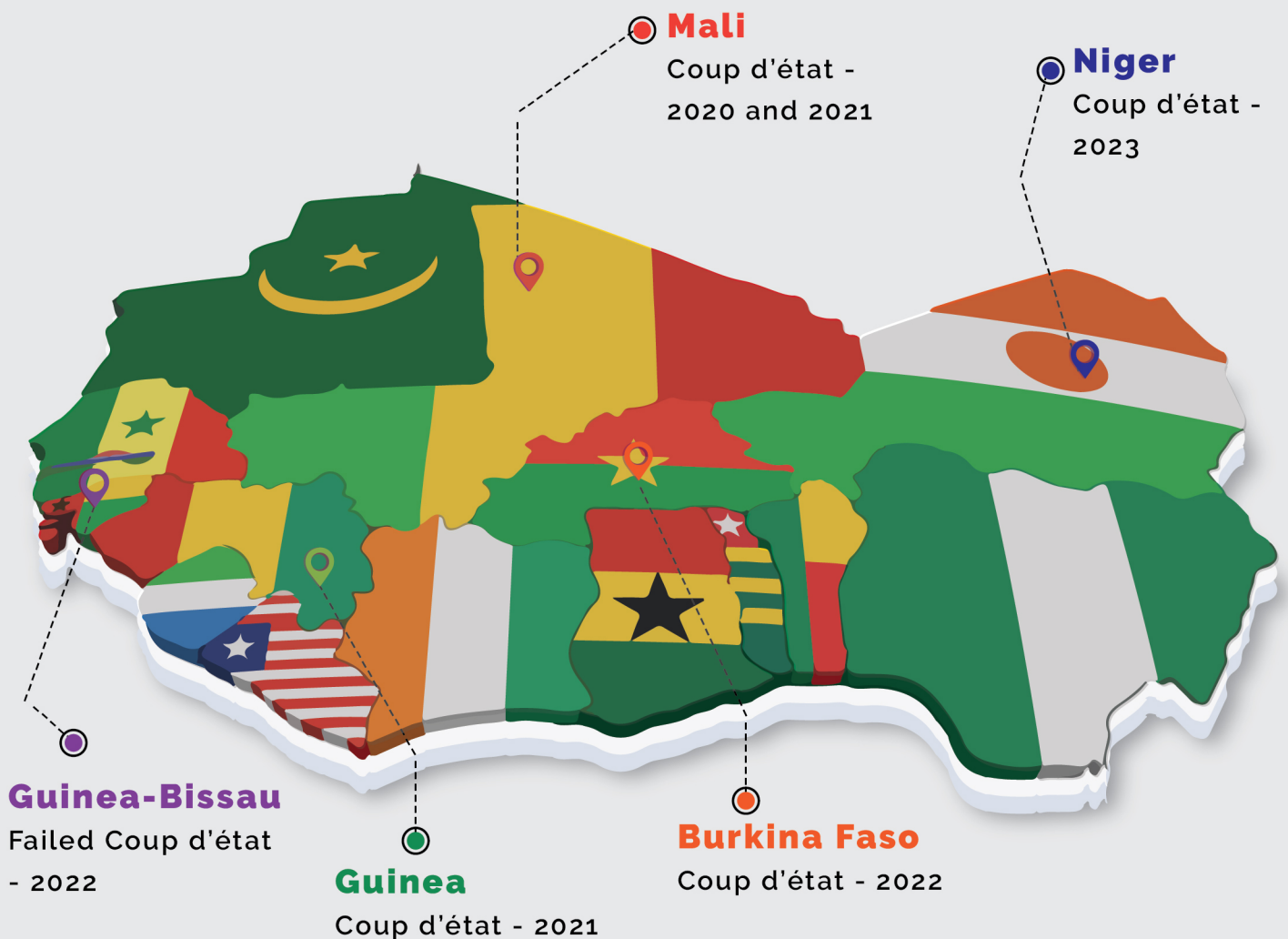


Democratic Recession and its impact on Press Freedom: Case studies from Five Countries in West Africa



Democratic Recession and its Impact on Media Freedom: Case Studies from Five Countries in West Africa

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1. Executive Summary

Across the West African sub-region, recent events have led to concerns among observers, policy makers, actors and development partners about the democratic fortunes of nations. This is a concern given that the state of democratic practice is closely linked to media freedom, safety of journalists and the opportunity for civic participation and inclusive governance. This paper presents an analysis of the state of democratic practice in five countries—Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea Bissau and Niger—to understand how democratic recession is foregrounding erosions in media freedom in the sub-region.

The Report finds out that three primary factors underline democratic recession in these countries. These are: military coup d'états, terrorism and violent extremism, and economic mis-governance. These factors manifest in two major ways: political crisis and security crisis that converge to significantly shrink the operating space for the media and civic participation.

Media face significant pressures from domineering political authorities that legislate new repressive laws or resort to existing laws to persecute media in facetious law suits that often result in unreasonable judgements aimed at shutting the media up. The safety of journalists in these countries cannot be guaranteed as they face verbal attacks, physical assaults and reprisals, and arrests and incarceration for doing their work. Meanwhile, media regulatory bodies in these countries are lax in their approaches to dealing with the violations of press freedom.

Additionally, the crises of economic mis-governance has exacerbated the economic precariousness of most media outlets, forcing austerity measures that challenge professional and ethical practice in media.

Generally, the negative impacts of democratic recession on press freedom are more pronounced in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea than in Niger and Guinea-Bissau. These findings serve as the bases for recommendations to governments, the Economic Community for West Africa States (ECOWAS), media regulatory bodies, media organisations and civil society organisations to restore democracy, free media and inclusive governance in the affected countries. The recommendations also call on governments and ECOWAS to strengthen framework for media development and human rights in the sub-region.

2. Introduction

Democracy thrives on inclusiveness as citizen participation remains a key measure for democratic success. Where citizens can exercise voice and participate in the decisions and processes towards their development, the real benefits of democracy are realised. Accordingly, nations cannot have democracy without democratic citizenship, free speech and institutions that support democratic participation.

After years of experimentation with military and autocratic rule, the 1990s saw West African countries transiting to democratic governance. Beginning with Benin in 1991, all the 15 countries in West Africa incrementally transited from autocratic leadership to democratic governance. By 2015, all members of the ECOWAS had functioning democracies. This manifested by way of established political rights and civil liberties for citizens, separation of powers and press freedom provisions in law.

While in some cases parliamentary oversight on the executive remained weak, expansion in the frontiers of civic participation and media pluralism enabled alternative voices to hold governments accountable. The liberalisation of the media, coupled with increased internet penetration gave citizens improved access to information, and opportunities to exercise voice. In addition, the adoption of freedom of information laws further deepened the opportunities for citizen's access to information and participation in democratic practice. By 2020, West Africa had the highest number of countries that adopted Access to Information (ATI) laws, compared with other regional blocs in Africa¹. Accompanying these country-specific evolutions were regional and continental interventions aimed at boosting democratic values and governance. Initiatives such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and ECOWAS' ratification of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001 ushered in a new political order for inclusive governance.

After years of democratic evolution; however, progress begun to decline. Poor governance practices and corresponding declines in economic fortunes of nations begun to expose faulty lines, resulting in discontent, and trust deficit between citizens and the governments. By the late 2000s many West African countries were failing to secure democratic benchmarks with negative impacts for the rule of law, political stability, national cohesion and transparency and accountable governance. Even regional democratic success stories such as Ghana started trotting at a slower pace to hold onto democratic gains of expanding the boundaries of governance. The retrogression of apparent "democratic giants", notably Ghana, Senegal, Benin and Nigeria in the ECOWAS region was characterised by growing discontent as the 'winner-takes-all' systems of governance failed to ensure stronger oversight over the executive². Countries fell into grand political corruption and reckless borrowing, resulting in high debt distress, and extreme hardship.

The economic downturn across the ECOWAS region was deepened further by political recession. The political space was marked by constitutional manipulation, voter suppression, intimidation and harassment of political opponents with the view to win victory at polls. Such incidents were recorded in Senegal, Guinea, Benin, and Cote d'Ivoire³. Beginning 2020, the recession was aggravated by political convulsion as a result of military coup d'etats that swept

¹ See MFWA, Concept Paper, 2020.

² See Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies, Kofi Annan Foundation.

³ Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies, Kofi Annan Foundation.

across Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and Guinea-Bissau. The coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and recently Niger were successful while the one in Guinea-Bissau was foiled, putting the country at risk of democratic backslide. The military takeovers were characterised by heedless destruction of properties, injuries, fatalities and internal displacement of citizens. So far, ECOWAS has not been successful at reaching an agreement with the military leaders in Mali, Guinea, Niger and Burkina Faso on a timetable for the return of the countries to democratic rule. Indications are that the military leaders may be in power for a while, amid fears that the coup d'états may even spread further to other countries in the ECOWAS region⁴. Additionally, the coup d'états have been accompanied by deadly application of force against citizens, resulting in violations of human rights, suppression of media freedom and a shrinking of the space for civic discourse.

Authoritarian regimes across the ECOWAS region are intensified by fundamentalism, violent extremism, terrorism and insurgency. The security threats of extremism and terrorism from the Sahelian belt are moving speedily and infectiously towards the littoral states and the Gulf of Guinea where governments find themselves in long-drawn turf wars with the extremists and terror groups⁵. Further, protracted armed conflicts in several part of Africa (Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria⁶) are forcing civilians to pay the price of war crimes and violations of human rights.

The foregoing have been accompanied by deepening threats to media freedom in the sub-region. Journalists, media organisations and human rights activists are harassed, attacked, and rampantly arrested and detained. In the last two years alone, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has reported approximately 200 incidents of media freedom and freedom of expression violations across West Africa⁷. The Foundation has warned that “independent journalists face the strong headwinds of criminal libel suits and imprisonment, physical reprisal, and revocation of licenses.”

Regrettably, there appears to be a decreasing public support for media freedom in the ECOWAS region. The Round 8 survey of the 2019 Afrobarometer report revealed that even though media freedom is on the decline in Africa, the situation in West Africa was particularly worrying⁸. Again, recent surveys show that public confidence in the media is waning⁹. Issues of partisanship, unprofessionalism, misinformation and disinformation have reduced the credibility and relevance of the media in the eyes of many publics. Unfortunately also, ECOWAS has lost some trust and credibility among sections of the population in the region who believe that over the years, it has served the interest of heads of state (including abusive and autocratic leaders), rather than protecting the rights and interests of communities and citizens¹⁰.

