative system, and improve the civic space.

- b) MFWA to Leverage ECOSOC Status:** Since 2018, the MFWA was granted a special Consultative Status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). One of the most efficient approaches to restoring democratic principles and safeguarding freedom of expression and of the press is through international pressure groups. Thus, the MFWA is encouraged to leverage its special status and engage United Nations groups, and officials at the high level to communicate concerns from the region, and intensify international advocacy efforts. This would contribute to building international pressure on local officials and help adopt protocols favourable to freedom of expression and of the press.
- c) Leverage the ECOWAS Court of Justice:** It is understood that national institutions remain fragile and that media, CSOs, and activists face impunity in face of rising attacks. It is recommended that through the formation of alliances, and coalitions, the media, CSOs, and activists leverage the ECOWAS court for justice. This approach would contribute to highlighting at the regional level local violations, further shame perpetrators of violations, pressure national and local authorities towards upholding democratic principles, and contribute to improving the state of democracy, and justice in West Africa.

- To ECOWAS

- a) Involve the Media and CSOs in the Engagements with the Junta and Wider Efforts on Improving Democracy and Good Governance:** A critical point raised during discussions was the side-lining of the media and other stakeholders during negotiations with the Juntas. Also, a diagnostic research report from the MFWA revealed very limited engagement of media and CSOs by ECOWAS in its democracy and good governance work (Tietaa, 2022). Involving media and CSOs while engaging the junta, would contribute to a more holistic engagement of all stakeholders, and allow the media to express citizen concerns and perceptions. This would contribute to building more

feasible agreements with junta leaders, and create a harmonious collaboration between media, CSOs and government. This would contribute to improving the implementation of a roadmap towards a return of civilians to power, facilitate media access to information, and improve the state of expression and of the press by further opening the civic space.

- b) Severely Denounce and Sanction Violations of Democratic Principles including Freedom of Expression and of the Press:** ECOWAS remains one of the most influential regional organisations negotiating with the three military governments. ECOWAS could leverage its influence to advance the respect for democratic principles by denouncing violations of democratic principles and calling for investigations and prosecution to end impunity. This would enable the ECOWAS further implement its protocols to protect the media, and improve efforts for democratic restoration as the media by feeling protected could better play its watchdog role.

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