

No breather for the media in Burkina Faso as junta, its fanatics go on rampage

The year 2023 will go down as one of the most repressive in the history of Burkina Faso's media, characterized by a blitz of suspensions and closure of media houses, expulsion of foreign correspondents, threats against critical journalists and media outlets by the junta, its fanatical supporters, and intimidating interrogations of journalists.

The storm gathered as early as the beginning of the year with the summoning and interrogation on January 24, of Bangaly Touré, a journalist with the French channel *France 24*. The interrogation was in relation to reports by *France 24* about an “Islamist rebels attack”, which the CSC judged to be inaccurate. According to the CSC, the official information from the government attributed the attack rather to “an armed terrorist group.”

While one can easily conflate the “armed terrorist groups” with “Islamist rebels”, the slight nuance can make a lot of difference to a government which is sensitive about communications around its counter-insurgency operations. And this sensitivity explains the impulse to bring the media under control.

With such a posture, the government would consider the “mere” interrogation and cautioning of Touré by the CSC as a timid response. It would therefore show the media regulator how to tackle media “offenses” more vigorously by suspending indefinitely *France 24* on March 27, for interviewing a leading member of the jihadist group. This was in spite of the fact that the broadcast in question did not actually feature the direct voice of the AQIM rebel group, but rather a brief highlight of the interview.

The action came four days after junta leader, Ibrahim Traoré issued a dire warning to undisclosed media actors he accused of working for foreign interests.

“All those who think they are hidden within or outside of the country, who continue to inform and communicate for the enemy are going to pay for it,” President Traore said on March 23.

The military leaders' warning also came in the context of an already hostile atmosphere. For example, on March 26, the Omega media group formally lodged a complaint against unknown persons, following threats against its journalist Alain Traoré and founder Alpha Barry. The threats included calls on social media to burn the houses of the targeted journalists.

Still, there was no let-up in the repression as the authorities expelled two French journalists and correspondents for *Liberation* and *Le Monde Afrique* newspapers respectively, Agnès Faivre and Sophie Douce on April 1, 2023. The two were accused of “tarnishing the image of the country.” The accusations related to a March 27, 2023 [investigation](#) story by *Liberation* based on a video in which at least one soldier was seen executing a juvenile in a military barracks. State security officers interrogated the journalists on March 31 before ordering them to quit the country within 24 hours.

In connection with the same story, three Burkinabe journalists were targeted with a hate and defamation campaign on pirate websites. Hyacinthe Sanou of Studio Yafa, Boukary Ouoba of Burkinabe Journalists’ Association and Lamine Traoré of Radio Oméga, were accused of treachery and threatened by unidentified junta sympathisers.

As the threats escalated, a number of media professional bodies led by the Centre national de la presse Norbert Zongo (CNP-NZ), issued a [communiqué](#) on April 13 to express concern about the attempt to cow the media into obedience.

“The threats and intimidation against media professionals have increased in recent days. These fatwas against the Burkinabe press are part of a Machiavellian plan to demonise the work of journalists, who have been victimised only because it has refused to be gagged, manipulated, dictated into adopting one-track thinking and to deify authority,” the media groups bemoaned.

International condemnation

On May 3, 2023, 30 media defence and press organisations including the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) published [an open letter](#) calling for urgent action to end the siege on the media in Burkina Faso and Mali. The call, which was addressed to the African Union, ECOWAS, UEMOA, the UN and other stakeholders, acknowledged the complex political, geopolitical and military context. “However, the fight against terrorism must not in any way serve as a pretext for imposing a new reporting standard and restricting the fundamental rights of the Malian and Burkinabe public to seek and access news and information through professional and independent media,” it warned.

The signatory organisations also referenced an April 6, 2023 statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk who said he was “deeply troubled by restrictions on media and civic space in Burkina Faso after the suspension of media outlets and expulsion of two foreign correspondents from the country, amid wider curbs against freedom of expression in the country.”

International call ignored

The calls, however, fell on deaf ears, as the media regulator, the CSC, on June 23, [suspended](#) French television channel, *La Chaîne Info (LCI)* for three months, accusing it of publishing false information. The regulator claimed in a [statement](#) that the channel aired a subjective and non-credible report on the security situation of the country. The accusation related to critical remarks about the country's security situation made by journalist, Abnousse Shalmani, on a popular show hosted by the channel.

And as if the three months' suspension imposed on *LCI* by the CSC was not deterrent enough, the military authorities, acted swiftly barely two months later by [suspending indefinitely](#) *Radio Oméga*. The August 10 decision, the first against a local media house, followed an interview on the Ouagadougou-based station on the political situation in neighbouring Niger. The government described the interview which called for the restoration of Niger's overthrown civilian government, as offensive.

And for criticising the suspension of Radio Omega, journalist Inoussa Ouédraogo, was [bombarded with threats](#) from anonymous callers. Ouedraogo, who heads the private newspaper editors' association, SEP, received [death threats](#) on August 13, 2023 from unknown individuals. Representing the Professional Media Organizations (OPM) on a discussion programme on *Télévision BF1*, Ouedraogo had condemned the government's suspension of *Radio Oméga*, describing it as both illegal and arbitrary

The authorities were to [suspend](#) another media organisation, again in less than two months. Yet again, the victim was a French media platform, the *Jeune Afrique* magazine. The decision taken on September 25, banned the magazine and all its distribution platforms in Burkina Faso, **until further notice**. It followed a series of publications by the French media about alleged discontent among the military. The government specifically cited an [article](#) published on the same day that suggested that there were some tensions within the ranks of the army.