While a lot exists by way of anecdotal evidence and media reports on the threatened fortunes of democracy and media freedom in the sub-region, empirics are harder to come by, prompting

⁴ See concept note on democratic recession and impact on media freedom in the study countries, 2023.

⁵ See Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies, Kofi Annan Foundation.

⁶ Amnesty International (2021), Africa Regional Overview Report.

⁷ Tietaah Gilbert and Braimah Sulemana (2019). A Regional Approach to Media Development in West Africa, Media Foundation for West Africa.

⁸ https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/publications/Summary%20of%20results/summary_of_results-ghana_r8-19feb20-updated.pdf

⁹ Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 56, May 2019.

¹⁰ See concept note on democratic recession and impact on media freedom in the study countries, 2023.

this study to understand the links between the two. It is informed by observed patterns of democratic recession, and the concerns they evoke about the state and fate of the media and free expression rights, as both instrument and indicator of democracy. It focuses on five West African countries selected based on their recent encounters with coup d'états and ensuing democratic recessions. Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and now, Niger are under military rule as a result of coups d'état while Guinea Bissau has faced failed coup d'état attempt, placing it at the risk of future coups. The study was guided by a quest to:

- i. analyse the manifestations of democratic recession in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Niger,
- ii. understand the implications of democratic recession for media freedom and free expression in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Niger,
- iii. explore pathways to enhancing media freedom to inform regional policies on media freedom and freedom of expression, and
- iv. make recommendations to ensure the prioritisation and mainstreaming of media development into ECOWAS' interventions around democracy and human rights.

Ultimately, the study serves as advocacy material to engage ECOWAS Commission with a view to promoting media freedom and development, while enhancing the role of the media in improving and consolidating democratic governance in West Africa.

2.1 Democratic recession: a background

Freedom House defines the concept of democratic recession as the decline in political rights, civil liberties, and overall quality of democracy¹¹. It may manifest as pseudo democracy in which a country is formally democratic but in practice exhibits significant authoritarian tendencies. It is, thus, characterised by a clever mix of dictatorship and democratic rule, described as “democrature”. Democratic recession also manifests as outright cutbacks in democratic practice which results in the suppression of the “operating space” (i.e., civic space) for the media and civil society.

In Africa, recent episodes of democratic recession have swept over Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. In West Africa, military incursions have removed democratically elected governments from power in countries such as Mali, Guinea, Niger and Burkina Faso. In other African countries, the appearance of democratic governance (existence of a constitution, parliament, rule of law and elections) is marred by political maneuvering to restrict dissenting voices¹².

Democratic recession is not unique to West Africa nor even Africa. The global community is increasingly faced with challenges to democratic governance. Democratically elected governments, including established democracies, are increasingly adopting authoritarian strategies to govern the citizens. Some of the world's largest democracies (e.g., Brazil and India) present worrying cases of democratic backsliding. The United States and three EU members (Hungary, Poland and Slovenia) are also experiencing alarming democratic setbacks.

In this study, democratic recession denotes suppression of the operating space for the media and civil society which affects their watch-dog and advocacy roles. Such shrinking civic space invariably affects media and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) capacity to impact policy

¹¹ Freedom House (2018). See also Diamond, 2015; Lührmann, Mechkova, & Wilson, 2017; Economist, 2018; Freedom House, 2018

¹² Cheeseman, 2019.

advocacy, access information, mobilise citizens for civic and political participation, and engage duty-bearers with the view to demanding accountable governance.

3. Research methodology

The study relied on a three-pronged approach comprising a desk research, in-depth interviews and stakeholder validations. In the first instance, the study drew on a desk review of relevant secondary resources. These included research papers, articles, reports, and media content to understand the indicators of democratic recession in the ECOWAS region, and highlight their implications for media freedom. The desk research also helped to assemble country specific evidence on democratic recession and erosion of media freedom. The second mode of inquiry involved interviews with key informants including individuals or entities [that have suffered attacks for exercising their rights to free speech], media personnel (journalists and editors), media owners, regulators, statutory and self-regulated bodies with interest in media, state authorities, and law and security enforcement agencies (i.e. military, police, gendarmerie). Other interviewees were recruited from, media associations and unions, civil society, academics and citizens.

Interviews explored their perspectives on trends and tensions in democratic practice in the selected countries, as well as experiences and accounts of recessions in media freedom. An interview guide developed and validated by the MFWA served as the basis of data collection with interviews being conducted by trained field assistants recruited from the sampled countries. Interviews were conducted either in person or over the telephone. In all, 100 interviews were conducted between April to May, 2023.

Analysis of the interviews focused on drawing within-country and cross country patterns of democratic recession, and impacts on press freedom. A narrative discussion was constructed around the findings from the study countries to establish the trend and emerging issues of democratic recession and impact on media freedom.

Finally, the report was reviewed by an academic and media expert. This helped to address missing links in the study and improve its general flow and validity.

3.1 The study context

The 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance proscribes change of government through military coups. Article 19 of the protocol enjoins member states to ensure that the armed forces and the police are not partisan, remain loyal and defend the independence and territorial integrity of the states including democratic institutions¹³. Article 22 of the Protocol also entreats the police and other security agencies to be responsible in law maintenance. The Article also forbids the police to apply deadly force in law maintenance, including inhuman and degrading treatment of citizens¹⁴. Yet, military takeovers have become infectious across the ECOWAS region. Between August 2020 and September 2022, seven coups d'état were staged, with two failures. Two of the successful coup d'états occurred in Mali, another two in Burkina Faso, and one in Guinea. The foiled coups d'état occurred in Guinea-Bissau and Niger. In 2023, a successful coup d'état occurred in the country, ousting

¹³ See concept note on democratic recession and impact on media freedom in the study countries, 2023.

¹⁴ ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, A/SP1/12/01, ratified on 1 January, 2001.

the democratically elected President. The rising coups d'état cast a snooze on the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Further, increasingly, security institutions have become heavy-handed in using force to maintain law and order. In all the countries affected by the coups d'état, the security agencies repressively enforce the law with impunity. For example, in Mali, on 10 and 11 July, 2020, the police applied deadly force against demonstrators which resulted in 11 deaths, 140 persons being injured and several others being arrested and abused¹⁵.

While deadly use of force is unfortunate given that it accompanies military takeovers, security agencies in apparent democratic countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal are equally applying excessive force in law maintenance. A report by The Fourth Estate, a not-for-profit media organisation of the MFWA, on 29 June, 2021, indicated extra-judicial killing of six persons at Ntoaso in the Eastern Region of Ghana¹⁶. Again, the use of deadly force and violence by the police in Nigeria continues to impact negatively on public confidence and accountability in policing¹⁷. The 2021 report by Amnesty International¹⁸ recognised violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws, unlawful attacks and killings, impunity, and use of excessive force by security agencies which amounted to crimes against humanity in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria.

Additionally, while Principle 'C' of the ECOWAS Protocols charges member states to ensure that accession to power is done through free, fair and transparent elections, recent elections have been characterised by sporadic violence and other factors that undermine their integrity. Reports from the ECOWAS Observer Mission¹⁹, Africa Union Election Observation Mission, and European Union Election Observer Mission in many ECOWAS countries outlined challenges such as political crisis, violence, unequal access to the media, unaccountable campaign financing, abuse of state resources and political polarisation as factors that undermine the elections²⁰. While these factors threaten electoral reforms and peacebuilding, they also affect the quality of the elections.

The tell-tale signs of democratic backsliding across the ECOWAS region have affected civic governance, political participation, media freedom and access to information. In Mali, access to internet was disrupted during the coup d'état. Again, citizens' rights to access information and freedom of expressions were violated following the coups d'état²¹. Similarly, in Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, the internet was disrupted, and social media shutdowns and suspensions²². In June 2021, the Guardian²³ reported that, Nigerian authorities suspended Twitter after the site deleted a controversial tweet from President Buhari for violating its community rule. Again, in 2021 in Nigeria, the "Information Black Out"²⁴ campaign was launched by media organisations to protest against two bills that aimed at tightening media regulation and undermining access to information²⁵. Statesmen such as former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar²⁶ supported the

¹⁵ <https://www.article19.org/resources/mali-bloody-repression-of-protesters-and-attacks-against-the-media/>

¹⁶ <https://thefourthstategh.com/2022/07/04/ntoaso-killings-how-police-shot-npp-organiser-and-five-others-in-alleged-extra-judicial-killings/>

¹⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362153726_Violence_the_police_and_the_community_Examining_the_impact_of_police_use_of_deadly_force_in_contemporary_Nigeria_through_the_prism_of_the_EndSARS_Protest

¹⁸ Amnesty International (2021), Africa Regional Overview Report; see Impraim, Police use of force in Ghana, 2022, forthcoming

¹⁹ <https://parl.ecowas.int/ecowas-observes-election-in-five-member-states/>

²⁰ National Peace Council (2020). Report on 2020 general elections in Ghana

²¹ <https://www.article19.org/resources/mali-bloody-repression-of-protesters-and-attacks-against-the-media/>

²² The 2021 Africa Regional Overview report by the Amnesty International

²³ <https://guardian.ng/news/when-abuse-of-power-disguises-as-media-regulation/>

²⁴ <https://www.dateline.ng/atiku-backs-nigerian-media-against-anti-free-press-law/>

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/04/nigeria-suspends-twitter-after-presidents-tweet-was-deleted>

²⁶ <https://www.dateline.ng/atiku-backs-nigerian-media-against-anti-free-press-law/>

campaign against the “anti-free press” bill which was laid before the Nigerian National Assembly. Additionally, democratically-elected governments in Senegal and Togo had newspapers, radio and television suspended²⁷. Again, in Ghana, some journalists were harassed in 2019, including the storming of some media houses by security operatives. Along with this was the violation of the rights of human rights defenders who exercise their rights with courage. In Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin and Senegal, political authorities continue to silence defenders or criminalise them²⁸.

