



WEST AFRICA **FREEDOM OF** **EXPRESSION** **MONITOR**

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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the political landscape in West Africa has changed considerably. The military decrees and edicts of the 1960's -80's have been replaced by constitutional provisions and legislations that guarantee fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression in all the countries in West Africa. This healthy development has also seen human rights and other civil society organisations, like the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), actively engaged in advocacy around FOE issues across the sub-region to help consolidate the progress made.

As part of its FOE advocacy activities, the MFWA has been monitoring the freedom of expression landscape in West Africa and publishing the results of the monitoring as the Freedom of Expression Monitor (*The Monitor*). Published on a quarterly basis, *The Monitor* highlights violations of freedom of expression rights and allied civil liberty such as the rights to peaceful assembly.

This report is a consolidation of the reports from the MFWA's monitoring activities for the year 2019.

In all, there were 167 violations recorded in 14 countries. The figure represents nearly 10% increase in the number of violations reported in 2018, which stood at 152.

The 167 violations included nine incidents of killing in which 30 protesters and two journalists were killed in four countries. There were also cases of arbitrary arrests and detentions, physical attacks, and seizure or destruction of the property of journalists and media houses.

It must be noted that all the countries featured in the report are constitutional democracies with local laws, which guarantee freedom of expression and assembly. They are also signatories to regional and international charters, treaties and covenants guaranteeing FOE rights. The violations thus underline the gap between governments' commitments to the ideals espoused in these instruments and their actual political will to deliver on these commitments.

In the light of the above, the MFWA urges all stakeholders in the FOE space to increase collaboration in promoting freedom of expression and to take measures to end impunity for such violations, particularly among security agents and public officials who are frequent violators.

Introduction

Press freedom and freedom of expression generally have seen an impressive improvement in West Africa over the past two decades. Considered as one of the dividends of the democratisation process that the sub-region has witnessed since 1991, this boom in press freedom and freedom of expression is evidenced by the emergence of several media outlets in the various countries, with media independence largely respected by governments.

Radio in particular is contributing immensely to advancing democracy by facilitating inclusion of all shades of opinions in the democratic discourse in various countries of West Africa.

The new-found liberty is however, constantly under threat from state and non-state actors who are yet to come to terms fully with the new dispensation. Violations such as physical assaults, threats and destruction of journalists' equipment are rife in many countries. Freedom of assembly rights are sometimes violated through prohibition of marches or the use of excessive force against demonstrators, while the internet is disrupted at the least excuse.

In response to this challenge, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has, over the past two decades, been monitoring and reporting on freedom of expression (FOE) violations in West Africa and carrying out campaigns to seek redress for such violations. Since 2014, the results of the monitoring have been published as the West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor.

The Monitor has, since its introduction, served as an advocacy tool for promoting and protecting media and FOE rights in West Africa. It is also an objective measure of the commitment level of the 16 countries to their obligations under national, regional and international binding instruments regarding freedom of expression. All the countries featured in this report are party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which guarantee freedom of expression and assembly rights.

This edition of *The Monitor* (January-December, 2019) recorded a total of 167 violations, evidence that the ideals espoused in the national, regional and international legal frameworks are not observed in practice. This, therefore, underlines the urgent need for sustained collaboration between stakeholders to ensure that FOE rights are respected and protected in accordance with the above frameworks.

Methodology

This report is based on daily alerts received from the MFWA's correspondents and national partner organisations in all 16 countries of West Africa. The daily alerts are collated, analysed and published on a quarterly basis as *The Monitor*. This report covers the period January-December, 2019 and is a summary analysis of the four quarterly monitoring reports issued in the course of the year.

The findings are discussed under six sections: incidents of violations, perpetrators of violations, targets/victims of violations, comparative analysis of the 2018 and 2019 annual findings and the state of redress for violations reported. Also highlighted in this report are some key trends and