The junta further expanded the battle ground by issuing an order to [conscript](#) into the army a dozen Burkinabè, including Issaka Lingani and Yacouba Ladji Bama, two journalists who are known to be critical of the Transitional government. Other people targeted by the November 2, 2023 order were outspoken blogger-activists, politicians and opinion leaders from civil society organisations and trade unions. The order, obviously punitive, was issued under Decree No. 2023-0475 / PRES-TRANS / PM / MDAC / MATDS / MJDHRI, on general mobilisation adopted on April 19, 2023.

The military regime in Burkina Faso wrapped up a highly repressive year by suspending yet another French media outlet *Le Monde*. The suspension follows a critical publication by the network which the authorities describe as “tendentious.”

Government spokesperson Rimalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo, who announced the decision said all channels of *Le Monde* have been suspended in Burkina Faso with effect from December 2, 2023.” The contentious article published on November 26, 2023, had challenged the official account of an attack on a military base in Djibo in the North of the country.

Laying the legal foundations for continued repression

If the year 2023 has been tempestuous, 2024 does not appear to promise any calm, as a new [law passed](#) on November 21, 2023, puts media regulation under the already repressive grip of the junta. Passed by the transitional parliament, l’Assemblée législative de Transition (ALT), The law on the composition and function of the Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC), grants the Head of State and Cabinet the power to appoint the president and vice president, respectively, of the media regulatory body.

Under the previous law, the President of the CSC was elected by his fellow councillors, which guaranteed the independence of the media regulator. The change is therefore widely feared to be a manoeuvre by the junta to legitimise future repressions by carrying them out through the CSC. It is perceived as a ploy by the government to stifle criticisms that its crackdown has been in flagrant disregard of the role of the independent CSC, the body constitutionally mandated to regulate the media.

For example, following the suspension of French media channel France 24 by the junta, a Burkinabe human rights lawyer protested that the action violated the [2013 decree](#) on the powers of the CSC).

“It’s up to the CSC to issue any sanctions to news media, not the government. The CSC is also supposed to provide advance notice for its decisions and all its final decisions may be appealed before competent courts,” the lawyer [told](#) Human Rights Watch anonymously.

The government reckons to legitimise, henceforth, the closure of media houses, summons, interrogations and suspensions of journalists by carrying them out through a pliant CSC.

And ominously, the powers of the CSC have been extended under Article 55 to include the authority to seize equipment and close down media houses; to order suspension of broadcast activities, and to temporarily or permanently withdraw journalists' press cards (Article 63). Also, under the new law, social media, particularly Facebook accounts and pages with at least 5,000 followers, are treated on equal terms with traditional media and are subject to same regulatory conditions.

“For a military regime that already wields, and has been deploying, all the coercive powers of the state to suppress the media, the new law adds an awful lot of legal muscle to the junta's repressive machinery. An independent CSC is supposed to settle media-related disputes, standing as a buffer between the media and any arbitrary interference from outside, including from government. With this huge influence that the new law allows the government to potentially exercise over the regulator, the media in Burkina Faso have practically no appeal against the junta's attacks. And with the targeting of social media, the civic space in Burkina Faso is doomed to complete closure,” said Muheeb Saeed, Head of *Freedom of Expression* at the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA).

Challenging regulatory and security context

The work of the media has always been challenging since the outbreak of armed extremists' attacks in the country. In 2019, the authorities adopted law [n°044-2019/AN](#) that reintroduced jail terms of up to 10 years for press offenses committed online. The law requires all persons, including journalists, to seek authorisation before publishing any images or audios relating to a scene of terrorist crime. It also penalises online publications likely to demoralise the defence and security forces or undermine their counter-terror operations.

Besides being subjected to legal restrictions, the media faces the additional challenge of restricted access to many parts of the country as a result of the precarious security situation. Journalists run the risk of being attacked, kidnapped or killed by the terrorist groups. The ambush killing on April 26, 2021 of Spanish journalists David Beriain and Roberto Fraile, at a national park underlines the risk of reporting in certain parts of the country. In a war of attrition between government forces and terror groups in which information control is a critical part of the strategies of both sides, the media have been left vulnerable to the crossfire of opposing propaganda. They are threatened, suspended and attacked for contradicting the official account and risk being targeted by the rebels as well.

The Way forward

The MFWA wishes that the military government in Burkina Faso would appreciate the stifling environment in which the Burkinabe media is operating and work with all stakeholders to improve the conditions. There should be a rapprochement on the basis mutual recognition of the rights and roles as well as the fallibility of each side. In particular, the authorities should recognise the media's constitutionally-sanctioned role as a watchdog holding duty bearers accountable to the people, and commit to uphold the independence of the media as guaranteed by the country's constitution.

In this regard, it is critical for both sides to agree on, and work towards establishing a truly independent media regulator to serve as an arbiter on press disputes. The government cannot be complainant and judge in its own case, as has been the case over the past year. Neither should the junta leaders decide that any publication they find uncomfortable or even offensive, is necessarily bad journalism. An independent and impartial media regulator can be trusted to pronounce a fair judgement on contested media content.

While we call the media to discharge their duty with increased sensitivity and professionalism, we urge the government to also tone down on the anti-media rhetoric. Burkina Faso needs the contributions of all its citizens including the media to navigate this delicate phase of its existence. It is therefore necessary for the junta to prioritise dialogue rather than confrontation in its dealing with the media.



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