Largely, this state of affairs runs counterproductive to the ECOWAS protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, and call into question the opportunity for media to support good governance. Even though ECOWAS is yet to adopt a formal regional policy on media development and freedom of expression, previous engagements by the MFWA and other media-civil society organisations have awakened a regional call for stronger media independence, freedom and development. Furthermore, the current regional context has created enabling environment for ECOWAS to have an interest in supporting a regional initiative that will aim at fostering media liberalisation and development. Besides, ongoing revisions of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance presents an opportunity for engagements on the need to have media development and media freedom prioritised in the revised protocols and frameworks.

4. Findings

4.1 Regional manifestations of democratic recession in West Africa

Three key trends enabled observations of a recession in democratic governance in the sub-region—the wave of political liberation that swept across the West Africa region in the 1990s and recent turn towards authoritarian rule; the rise of violent extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism; and the growing rate of attacks on media freedom after years of experimentation with media pluralism and free expression. These are discussed below:

4.1.1 The wave of political liberalisation and setback across ECOWAS region

A new liberal democratic and constitutional order swept across West Africa beginning 1990s. This order promised to guarantee rule of law, separation of powers, transparency and accountability, and respect for human rights. It also assured of media pluralism, freedom of speech, and improved citizen inclusion and participation in governance and development. The adoption of the democratic model of governance in West Africa entailed two approaches. The first approach was the so-called Sovereign National Conferences (imposed by opposition movements mostly made up of CSOs) which produced mixed results. Many French-speaking African countries adopted this form of transition. This began with Benin in 1991 compelling President Mathieu Kérékou to concede to holding a Sovereign National Conference in February 1990²⁹. The crusade was followed by Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Togo convening different forms of sovereign national conferences between 1990 and 1993.

The second approach, less original, saw incumbent presidents anticipate the demand for reforms of the constitutional and political system under national and international pressure.

²⁷ Amnesty International (2021). Africa Regional Overview report.

²⁸ Amnesty International (2021). Africa Regional Overview report.

²⁹ See Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies, Kofi Annan Foundation.

That was the approach in Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Madagascar, Tanzania, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, etc. Côte d'Ivoire amended Article 7 of its Constitution to allow for the formation of other parties to compete against President Houphouët Boigny³⁰. Eventually other countries followed suit with varying results. In Ghana, a new constitution drafted in 1992 ushered in the multi-party system under the Fourth Republic.

According to the Freedom House, these reforms towards democracy saw political rights in West Africa improve substantially. From a rating of 5.53 in 1990, scores improved to 3.93 by 2000, and 3.8 by 2010. By 2015, all countries in the ECOWAS region were functioning democracies with governments elected through the ballot. Across 14 countries surveyed in 2019/2021 through Afrobarometer, 70 per cent of citizens noted that elections were generally free and fair. In 2018, West Africa was also home to six of the 10 fastest-growing economies in Africa—Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Niger³¹.

The conduct of elections ostensibly became the litmus test for democratic success in Africa including the ECOWAS region. However, this test was met with challenges. The outcomes of elections were largely not free and fair nor credible and some countries witnessed controversial power transfers. This was the case of Faure Gnassingbe controversially becoming president after the demise of his father, President Gnassingbé Eyadéma. Commonly, elections across the ECOWAS region were characterised by sporadic violence and other factors which undermined peacebuilding.³² On the other hand, elections in countries such as Ghana, Cape Verde, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone were reasonably credible resulting to generally accepted political transitions³³.

Towards the late 2000s many governments became autocratic, adopting repressive forms of governance instead of dialogue and debate. Disappointingly, democratic elections, which had become the means par excellence of political transition, plunged countries into violence, conflicts, coups d'état, if not outright civil war. Countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Conakry and Guinea Bissau all experienced conflicts by the late 2000s. In Côte d'Ivoire, the sectarian conflict as a result of the election receded the country's 30-year ethnic harmony, progress and prosperity. Electoral conflicts were triggered by impunity, electoral manipulations, restrictive voter-registration laws, existence of ghost names in electoral registers, voter intimidation, ballot tampering, ballot stuffing and wrong vote tallying. Electoral violence resulted in injuries, deaths, displacement of persons, attacks on journalists and media.

In 2012, Mali experienced a military coup, resulting in unconstitutional change of government. Yet, the overthrow of President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso in 2014 through a popular uprising, and the defeat of President Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia in 2016 were anticipated by many to bring an end “gerontocracy”³⁴ and “life serving presidents”,³⁵ and offer a new

³⁰ Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). **Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies**, Kofi Annan Foundation.

³¹ Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). *Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies*, Kofi Annan Foundation.

³² National Peace Council' report on the 2020 general elections in Ghana

³³ Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). *Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies*, Kofi Annan Foundation.

³⁴ Government based on the rule of old people.

³⁵ Notable ones were Yahya Jammeh of Gambia, Alpha Condé of Guinea, Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo, and Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire tweaking constitutional term-limit. Other presidents for life outside the ECOWAS region are Paul Biya of Cameroon who has been in power for 40 years; Isias Afewerki (Eritrea, 29 years in power) and Ismail Omar Guelleh (Djibouti, 23 years). The rest are military strongmen masquerading as civilians – Equatorial Guinea's Theodoro Obiang

confidence for democratic consolidation across ECOWAS. However, this expectation has not been realised.

The 2020s have been marked by incumbency adventurism towards using legal and other interventions to prolong their stay in power beyond constitutional term-limits. For example, in December 2019, President Alassane Ouattara forced his main political opponent, Guillaume Soro, into exile. Soro was later sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia. Likewise, President Alpha Condé of Guinea staged a constitutional coup by amending the constitution to stand for a third-term. In Senegal, President Macky Sall's advertised intent to revise the two-term limit and run for a third-term in the 2024 elections stoked anger and disbelief with the opposition vowing to resist. This trend, which gained notoriety, resulted in a return to coup d'état and military takeovers.

The political rollback in the ECOWAS region has been accompanied by economic downturn. In 2020, thirteen of the 15 ECOWAS Countries fell in the "low" category of the Human Development Index (HDI), with Niger rated at the very bottom of the 189-country list³⁶. The performance of countries such as Guinea-Bissau and Mali were abysmal. The economic slump was further hampered by the global COVID-19 pandemic from which countries are still struggling to recover.

ECOWAS' ratings on democratic and economic progress, have, therefore, seen regression. The 2019 Afrobarometer survey revealed that only 38 per cent of West Africans saw their governments as providing a full supply of democracy. This was 11 percentage points lower than the 49 per cent average demand for democracy. While popular satisfaction for democracy ranks low, a growing trend towards official impunity is palpable. Thus, there is a general growing disenchantment with democracy among citizens of the ECOWAS. Many citizens in the sub-region feel that the dividends from democracy, especially in terms of improvement in their economic well-being, freedom of speech, media freedom and accountability have been dismal.

4.1.2 Growing violent extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism across ECOWAS

Amidst the gloomy democratic rollback in West Africa is the security threat of terrorism, insurgency and fundamentalism. The spill over of violent extremism from the Sahelian region, notably Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, threatens the feeble peace in the region. Within the central Sahel, terror groups, including fundamentalists and separatists, have been fighting for various causes for decades with over 2.4million people estimated to have been displaced³⁷.

Arguably, violent extremism originated in Mali, where Tuareg separatists and armed Islamist groups seized territories in the north following the 2012 military coup. Since then, there have been numerous initiatives to stem the degenerating security situation, but to no avail. Terrorism and violent extremism have mutated into inter-communal and hyperlocal violence in Mali and Burkina Faso, with armed Islamist groups increasing their footholds. The violence is exacerbated by porous borders and the absence of state authority, with armed fundamentalists targeting young Fulbe men for recruitment. Attacks by terror groups, including groups

Nguema (42 years in power), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda, 35), Dennis Sassou-Nguesso (Republic of Congo, 23) and Paul Kagame (24).

³⁶ See Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). **Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies**, Kofi Annan Foundation.

³⁷ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states>

affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Sahel Province, have spread, multiplied and intensified throughout Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Since the start of 2022, citizens in Burkina Faso and Mali have faced recurrent and escalating attacks by armed fundamentalists and violent extremists. At least, 2,050 civilians have been killed in the central Sahel as of 2022. Likewise, the extremists have taken over vast territories in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and are wreaking havoc on innocent citizens.³⁸

In response, states have deployed counter terrorism operations. For example, the 2017 Accra Initiative³⁹ sought to prevent and counter spill over of terrorism from the Sahel and to address transnational organised crime and violent extremism. The initiative has Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo as members with Mali and Niger having observer status. However, the “war on terror” has, largely, not succeeded in bringing attacks by extremists, fundamentalists, and terrorists under control. Foreign military assistance and personnel particularly from France, the United States and Russia to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to assist local governments to douse the insurgency have also not been successful⁴⁰.

4.1.3 Media liberalisation and subsequent suppression across ECOWAS

The democratic liberalisation that gained recognition across West Africa was meant to be accompanied by several dividends including freedom of expression, media freedom, expanded space for civic discourse, and political inclusion. Journalists and civil society activists needed to be safe to play their constitutional watch-dog role effectively.

Consequently, beginning the late 1990s, rights to free expression, and to establish and operate media outlets were guaranteed in national constitutions. A gradual introduction of privately-owned media, particularly radio and newspapers saw nations’ dependency on state media lessened. Additionally, growing internet penetration improved access to information and civic spaces. In the early 2000s, some countries began to repeal criminal libel laws, while censorship of the media became considerably relaxed. This paved the way for freelancing and investigative journalism aimed at exposing wrongdoing in the society, while contributing to ensuring transparency and accountable governance. Additionally, countries adopted and ratified several global, continental and regional treaties, covenants and instruments to safeguard and promote freedom of expression, and press freedom.

The liberalisation and expansion of the media across West Africa gained global recognition. For example, in 2002, five⁴¹ West African countries out of eight African countries ranked in the top 50 of the World Press Freedom Index by the Reporters Without Borders. Additionally, between 2010 and 2015, the Mo Ibrahim Index of media freedom ranked West Africa higher than other regional blocs in Africa. Rankings in the Freedom House report also saw an upward trajectory. By 2010, only three West African countries were ranked as “not free”, a significant growth from the nine countries ranked same in the 1980s.