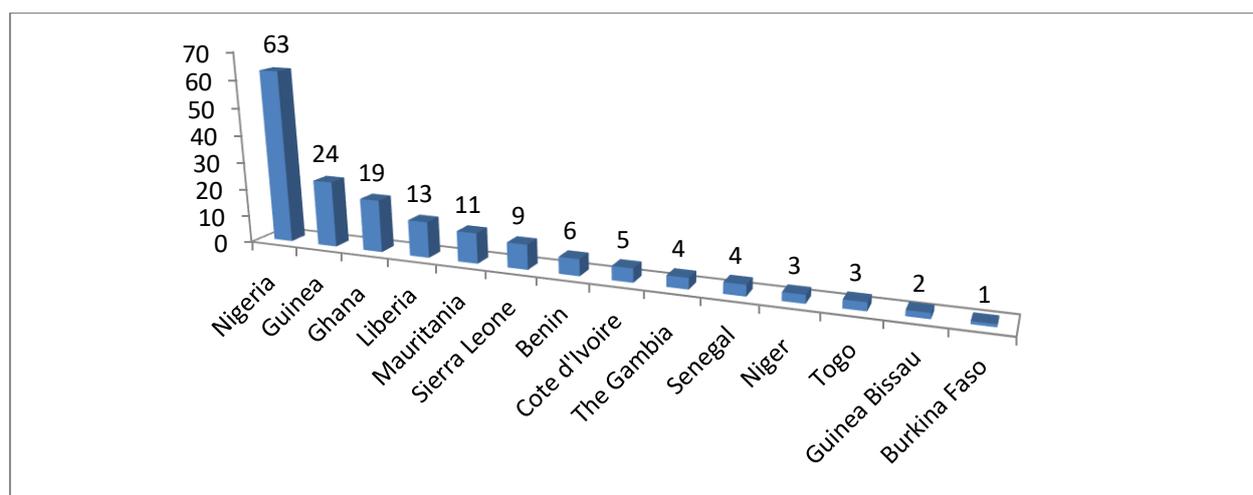
developments in the FOE landscape in the region. The report ends with recommendations to relevant stakeholders on measures to take to improve the FOE situation in West Africa.

Incidents of Violations

The monitoring activities over the period January-December, 2019 recorded a total of 167 violations in 14 different categories. There were 50 cases of arrests and detentions, the most dominant type of violation; 45 cases of physical attacks were also recorded and 19 cases of seizure or destruction of the property of journalists and media houses, particularly mobile phones, cameras, recorders and computers. There were also nine incidents of killing in which 30 protesters and two journalists were killed in four countries.

The frequencies of incidents of each of the eight categories of violations are presented in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Types and Frequency of Violations



Countries and Incidents of Violations

Fourteen countries recorded violations in the year under review. Nigeria recorded the highest number of violations with 63, followed by 24 in Guinea, 19 in Ghana, 13 in Liberia and 11 in Mauritania. The five countries accounted for nearly 78% of the total violations recorded. The rest of the countries recorded single-digit figures while Burkina Faso reported a single violation.

Table 1 below gives more details of the type and number of violations perpetrated in each of the fourteen countries.

2019 Freedom of Expression Violations in West Africa

Nigeria 63	24 Arrests / Detentions, 5 Threats, 23 Physical Attacks, 6 Seizure / Destruction of Properties, 2 Killings, 1 Denial of Assembly, 2 Shutdowns.
Guinea 24	7 Arrests / Detentions, 3 Physical Attacks, 2 Censors, 1 Repressive Law, 2 Sentences, 1 Seizure / Destruction of Property, 5 Killings, 2 Denial of Assembly, 1 Fine
Ghana 19	3 Arrests / Detentions, 2 Threats, 8 Physical Attacks, 2 Seizures / Destruction of Properties, 1 Killing, 1 Denial of Assembly, 2 Shutdowns
Liberia 13	1 Arrest / Detention, 1 Threat, 2 Physical Attacks, 2 Censors, 1 Digital Rights Violation, 4 Seizures / Destruction of Properties, 1 Denial of Assembly, 1 Shutdown.
Mauritania 11	5 Arrests / Detentions, 1 Physical Attacks, 1 Censor, 2 Digital Rights Violations, 2 Seizures / Destruction of Properties.
Sierra Leone 9	1 Arrests / Detentions, 1 Threats, 3 Physical Attacks, 3 Seizures / Destruction of Properties, 1 Denial of Assembly.
Benin 6	2 Arrests / Detentions, 1 Digital Rights Violation, 1 Sentence, 1 Killing, 1 Shutdown.
Cote d'Ivoire 5	2 Arrests / Detention, 1 Digital Rights Violations, 1 Sentence, 1 Denial of Assembly.
The Gambia 4	1 Arrest / Detention, 2 Physical Attacks, 1 Seizure / Destruction of Property.
Senegal 4	2 Arrests / Detentions, 2 Physical Attack.
Niger 3	2 Arrests / Detention, 1 Repressive Law.
Togo 3	1 Sentence, 1 Denial of Assembly, 1 Ban / Suspension.
Guinea Bissau 2	1 Physical Attack, 1 Shutdown.
Burkina Faso 1	1 Repressive Law.