The progress on media pluralism across the ECOWAS region was, however, sluggishly sustained. Media freedom and dissenting voices were gradually curtailed. A report by the MFWA revealed arrest and detention of critical journalists and bloggers, while political

³⁸ See Report on Freedom of Expression in Africa in steep decline, Media Foundation for West Africa.

³⁹ <https://ecfr.eu/special/african-cooperation/accra-initiative/>

⁴⁰ See report on Freedom of expression in Africa in steep decline, Media Foundation for West Africa.

⁴¹ See Gyimah-Boadi, E (2021). **Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Natures, Causes and Remedies**, Kofi Annan Foundation.

opponents were clamped down⁴². The report also revealed the closure of media organisations with divergent editorial lines, with high fines and damages in libel suits awarded against journalists by compromised judicial systems. In Benin, the Internet was shut down as tension mounted over the decision to proceed with the controversial legislative elections of 2019. Protests were banned and the police attacked a crowd of protesters which included two former Presidents. Benin's government has also deployed spyware to infiltrate and monitor journalists whose activities were considered hostile to the President. For example, Ignace Soussou, a journalist in Benin, was spied on by the government with the technology. In Ghana, three former government officials were sentenced to jail in 2021 for purchasing the spyware Pegasus [from the Israeli surveillance firm NSO Group] with the potential for controlling people's cell phones, and collecting their personal data. Also, in Nigeria, the report from Front Line Defenders suggests that in 2018, the government of Nigeria conducted mass surveillance of its citizens' telecommunications using the Pegasus software.

A joint report by the MFWA and the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) in 2021 revealed 300 incidents of violations against approximately 500 journalists, media workers and media houses in Nigeria⁴³. In Ghana, unknown gunmen shot and killed the investigative journalist, Ahmed Suale, in 2019. In the same year, National Security operatives stormed the offices of the online newspaper, ModernGhana.com and arrested and tortured the editor and a reporter. Their working equipment were also seized. Similar attacks have been meted out to broadcast journalist, Caleb Kudah, for "unauthorised filming" on the premises of the National Security Ministry.⁴⁴

The consequence of the eroding state of media freedom is the worrying trend of poor rankings on the World Press Freedom Index. For example, 2023 saw the fall of Ghana, Africa's prized haven of democracy, from 23rd in 2018 to 62nd. While six countries from the sub-region were in the "Free" zone of the Freedom in the World rankings by Freedom House in 2015, by 2021, this had dropped to four; Guinea and Mali slipped into the "Not Free" zone. Indeed, only Ghana remained in the "Free" zone; the remaining fell in the "Partly Free" zone⁴⁵.

Additionally, the 2022 report by Civicus, cited Cape Verde as the only country in West Africa with an open civic space. Ghana's civic space has narrowed while the civic spaces in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea Bissau, The Gambia and Burkina Faso are obstructed. The civic spaces in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria, Togo, Niger, Mauritania, Guinea and Cameroon are repressed according to the Civicus Monitor⁴⁶.

4.2 Country-specific trends in dwindling media fortunes

This part of the report discusses the impact of democratic recession on press freedom in the five countries, that is, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Niger and Mali

4.2.1 Burkina Faso

The democratic recession in Burkina Faso is characterised by political instability [marked by repeated military coups], and security crisis [marked by terrorist attacks and violent

⁴² <https://www.mfwa.org/issues-in-focus/ecowas-sadc-regions-save-africas-face-in-global-freedom-ranking/>

⁴³ See [HumAnglemedia.com](https://www.humanglemedia.com) report, 2021.

⁴⁴ See Report on Freedom of Expression in Africa in steep decline, Media Foundation for West Africa.

⁴⁵ [2022 Freedom in the World Report](#)

⁴⁶ The [Civicus Monitor](#) is dedicated to strengthening citizen action and [civil society](#) around the world.

extremism]. Burkina Faso has, in the last two decades, witnessed a number of unconstitutional transfers of power starting with the popular uprising that led to the ousting of President Blaise Compaoré in October 2014. Subsequent to this, a series of coup d'états in the country have resulted in a general atmosphere of democratic recession. This has been exacerbated by the rise of armed groups and extremists linked to al Qaeda and the Islamic State who continue to exploit the hyperlocal conflicts. Interventions by the military junta and foreign military assistance from France, the United States and Russia have failed to quell the situation. The implication of this state of affairs is a shrinking civic space that has created an enabling environment for various forms of violations that affect media. These violations include control of information, death threats, intimidation of journalists and civil society activists, suspension of media authorisations, and expulsion of journalists, altogether leading to self-censorship and impoverished media. These are explained in detail below:

4.2.1a The introduction of repressive laws

The constitution of Burkina Faso largely guarantees media liberalism with provisions supporting freedom of opinion and expression, and of the right to information. Additionally, there are specific laws that guarantee media freedom. These include: Law No. 51-2015/CNT on the right to access public information and administrative documents; Law No. 057-2015/CNT on the legal status of the print media; Law No. 058-2015/CNT on the legal status of online media; and Law No. 059-2015/CNT on the legal status of radio and television broadcasting.

The two coup d'états have resulted in recurrent suspension of the country's constitution. Accompanying this has been the introduction of a number of repressive laws to limit access to information and publications. For example, in 2019, the government adopted a new law, Article 312(15) which criminalises the publication of “information, images, or sounds of a kind liable to compromise and operation or an intervention of security forces against acts of terrorism.” Again, Article 312(16) criminalises “unauthorised publication, by any means, of the images or sounds of the scene of a terrorist offence.” These offences are punishable by between one to five years in jail, as well as a maximum fine of 10 million CFA (about USD17,000). Besides the threats that unfair jail sentences pose to journalists, the heavy monetary fines also threaten media viability and sustainability.

4.2.1b Restricted access to information

The security and democratic crises have redefined the conditions for producing news and other content. There are legislative restrictions on the treatment of security information. In June 2019, for instance, new legal provisions were introduced into the penal code, Law 044-2019/AN amending Law 025-2018/AN, to discourage publications on terrorist violence. Journalists no longer have direct access to some information e.g. from the battlefield. They must rely on intermediaries such as army officials to feed them with information. This affects timely and quality reporting. Importantly, it also means that often the opportunity to verify information received from the limited sources is compromised. The hold-up of information from the state authorities also contributes to the amplification of rumours and disinformation.

The limited access to information is further deepened by an inequitable regime of information sharing. Two public media outlets, notably, the Radio and Television Broadcasting (RTB) and

the Agence d'information du Burkina (AIB) have been chosen by the military government to relay news from the battlefield. These outlets are the only ones having exclusive access to security news and have become de-facto official sources of information for the rest of the country's media. The selection of these media outlets as the official sources have created inequity in the right of access to information. The arrangement also tends to put public and private media in opposition, even though both categories of media have the same mandate to serve the interest of the public with quality information.

Again, press releases constitute an integral part of institutional information regime, relegating journalists to the narrow role of reproducing official messages. As noted by an informant,

At the institutional level, especially the Presidency and the office of the Prime Minister, there is no longer any real reporting. Communiqués are produced and made available to journalists; there is a tendency to transform the media into mere disseminators of communiqués (field interview, 30 March, 2023).

This is corroborated by a regulatory official who explained that in the current information ecology, journalists can only hope to convey information. Journalistic duties of gathering and verifying information to bring context and frame the news are no longer feasible:

There is a lock-up of institutional information and the media only disseminate Ready-to-Disseminate (RTD) documents; there is no exchange between journalists and the authorities. The media do not collect information, they do not process it, they just broadcast it," (field interview, 1 April, 2023).

Even where journalists use their initiative to pursue these professional responsibilities, they may be compelled to desist. In March 2022, the security guard of Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, forbade a journalist from the privately-owned daily L'Observateur Paalga from taking a picture of the President on the day of the first Council of Ministers. The newspaper reported in its issue no. 10 559 of Monday 21 March 2022 what happened:

In a courteous tone, he (a security guard) invited us to delete all the photos we had just taken. We did so under his watch. In addition to the photo of the President's convoy, he made us delete the one we had taken earlier of the Prime Minister"⁴⁷.

Attempts at controlling information access also manifest by way of efforts to secure control of regulatory agencies. For instance, under the administration of Paul-Henri Damiba (January to September 2022), the Conseil supérieur de la communication did not work. The President had refused to sign a decree confirming the election of Abdoulazize Bamongo as chairman of the institution. The media regulatory body remained lethargic until 6 December 2022 when new president Ibrahim Traoré signed the decree.

⁴⁷ ZodoMail : Burkina Faso : « Il est interdit de filmer Damiba ». <https://www.zodomail.com/fr/luttes-syndicales/burkina-faso-il-est-interdit-de-filmer-damiba#:~:text=Les%20journalistes%20preneurs%20d'images,est%20interdit%20de%20filmer%20Damiba%20%C2%BB>.

4.2.1c Suspension of foreign media outlets and expulsion of (French) journalists

The precarious security environment has increased government's control over national, and to a greater extent, international media. At the end of December 2022, the Minister of Communication and government spokesperson, Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo, ordered the immediate suspension of *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, accusing it of having relayed a "message of intimidation" attributed to a "terrorist leader". In the same spirit, on 27 March 2023, a communiqué signed by the same Minister announced the suspension of the television station, *France 24* and *RFI*. The Burkinabe government accused the French news channel, *France Médias Monde* Group, of having granted an interview to the leader of AQIM which it aired. The government said that "by opening its airwaves to the leader of AQIM, *France 24* was not only serving as a communication agency for the terrorists, but was also providing a space for the legitimisation of terrorist actions and hate speech to further the evil of terrorism in Burkina Faso"⁴⁸. These expulsions came a few days after *Libération* published an investigative report on 27 March showing children and teenagers being executed in a military barracks by at least one soldier in northern Burkina Faso. Four days after the suspension of *France 24*, correspondents of *Le Monde* [Sophie Douce] and *Libération* [Agnès Faivre] were expelled from Burkina Faso.^{49 50}

4.2.1d Death threats, intimidation and abuse of journalists and CSOs leaders

Journalists, civil society activists and opinion leaders frequently face death threats and intimidation, including from citizens who are unconditional supporters of the transitional regime led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. Threats are, often, made on social media (particularly, Facebook and WhatsApp) where perpetrators call for the assassination of those targeted or for their homes to be burnt. Victims are targeted for expressing critical opinions of the regime or its actions to wipe out the armed terrorist groups. The threats sometimes spread beyond the journalists to the entire staff of media organisations. While such attacks remain mostly verbal, the worst is also possible. For instance, in April 2021, Spanish reporter David Beriain and cameraman Roberto Fraile were killed when a national army convoy accompanying the journalists was attacked near a national park in the east of the country, near the Tri-border area of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

The threats have become so frequent and alarming that the Supreme Council of Communication (SCC) was forced to react. In a press release issued on 29 March 2023, the president of the media regulatory body said it had "observed with concern the recurrence of threats made against media outlets and media actors in the course of their work". The SCC called on citizens to show tolerance, moderation and restraint and condemned hate speech and calls for violence, by some section of the society, against journalists. It also invited Internet users to refrain from relaying or endorsing such messages. The statement also urged political authorities to take

⁴⁸ lefaso.net : Médias : Le gouvernement burkinabè suspend la diffusion de France 24 sur l'ensemble du territoire. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article120402>

⁴⁹ Jeune Afrique: Le Burkina Faso expulse des journalistes du « Monde » et de « Libération ». <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1432599/politique/le-burkina-faso-expulse-des-journalistes-du-monde-et-de-liberation/>

⁵⁰ Libération : Au Burkina Faso, une vidéo d'enfants exécutés tournée dans un camp militaire. https://www.liberation.fr/international/afrique/au-burkina-faso-une-video-denfants-executes-tournee-dans-un-camp-militaire-20230327_M5YTOLIU3RCIVCRNHX2MHLHIBM/?datawallToken=GFT-4f9a142106a8c9a201d7705ef8d9b631

appropriate measures to ensure the safety of the media and journalists in the course of their work”⁵¹.

Also of concern is the fate of journalists working in geographical locations with major security challenges including terrorist attacks. In places such as the East, Sahel, North, Centre-North, and Boucle du Mouhoun regions, journalists, particularly hosts of radio programmes are not safe. They are often the target of threats, assassination, kidnapping, and destruction of property.⁵² In the Sahel, North and Boucle du Mouhoun Regions in particular, radio stations are closed due to the terrorism threat. On 11 March 2022, the generator of the radio station La Voix du Soum based in Djibo was destroyed in a terrorist attack, which shut down the station for a week. Radio *Dandé yaali* in the Yagha province in the Sahel Region stopped broadcasting after being ransacked by armed terrorist groups. In 2021, two community radio hosts, one in the Northern Province of Yagha and the other in the Eastern Province of Komandjoari, were kidnapped and held captive by armed terrorist groups.⁵³

4.2.1e Self-censorship and changing media content and programming

Since the military came to power in January 2022, journalism as a profession has gradually been reconfigured. Particularly in regions with high levels of insecurity [Eastern, Sahel, and Northern regions], journalists and media are forced to change their operational strategies and adopt ones more conducive to the volatile environment they operate in. For instance, in the Boucle du Mouhoun, community radio hosts have been forced either to resign or to retrain.⁵⁴ The MFWA’s Freedom of Expression Monitor reveals that many print media in Burkina Faso have been forced to shift to publishing online because of the economic effects of the coup’ d’états⁵⁵. Even in Ouagadougou, the repressive media environment has led journalists to adopt new approaches to their work. While interference of the army in journalistic work is not blatant, the dwindling operating space and attacks have pushed them into self-censorship.

What can be seen as a change is the fact that we are now wary of a number of topics regarding opinion, analysis or commentary pieces. We have stopped covering them. The most important thing is to write in order to shed light on an issue for the public; but, if it is not seen in this light, we prefer to refrain from doing so (field interview, April, 2023).

Accordingly, subjects that used to be covered by community radio stations have become, since the spread of terrorism and violent extremism, an omerta. To talk about them is to expose oneself or to suffer retaliation from armed terrorist groups. The result is a general sense of fear within the media community forcing a culture of self-censorship on practitioners and their sources. A journalist from a community radio station in eastern Burkina described the change in radio programming as follows:

⁵¹ Savane Médias: Menace de médias, le CSC appelle l’autorité à la protection des journalistes. <https://savanemedias.net/2023/03/29/menace-de-medias-le-csc-appelle-lautorite-a-la-protection-des-journalistes/>

⁵² Yaméogo, 2018.

⁵³ Yaméogo, 2022.

⁵⁴ Yaméogo, 2018

⁵⁵ Report on Freedom of Expression in Africa in steep decline, Media Foundation for West Africa

We are very careful about what we broadcast. We avoid talking about certain topics, such as terrorism, gender equality and family planning. We have also decided to suspend talk shows because terrorists often use them to threaten us or to forbid us to talk about what we should not talk about,” (field interview April, 2023).

As explained by the informant below, both journalists and the people they ordinarily empanel for discussions are afraid to speak, lest they be attacked.

We can say that the media space has shrunk because of the current situation in Burkina Faso. It is becoming increasingly difficult to have stakeholders on air because of the threats and the criticism they may face for their critical opinions,” (field interview, April, 2023).

4.2.1.f Threats to economic viability of the media

The threats of terrorism, and coups d'état of January and September 2022 have resulted in significant financial losses to the media. With the suspension of political activities and CSOs by the Transitional Government of Captain Ibrahim Traoré, sources of financial support to the media have become scarce. Restrictions on freedom imposed by the government to contain the security crisis such as a state of emergency, protection of the military zones of interest, and imposition of curfews limit the movement of journalists on the ground, which significantly reduce billed or paid media coverage.

“Journalists are no longer free to move about, they can no longer travel throughout the country to report or investigate because of the security threat, and this is an obstacle to economic viability” (field interview, April, 2023)

4.2.2 Mali

The democratic recession in Mali follows its return to military rule in 2012 after the ousting of its democratically elected president. Since then, a series of coups have seen the country's democratic credentials degenerate further, leading to increased insecurity. The insecurity in Mali has been aggravated by continuous tension and violence between the government forces and Tuareg rebels and other ethnic groups from the north. The insecurity in Mali is further intensified by radicalism, farmer-herder conflict, extremism, terrorism and illegal circulation of weapons. The implication of these for media practice are highlighted below.

4.2.2a Shrinking civic space

In an attempt to counter and prevent terrorism, the rights of citizens have been abused. Journalists and citizens who express dissenting opinions on the apparent “patriotism campaign” by the military are branded unpatriotic, a label that can lead to arrests, detention, suspension of broadcasting, and seizure of equipment etc. Journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders

are arrested and detained for their critical comments of the military regime and terrorism⁵⁶. For example, Joliba TV was suspended for broadcasting an editorial that criticised the Prime Minister's speech delivered at a UN General Assembly meeting. Also, on 8 April 2020, a French journalist, Olivier Dubois was kidnapped by a group of terrorists⁵⁷. In 2021 Amnesty International⁵⁸ reported violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws, unlawful attacks and killings, impunity, and use of excessive force by the security agencies.

Additionally, the political crisis in Mali has served as pretext to prohibit freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration. A civil society activist noted that:

The crisis in Mali has given the political authority a pretext to limit certain individual and collective freedoms. It is unfortunate that gatherings, especially those that disturb the authorities, have been prohibited under this transition (fieldwork, April, 2023).

While CSOs, citizens and the media are helplessly attempting to fight the shrinking civic and democratic spaces, their efforts are, sometimes, hampered by competing interests.

There is an alliance between the two actors, but from time-to-time personal interests of each other cause the degree of cooperation to vary. Again, civil society organisations complain that the media ask for money before they cover their activities" (Activist; fieldwork, April, 2023).

4.2.2b Introduction of repressive laws on press freedom and privacy

In Mali, press freedom is enshrined in Article 7 of the Constitution. The print media for example, do not need any authorisation prior to publication. The National Communication Authority (*Haute autorité de la communication -HAC*) is empowered by Ordinance No. 2014-006/P-RM of 21 January 2014 to ensure the sanctity of the implementation of the law.

However, press freedom is now severely restricted as a result of the coup and terrorism. On 18 December 2020, the military junta approved a decree that restricted the media and civic space. The decree reads in parts: "relevant administrative authorities are empowered to take all appropriate measures to ensure the control of the press and publications of all kinds, social networks, as well as radio or television broadcasts, film screenings and theatrical performances"⁵⁹. This measure, taken under the pretext of curbing insecurity, empowers the security forces to seize publications and equipment in case of breaches by journalists and citizens.

While local voices are silenced, the government has introduced tougher conditions for foreign media accreditation. On February 7, 2022, the military expelled Benjamin Roger, a French journalist for *Jeune Afrique*, less than 24 hours after his arrival in Bamako. The authorities accused the correspondent of failing to obtain the necessary work permit and accreditation which was until then rarely required⁶⁰. Likewise, on 16 March, 2022, the political authority

⁵⁶ The Arab [Observatory](#) for Media Freedom.

⁵⁷ https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_french-journalist-kidnapped-northern-mali-appears-video/6205458.html

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, [2021 Report](#).

⁵⁹ <https://www.mfwa.org/join-the-praise-singing-or-hold-your-tongue-the-new-normal-for-the-media-in-mali/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.mfwa.org/join-the-praise-singing-or-hold-your-tongue-the-new-normal-for-the-media-in-mali/>

proscribed the French stations, *France 24* and *RFI*, over accusations of broadcasting allegations of abuses committed by the Malian armed forces (FAMa).⁶¹

Existing anti-free media laws are also being exploited to silence dissenting voices. Law No. 00-46/AN-RM of 7 July 2000 on the media system and press offences, and No. 2012-019/ of 12 March 2012 relating to private audiovisual communication services are repressive to media freedom as they penalise press offences by imprisonment. The laws do not follow the universal trend of decriminalising press offences.

“These laws are threat to freedom, and, journalists can find themselves in the most ordinary way in prison for their writings or comments And it is through these laws that the transitional authorities, in complicity with the Prosecutor of the Municipal Court 4, M. Toure, take advantage of them to lock up journalists” (fieldwork, April, 2023).