Table 1 Countries and Types of Violations

Country	Types of Violations													Total
	Arrest/ Detention	Threats	Physical Attack	Censor	Digital Rights Violations	Repressive Law	Sentence	Seizure/ Destruction of Property	Killing	Denial of Assembly	Shutdown	Ban/ Suspension	Fine	
Nigeria	24	5	23				6	2	1	2				63
Guinea	7		3	2		1	2	1	5	2			1	24
Ghana	3	2	8				2	1	1	2				19
Liberia	1	1	2	2	1		4		1	1				13
Mauritania	5		1	1	2		2							11
Sierra Leone	1	1	3				3		1					9
Benin	2				1		1		1		1			6
Cote d'Ivoire	2				1		1			1				5
The Gambia	1		2				1							4
Senegal	2		2											4
Niger	2					1								3
Togo							1			1		1		3
Guinea Bissau			1								1			2
Burkina Faso						1								1
Total	50	9	45	5	5	3	5	19	9	8	7	1	1	167

As indicated in the table above, Nigeria, Guinea and Ghana were the countries with the recorded the highest number of violations. Details of the violations recorded in the various countries are presented below:

Killings

The year 2019 began on a tragic note as some unknown persons shot and killed journalist, Ahmed Hussein Suale, on January 16 in Accra.

Twelve demonstrators were also killed in the crackdown, which led to Owolabi's death. In a crackdown on post-election protesters in Benin on May 1, two people were shot dead in Cotonou. In Guinea, a bloody security clampdown, coupled with attacks from ruling party supporters, also left one person dead and about 22 protesters injured in the southern town of N'Zérékoré on June 13, 2019.

On June 19, Mory Kourouma who was brutalised on April 30, alongside several opposition protesters in Guinea, [succumbed](#) to his injuries, while receiving treatment at the hospital.

There was another journalist casualty in Nigeria when a bullet fired by security forces hit Precious Owolabi, a reporter for Channels Television, who was covering a protest on July 22.

On October 14, [nine protesters were killed](#) and several others injured following a brutal suppression by security forces in Guinea on citizens demonstrating against a possible third-term bid by President Alpha Conde.

On November 4, Guinea's security forces their onslaught on demonstrators by [fatally shooting](#) two people as they opened fire on a cortege accompanying the remains of 11 people who had been killed from police brutalities during demonstrations on October 14-16. Two days after the attack, security forces in Guinea [killed two more protesters](#) in Conakry.

Attacks on Media Houses

In Nigeria, Department of State Services (DSS) operatives [stormed the newspaper's office](#) in Maiduguri on January 6, 2019. Soldiers also raided the news organisation's headquarters in Abuja and its office in Lagos on that day. The *Daily Trust's* regional editor, Uthman Abubakar and a reporter, Ibrahim Sawab, were whisked away by a combined team of soldiers and operatives of the Department of State Services (DSS).

In Liberia, three armed men suspected to be sympathisers of the government stormed Roots FM on January 31 and destroyed equipment at the station's studios. The thugs repeated the act on February 10, this time, carrying away two transmitters and other studio equipment.

On March 5, some unknown assailants also attacked Joy FM, based in Monrovia, disrupting the station's transmission by cutting vital transmission cables.

On March 30, there was an incident of arrest and detention four armed operatives believed to be agents of the Department of State Services in Nigeria picked up Jones Abiri, Editor of the *Weekly Source newspaper*, from the premises of the newspaper and drove him away.

On April 1, officers of the Ghana National Fire Service in Nkoranza, in the Bono East Region stormed Dero FM and assaulted the staff over a suspected “April Fool” prank played on the service by a presenter of radio station.

Shutdown

The first media outlet shutdown of the year was recorded in Ghana on May 9, when officials of the National Communications Authority, backed by armed police officers, stormed the premises of the two radio stations to shutdown the radio station.

In Nigeria, the National Broadcasting Commission, on June 6, 2019, suspended the license of DAAR Communications PLC, operators of the African Independent Television (AIT) and Ray Power FM, owned by Raymond Dokpesi, a leading member of the opposition People’s Democratic Party.

Roots FM in Liberia was also closed on October 10 by dozens of police officers while the station was broadcasting its flagship programme, “The Henry Costa Show,

In Guinea Bissau, the media regulatory body, Autoridade Reguladora Nacional, on October 21, closed Africa FM’s two stations in two cities, Bafata and Buba, for operating without a licence. The action was widely condemned as discriminatory enforcement of the law to target a critical media house ahead of campaigns for the presidential election run-off.