Additionally, state authorities’ monitor telephone conversations and text messages of some journalists. According to some of the journalists interviewed, phone tapping of journalists by state security poses a barrier to independent journalism. In 2013 the former Minister of Defence and head of the Intelligence Services, Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, was reportedly accused for being responsible for phone tapping. This was defended as legal when done for purposes of state security. Little regard was paid to provisions in the said law [Ordinance No. 99-043/P-RM of 30 September 1999] which stipulate that such action may only be permitted for use by judicial police officers, with written authorisation of the public prosecutor.

4.2.2c Threats and physical attacks on journalists

Journalists are often exposed to threats, physical attacks and imprisonment. Evidence of this was reported by the MFWA’s Freedom of Expression project which recorded 42 incidents of violation of freedom of expression across ECOWAS region. Victims suffered physical assaults, verbal attacks, arrests, and imprisonment. For example, on 13 March 2023, radio and television host Mohamed Youssouf Bathily, alias, *Ras Bath*, was placed under a committal order.

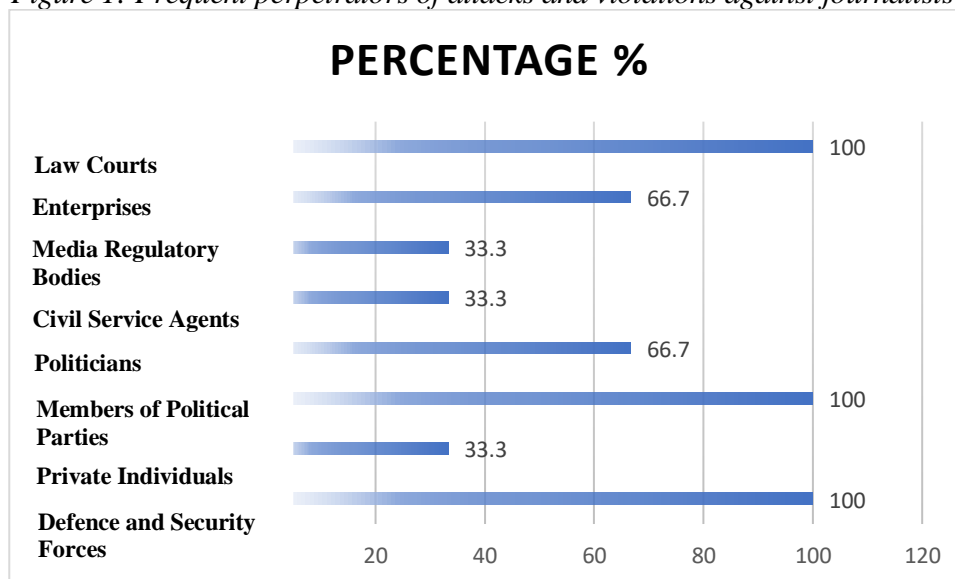
The threats are many. They include death threats, attacks on physical integrity, deprivation of liberty such as convictions and intimidation. The threats and intimidations do not only come from law enforcement agencies, state security or judges; they also emanate from the supporters of the transition, and even if you file a complaint, it remains unanswered... What can you do? We are obliged to resort to self-censorship on matters concerning corruption, abuse of justice and security (fieldwork, April, 2023).

Journalists are often subjected to summons, verbal and physical violence; assault, arrest warrant and deposition by the courts, especially the court of Commune IV District Court in Bamako. I was summoned by the Judicial Investigation Squad (BIJ), for having written an article that was not favourable to the President of Malian Community Abroad, following his controversial re-election. As the current Director General of the National Police is his relative, they took advantage of this position to summon me. I spent a week without working; every day I had to spend the day at the BIJ, and around 7 p.m., they ordered me to go home and come back the next day. After couple of weeks, the file was transferred to the Commune IV Court. Fortunately for me, I had to appeal to influential personalities to intervene to avoid being locked up (fieldwork, April, 2023).

⁶¹ https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_french-journalist-kidnapped-northern-mali-appears-video/6205458.html

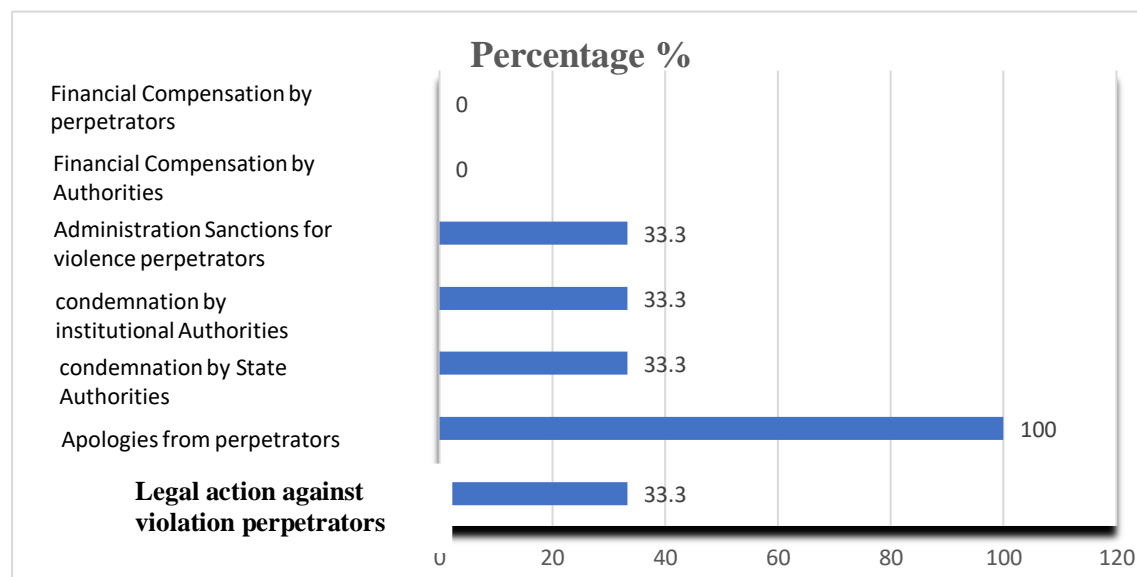
The perpetrators of these physical attacks and abuses against journalists are mostly political agents and security operatives, as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Frequent perpetrators of attacks and violations against journalists



Regrettably, journalists who suffer attacks do not benefit from legal redress. In the event of abuse against journalists, the most common form of reparation is apology from the perpetrators as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The most common form of reparations for abused journalists



4.2.2d Self-censorship and changing of editorial content

The democratic recession in Mali has also resulted in a culture of self-censorship. Self-censorship is often on publications relating to partitioning of the country into pro-Bamako or pro-Mali movements, terrorism and insecurity, religion, culture, and sex. In addition, stories

on the high cost of living, political instability, and mis-governance under the current government have become taboo subjects in most of the media newsrooms.

Self-censorship, particularly in the public media such as *Essor* and *ORTM*, appears to be driven by direct interference from the government. Coverage of taboo topics can attract problems with the National Communication Authority, which itself seems to be caught in a pincer by the transition authorities. Further, as insecurity moves southwards the political authorities force newsrooms to rewrite articles or correct articles unfavourable to them. This is further deepened by a culture of rent seeking in the public media where editors seek to court the favour and avoid the displeasure of the transitional government.

While the actions and inactions of the political authority have compelled journalists to self-censor, journalists are also afraid of incurring the wrath of certain organised groups or individuals, particularly Islamist groups, who attack critical voices. Journalists covering security issues related to terrorism avoid conflict zones to avert being kidnapped.

Journalists who cover security-sensitive subjects are often targeted by armed groups and are not immune to kidnappings. This has also considerably reduced the mobility of journalists for investigations or reporting missions in parts of the country plagued by insecurity” (regulatory agent; fieldwork, April, 2023).

... if the issue of religion is a taboo, it is because some newsroom staff practice self-censorship for fear of being the target of “Islamist fundamentalists,” (fieldwork, April, 2023).

“Censorship in the public media is not always the act of the State, but often the act of zealous civil servants who want to look good or of the fear of some of their hierarchy’s possible reaction about such topics. It is because in the event of a problem, no one wants to take responsibility for being the one who allowed the disclosure of the information. That trend sometimes leads to information being submitted to a long chain of opinions before being disseminated, even if there is no formal obligation to do so. The root cause of the problem is the fact that the State does not intervene to protect both citizens and journalists under threat” (Fieldwork, April, 2023).

The scourge of self-censorship is exacerbated by knowledge gaps in the journalistic community regarding ethical reporting of war and insecurity. This further opens journalists up to more risks of attacks. A civil society activist pointed out that: *“the media in general are neither professional on reporting on security issues nor independent. There is a perception of disorder in the media landscape because of proliferation of media outlets (print, audiovisual, blogging, etc.)”* (fieldwork, April, 2023).

4.2.3 Guinea

Democratic recession in Guinea ostensibly began in 2006 when a constitutional amendment extended the term of President Conte from five to seven years. This was in spite of protests from political parties, civil society and trade unions. The protests were undercut by crackdowns on political opponents, and failed to deter him from organising the elections in October 2020, which was characterised by intimidation, ballot box stuffing, harassment of political opponents

and repression of voters. Twenty Guineans were killed in the elections⁶². The 82-year-old Alpha Condé was declared a winner for a third term.

The ailing political economy of Guinea was also underlined by a disconnect between popular demand for material welfare and apparent inability of the government to provide these demands. It was in this atmosphere that the National Council for Reconciliation and Development (NCRD) staged a successful coup d'état that overthrew Alpha Condé on 5 September 2021. The knock-on effect was a decline in respect for people's rights, and press freedom as discussed below.

4.2.3a Shrinking civic space and media freedom

Prior to the elections, on 6 July 2019, President Alpha Condé pushed through parliament a controversial law allowing the security forces to “shoot on sight” during public order operations without fear of prosecution. From then on, every street demonstration had its share of deaths, while every public protest was suppressed. There were regular reports of missing protesters. From June 2019 to March 2020, more than 50 people were killed in a brutal repression. Also, over 100 people were arrested and hundreds more injured in crackdowns by security forces⁶³.

Despite this rather gloomy picture, press freedom had been relatively spared. In 2021, Guinea ranked 84th in the World Press Freedom Index. This saw a steep improvement on its 109th position in 2020, attributable to the reassuring pro-media actions of the new authorities. Examples include the provision of headquarters for the *Maison de la presse* in Conakry, regional press houses and increase in the subsidy allocated to the media. Furthermore, during this period no journalist was prosecuted.

Subsequently, however, the initial euphoria associated with the NCRD regime soon gave way to overtures to limit political rights and press freedom. A communiqué from the NCRD prohibited all demonstrations – in the public space until the elections period. The 13 May 2022, decree from Doumbouya Junta further banned all street protests and marches, restricting all gatherings by political and social actors to their offices. The enforcement of the decree by the security forces resulted in the killing of four protestors on 18 and 19 July 2022. There was further repression on 28 July 2022 resulting in several gunshot wounds, four deaths and more than 80 civilians being arrested⁶⁴. Also, journalists faced harassment, seizure of their equipment and prosecution as they carried out their duties.

From February to December 2022, twenty-five cases of repressive actions were recorded, 20 of which were committed against the media in the Conakry Region. August and September, 2023 were recorded as the darkest months for the press, each recording five cases of serious press freedom violations. Regrettably none of these have been subject to legal investigation nor disciplinary action against the perpetrators. A situation of lawlessness perpetuated by the military government has resulted in the silencing of discordant voices, intimidation of journalists, violation of freedom, human rights abuse, and excessive use of security forces to harass citizens. Besides, suppressing the civic space, the economic downturn has been intensified by corruption.

⁶² **Report on Freedom of Expression in Africa in steep decline, Media Foundation for West Africa.**

⁶³ Report on Freedom of Expression in Africa in steep decline, Media Foundation for West Africa.

⁶⁴ Amnesty International, [2021 Report](#).

4.2.3b Persecution of journalists

Attacks on media freedom manifest in the following forms: remand of journalists in custody or under judicial supervision; hasty court decisions, imprisonment without trial for unproven press offences; and deliberate violations of legal provisions on media freedom by the Defense and Security Forces. Journalists are also often summoned to the High Authority for Communication (HAC). Additionally, guests for radio programmes are interrogated by the security forces at the exit of radio stations.

There are also reported cases of kidnapping and physical attacks on journalists, killing of journalists, illegal invasion of media premises and confiscation of equipment by the Defense and Security Forces under the guise of maintaining peace. Journalists are frequently harassed [detained, subjected to judicial supervision, suspended or sequestered] for covering supposedly prohibited demonstrations. Harassment also occurs for hosting politicians not in good standing with the ruling government.

4.2.4 Guinea-Bissau

Historically, Guinea-Bissau has been characterised by fragility occasioned by frequent coup d'états, assassinations and conflicts. Guinea Bissau is the epicenter of West Africa narcotics transit to Latin American drug cartels⁶⁵. In 1994, Guinea-Bissau's attempt to institute a democratic framework was curtailed. Internally, Guinea Bissau is undermined by ethnic and religious differences which raise the risk profile to instability. Fragility in Guinea-Bissau manifests in a disconnection between state and society, with weak state institutions and apparent lack of state presence outside Bissau. This renders the state illegitimate in the eyes of many publics⁶⁶. There are also violations of all forms including human rights, civil, political and freedom of expression rights and press freedom.

Externally, the country faces the threat of violent extremism and radicalism which further threatens national cohesion. These internal and external factors culminated in an attempted coup on 1 February 2022. However, few hours later, President Umaro Sissoco Embaló declared that the coup had been foiled.⁶⁷ The consequences of this democratic recession for media are discussed below.

4.2.4a Repression of media freedoms

Constitutionally media freedom is guaranteed in Guinea-Bissau. However, the criminal libel law still exists and is often applied to silence journalists. Thus, the media face a major challenge that impedes their role. The general political instability of Guinea-Bissau has occasioned a culture of repression against dissenting voices, with the media and journalists being among the worst victims. Independent-minded journalists are often abused, attacked, detained or imprisoned for their work through the application of criminal libel law.

There is also weak capacity for media rights enforcement, and low priority for protecting journalists, bloggers and social media influencers. There are regular incidents of shutdown of media organisations and other forms of censorship. For instance, ahead of the 2019 elections,

⁶⁵ See Kojo Impraim (2022). Human Security, Democratic Policing and Public Safety in Ghana, unpublished PhD Thesis.

⁶⁶ <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/874941497621490526/Guinea-Bissau-Country-Partnership-Framework-F18-F21.pdf>

⁶⁷ <https://www.mfwa.org/publication/policy-brief-the-media-press-freedom-and-the-democratic-recession-in-west-africa/>

the media regulatory body, Autoridade Reguladora Nacional (ARN), shut down two radio stations located in Bafata and Buba. Further, in April 2019, the Bafata station of *Africa FM* was shut down⁶⁸. Again, in February, 2020, the state broadcaster, *Radiotélévision Nationale de la Guinée-Bissau* was occupied by the security forces. Also in 2020, there was an attack on *Radio Capital FM* resulting in the destruction of the station's equipment⁶⁹. The attack was widely condemned by state and non-state actors including the international community, notably the UN, AU, ECOWAS, CPLP and EU.

In 2022, Radio Capitale FM was attacked by security officials in uniforms who shot live bullets and destroyed equipment. Complaints brought to the court were not followed up. Security officials cited in these cases have still not been heard by the judges in charge of the cases. The attacks on *Radio Capitale* are linked to its programme schedule which favours interactions with listeners and voices of citizens.

These happenings have contributed to the poor state of media freedom in Guinea Bissau. In 2020, Reporters Without Borders ranked Guinea-Bissau 94 out of 180 countries in a global press freedom rating. Similarly, the US-based Freedom House ranked media freedom in Guinea Bissau as “not free”, citing insecurity among journalists, acts of indirect censorship, legal restrictions, among others.

4.2.4b Weak media managerial capacity

Besides suppressing the media, managerial capacity in media organisations and professional skills of journalists are low, affecting the capacity of journalists to produce quality content. Often independent journalism and quality of information are compromised. That leads to clickbait journalism and sensationalism. The limited capacity of the media is largely attributed to the fairly small and weak national economy which poses a major challenge to viability and sustainability of media organisations. This is compounded by media capture by political actors which exert significant ownership influence over the media. This situation means that citizens continue to lack access to quality information, which limits their participation in governance process.

4.2.4c Suppressive media licensing regime

The passage of new legislation in 2022 by the government saw the imposition of new tariffs for obtaining and renewing broadcasting licenses. Under the new requirement, a private radio station would pay CFAF 10 million to obtain a licence, CFAF 3 million for a newspaper, and CFAF 500 million for a private television station. Few media organisations in Guinea-Bissau can afford the over 7,000% increment in licence fees⁷⁰ which undermine their financial viability, and capacity to hold power accountable. Importantly, this presents as a means of drowning out dissenting voices often affiliated with private media.

Text Box 15: This is a subtle way of imposing effective control over the media through financial weight. I believe that the authorities are hostile to an independent and free press (field interview, April, 2023)

⁶⁸ MFWA Concept paper, 2020.

⁶⁹ MFWA Concept paper, 2020.

⁷⁰ <https://www.mfwa.org/issues-in-focus/why-new-licence-fees-can-decimate-already-strangled-media-in-guinea-bissau/>

4.2.5 Niger

The democratic recession in Niger in 2023 is as a result of heightened insecurity and economic mis-governance. Niger is notoriously the seedbed to Violent Extremism Organisations (VEOs), terrorism, fundamentalism and farmer-herder conflicts. Neighbouring Mali, Lybia and Burkina Faso are all suffering from terrorist attacks and upsurge in military coups, exposing Niger to a high risk of coup d'états. Extremism and terrorism are perpetuated by al-Qaida, Daesh, Islamic State of Libya, and Islamic State of West Africa. There is also a brewing tension and violence between the government's security forces and the Tuareg rebels and other ethnic groups in the northern part of the country. The violence and conflict between the two opposing forces are rampant and deadly. In addition, the northern part of Niger which shares border with Libya has become a field of insecurity controlled by terrorist groups and traffickers. Again, the south-eastern border of Niger with Nigeria and Chad also faces attacks from the notorious terrorist group, Boko Haram.

In spite of these theatres of insecurity, in 2021, Niger went through a relatively peaceful political transition where the President Mahamadou Issoufou, handed over power. The political transition was historical after several decades of political turmoil and attempts by incumbent governments to tweak constitutional term limits. However, in March 2021 ahead of the inauguration of the new elected president, there was an attempted coup d'état by a section of the military. This raised democratic and security concerns of the media freedom implications of which are highlighted below.

4.2.5a Diminishing civic space and press freedom

Terrorism has had a great impact on the political economy, press freedom and freedom of expression in general, but particularly in conflict zones of Niger. It has significantly impacted negatively on the operating space of the media and civil society. There is a disguised attack on freedom of expression and assembly, even though these are guaranteed by Niger's constitution. For example, some demonstrations by the civil society, and political gatherings have been banned, even after referral to the interim relief judge.

In addition, the political authority unleashes pressure on civil society and media actors who dare to speak out on pertinent issues related to security. This was the case of Abdoulaye Seydou, an activist who accused the army of slaughtering civilians. He was prosecuted by the state and his trial is ongoing. Another activist, Amadou Harouna Maiga, was detained by the Judicial Police following a statement on the security issue. The same fate befell journalist and activist Moussa Tchangari, head of the Alternative Espace Citoyen, and Nouhou Arzika Mahamadou, a civil society activist, when they commented on the fight against terrorism by the state authority.

In June 2010, the government passed the law 2010-035 to criminalise press offences. The law enables the government to control media outlets with regard to the dissemination of certain content which portrays the prevention and countering of terrorism by the Nigerien authority in a bad light. This is particularly the case in the regions of Diffa (1360 km from Niamey in the far east of the country) and Tillabéry bordering Mali and Burkina Faso.

Besides this, the 2021 Africa Regional Overview of the Amnesty International reported Internet shutdowns and suspension of social media in Niger, in a bid to stop dissenting opinions from spreading.⁷¹

4.2.5b Enactment of repressive laws on media freedom

In July 2019, the Nigerien government enacted a cybersecurity law to silence critical voices and control the cyberspace. Articles 27 to 32 of the cybercrime law LOI N°2019-33 du 03 Juillet 2019 listed a series of offences, including defamation and publication of false information. The law also imposes up to three years of imprisonment with fines that can go up to US \$8000. It also introduces criminal prosecution for press offenses online. The amendment Law N°2022-30 of 23 June 2022 on cybercrime, further requires journalists to pay a heavy fine in case of defamation or insult, ranging from FCFA 5,000,000 to FCFA 10,000,000. Journalists are the real victims of these provisions, as several have fallen victim to this repressive law. For instance, journalists Samira Sabou, Kaka Touda, Ali Souman, Samira Sabou and Moussa Aksar have borne the brunt of this cybercrime law for sharing or publishing articles deemed unfriendly to authorities on social media.

In an interesting contrast to the environment nurtured by these repressive legal provisions, the government, in 2018, amended Law n°2012-34 of 7 June 2012 which established a media aid fund given to private media. The amendment specifies that the media aid fund must be used for the training of journalists and the acquisition of equipment for media outlets. It is monitored by the Court of Auditors in accordance with Article 141 of the Constitution.

4.2.5c Media censorship

The media operating in geographic areas under the influence of terrorists are the subjects of censorship and self-censorship. Authorities have a keen interest in media not publishing information that is deemed disruptive of the peace. The result is a censorship regime that places gatekeeping powers beyond the borders of newsrooms as explained by a state actor interviewees.

We are often forced to check the content broadcast by the radio stations here! Often journalists broadcast false information that threatens to disrupt the peace within the communities (Official from Tillabéry; field interview, April, 2023).

We can't let anyone say what they want in the media around here. It disrupts peace in the community instead of helping us to consolidate it (Official from the Diffa region; field interview, April, 2023).

Beyond this, self-censorship presents as a coping mechanism for the media to stay safe, away from the hands of terrorists. Media and journalists consciously avoid problematic themes that have the potential to arouse the sensibilities of armed groups. “The authorities have our telephone numbers. With Boko Haram everywhere, we have often received thinly veiled threats about the content of certain religious broadcasts,” says a journalist in Diffa. He adds that “to avoid potential problems with them, we have opted to remove the problematic themes,”. This attitude is common to journalists in the Tillabéry region.

⁷¹ [2021 report 2021 Africa Regional Overview](#)

A community radio promoter noted: “I prefer to have trouble with the Nigerien army or the prefect than with the terrorists. I prefer to avoid them. If they come, no one will come to our rescue...”

4.2.5d Military entry into mainstream media

The democratic recession in Niger, coupled with the degenerating security situation, has also led to a new trend where the military is actively participating in media ownership and management. In areas hard-hit by security challenges, the Nigerian army now runs its own media, putting control of information and people’s access to information as well as the framing of information directly in their hands. For instance, in Tillabéri, the army has a radio station, *Radio Dango* by which it broadcasts information that the local media cannot broadcast for fear of reprisals from armed groups. The same is being done in Diffa.

In these conflict zones, the Nigerien army has also taken control of communication. Indeed, in Diffa the Nigerien army has a radio that broadcasts in the city of Diffa and the lakes area to deradicalise young people who are tempted to join the Boko Haram adventure. The radio station is called Radio Bouclier (field interview, April, 2023).

5. Conclusion

Three primary factors underpin democratic recession in the study countries. These are: military coup d’états, terrorism and violent extremism, and economic mis-governance. These have resulted in political and democratic crises. These crises have significantly undermined the operating space for the journalists and civil society. The media landscape has therefore become highly repressive. The limited operating space has had monumental negative impact on press freedom.

This manifests in several forms. Predominantly, verbal and physical attacks [death threats, kidnappings, insults etc.] against journalists and civil society activists threaten their safety. Journalists and media outlets find themselves caught up between the threats from armed terrorist groups and political authorities, and threats from some citizens who unreservedly support the military juntas.

This is coupled with imprisonment and the introduction and abuse of repressive laws to cow journalists and civil society into a culture of silence. In addition, high licencing regime for media outlets, and expensive fines against journalists for defamation threaten the right to free expression. Together, these have resulted into self-censorship and change in editorial lines by many media outlets and journalists. There is also a worrying trend of direct interference of political and military agents in media work.

Again, access to public information is limited. Journalists find it difficult to cover news about the operations of the military transitional governments and conflict zones. Information is hard to come by when reporting violations of human rights, and activities by violent extremists and terrorists.

Additionally, the crises of democracy and security crises have exacerbated the economic weaknesses of many media outlets, either forcing media owners and journalists to revise operations [e.g. move online or change vocation] or fold up.

While these hurdles greatly affect press freedom, media regulatory bodies largely remain lenient and indifferent. Many journalists and civil society activists are of the view that independent media regulatory bodies are outwardly weak in enforcing adequate regulatory framework that guarantee media freedom and professional ethics.

6. Recommendations

The findings of the study present several suggestions for restoring democratic governance in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea and Guinea Bissau, and for improving media freedom, free expression, media development and respect for human rights. Drawing on these, the study make the following recommendations to the governments, ECOWAS, media regulatory bodies, media organisations and civil society organisations.

ECOWAS

- **Set up a Media Directorate:** The ECOWAS Commission is enjoined to set up a Media Directorate which should be interfaced with the media through relevant regional organisations such as the Media Foundation for West Africa. This would enable ongoing monitoring of the state of media in member countries, and informed interventions towards media development and promotion of freedom of expression.
- **Mainstream democratic discourse in ECOWAS member countries:** The ECOWAS Commission is encouraged to actively promote democratic values and discourse that places commitments to democracy and tolerance in the consciousness of citizens. This is to inculcate the values of democracy among the people. Awareness-raising activities such as public education campaigns, curriculum insertions in the school system, and engagements with political parties, civil society groupings, and military leadership may help to serve this end.
- **Campaign to remove barriers to media freedom:** The ECOWAS Commission is urged to pursue proactive measures to remove barriers to media freedom and free expression in Member States. Repressive laws, poor judicial posturing and application of heavy sanctions including fines imposed on journalists for defamation threaten media freedom and must urgently be addressed.
- **Restore democracy governance in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea:** The ECOWAS Commission is urged to intensify pressure on the military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea to commit to the return of democratic governance through elections in accordance with roadmap and clear timelines. This would ensure the return to democracy and renewal of democratic infrastructure that supports media freedom, respect for human rights and the expansion of the civic space for idea sharing to aid development.

Governments and regulatory authorities

- ***Strengthen media legal framework:*** While legislations regulating the media in the study countries are generally liberal and allow for the exercise of press freedom, efforts must be made to remove barriers. Repressive laws, poor judicial posturing and application of heavy sanctions including fines imposed on journalists for defamation threaten media freedom and must urgently be addressed.
- ***Legislate to protect the safety of journalists in conflict zones:*** Protect journalists in conflict or war zones with specific legislations that guarantees their right to information. Such legislation should also guarantee the safety of journalists in covering conflict related news.
- ***Facilitate effective access to public information:*** The Government of Burkina Faso should implement the decree of Law 051-2015/CNT on the right to access public information and administrative documents to facilitate the work of journalists. Similarly, the of Governments of Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger should facilitate equal access to security information to allow all journalists, both private and public to carry out qualitative and independent journalism. Likewise, the Government of Niger should adopt the pending draft legislation (Electronic Press Act) on access to public information
- ***Carry out swift and thorough investigation and prosecution:*** The police and judiciary should swiftly investigate and prosecute all perpetrators of attacks on journalists and other forms of press freedom violations so that they can serve as a deterrent to potential perpetrators of such repressive actions.
- ***Revise repressive laws on press freedom:*** The media regulatory bodies in collaboration with the Ministries of Information and Communication should work to revise repressive laws in order to strengthen press freedom and freedom of expression

Media Organisations and owners

- ***Develop a code of conduct for safety of journalists:*** to guide journalists covering news in conflict zones and the treatment of security information.
- ***Establish remedial support systems:*** such as the appointment of legal counsel to support journalists and media organisations in cases of legal suits. In addition, media must ensure the existence of psychological support to assist journalists who suffer assaults, threats and insults that threaten their mental wellbeing.
- ***Carry out digital literacy:*** to educate citizens on the new information ecology, the need for tolerance, avoid cyberbullying, and the role of journalists and media in national development among others.
- ***Strengthen collaboration between media and CSOs to enlarge the civic space:*** media organisations in West Africa are encouraged to work closely with the CSOs to focus on country-specific advocacy on resisting authoritative leadership.
- ***Advocate the transformation of National Council for Social Communication into a regulatory body:*** In Guinea-Bissau, the media and CSOs are enjoined to advocate the

transformation of the current National Council for Social Communication into a regulatory body to strengthen its independence. In its current state, the Council is dependent on political parties. An independent regulatory authority with the power to sanction and take binding measures would be an important step towards greater autonomy of the media.

- ***Systematically strengthen the media:*** media organisations should empower journalists through continuous capacity building.
- ***Improve the working conditions and salaries of journalists:*** the working conditions of journalists are deplorable. For example, in Guinea-Bissau the miserable salaries paid to journalists ranges from (40,000 CFA francs, 50,000 CFA francs, to 90,000 CFA francs) are not attractive and place journalists in an almost suffocating vulnerability.

7. Challenges encountered during the study

This study was carried out in a context where freedom of expression and freedom of the press are repressed in the countries of study. The military juntas have nearly established a “one-track citizens mind”, suppressing any form of criticism against the transition in Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea. This posture made it difficult for some key persons in positions of trust to speak to the research team, which deprived the research of other relevant perspectives to corroborate the secondary data. In addition, it appears that given the dangerous conditions in the countries, trust in the research team posed a challenge to the willingness of participants to share information.

Again, the fear of reprisal attacks for sharing their insights made it difficult for some of the CSOs and journalists to speak out. This was especially so for women. Accordingly, the female voice in the study is very limited, denying it of insights from their unique perspectives.

Finally, the research team faced difficulties in gaining access to certain key players, in particular the leaders of civil society umbrella organisations or media outlets. This was made worse by demands by some respondents to be paid before taking part in the data collection. In some instances, the research team relied on access to information laws and personal networks to overcome these challenges.



MEDIA FOUNDATION FOR WEST AFRICA

Aar-Bakor Street, Ogbojo

Telephone: +233 (0) 302 555 327

Twitter: @TheMFWA

Facebook: Media Foundation for West Africa

info@mfwf.org

www.mfwf.org



@themfwa



www.mfwf.org



themfwa