In Benin, the media regulator, Haute Autorite de l’audiovisuel et de la Communication, on December 17, [closed down](#) a private radio station owned by a leading opposition politician for failure to renew its licence. This was despite the fact that media house had initiated the procedure to renew the licence four months ahead of the expiry of its licence.

Social media disruptions

On April 28, the Beninois authorities disrupted social media networks in the country and subsequently, the entire internet as tension mounted over the decision to proceed with legislative elections from which all opposition candidates had been disqualified.

Liberia on June 7 disrupted social media platforms as George Weah’s government faced the wrath of Liberians who came out in their thousands to protest against perceived corruption and bad governance.

In what the authorities said was a measure to prevent malpractices during final year school examinations, the government of Mauritania blocked Internet access throughout the country from June 10 to 13. On June 22 (a day after holding presidential elections), the authorities again blocked mobile telephone connections around mid-day. It was the second interference with the internet in ten days.

Repressive Laws

The onslaught against expression offline and online was also through repressive legislations. A new penal code passed by the Burkinabe Parliament on June 21, imposes sanctions including prison sentences and fines of up to 10 million CFA francs (about US\$ 17,350) for publication, in any medium, “likely to compromise the conduct of an operation or intervention of the Defense and Security Forces against acts of terrorism.” The code also requires anyone who wishes to disseminate “images and sounds of scenes of terrorist offences” to obtain prior authorisation.

A similarly controversial provision in Niger’s cybercrime law adopted on June 25, imposes fines of about US\$8,700 and prison sentences of up to three years for online publications deemed to “undermine public order,” a broad term that is liable to subjective interpretation.

Guinea also passed a repressive law on July 6, 2019, when the country’s Parliament approved a law authorising gendarmes in the country to shoot on sight without fear of prosecution when confronted with imminent danger or terror attack. Giving the country’s dreadful record of deadly crackdown on demonstrators, this law has grave implications for freedom of assembly rights.

Arbitrary Arrests and Detentions

Armed state security personnel in Nigeria [stormed the office](#) of the *Daily Trust* newspaper in Maiduguri on January 6, 2019 and arrested regional editor, Uthman Abubakar and a reporter, Ibrahim Sawab. Soldiers also raided the newspapers offices in Lagos and where a production staff was taken away from the Abuja head office alongside a number of computers.

On March 30, four armed operatives believed to be agents of the Department of State Services picked up Jones Abiri, Editor of the Weekly Source newspaper, from the premises of the newspaper in Yenoga, Bayelsa State and drove him away. He was released on bail on April 1 from a secret police secret detention facility on April 1.

On August 22, 2019, the police in Lagos arrested journalist, Agba Jalingo, after he published an article demanding accountability for funds allocated to a bank project. Jalingo, publisher of Cross River Watch, an online newspaper, was arrested at his residence and taken into detention.

On August 3, 2019, police in Nigeria arrested the publisher of the *Sahara Reporters*, Omoyele Sowore,. A vocal critic of the President Buhari’s government, Sowore had called on Nigerians to a demonstration that he said would herald a revolution. He was, arrested at his hotel in Lagos by operatives of the Department of State Services and detained for 144 days. He was eventually released provisionally on the orders of the Attorney General.

In Senegal, gendarmes arrested Guy Marius Sagna, a civil society activist on July 16 and interrogated him about a Facebook post criticising the state of the country’s health facilities. After two days, the gendarmes transferred him to the police who put him before a public prosecutor on a charge of “raising false terrorism alarm.” The charge related to a widely circulated press statement by Sagna’s organization, France Dégage, which warned that France could stir terrorist troubles in Senegal as a pretext to come in and control the country’s petroleum resources. He was released on August 16.

On September 16, 2019, Mary Ekere, who reports for *The Post* newspaper in Uyo, capital of Akwa Ibom State, was arrested for taking pictures of an operation by the Environmental and Waste Management Agency set up by the State Government. The journalist was put before court on September 17 and returned to prison for a second night before being released by a sanitation court the following day.

On October 4, Agba Jalingo was arraigned before a Federal High Court in Calabar, on charges of treason and disturbing public peace. The judge, Justice Simon Amobeda, remanded the journalist who appeared in court in handcuffs. Jalingo reappeared in court on October 23 where prosecution witnesses who were controversially granted anonymity, testified against him.

Physical Assaults

In Ghana, some staff of the National Identification Authority (NIA), on July 5, 2019, assaulted Edward Twum, a cameraman from Accra-based Citi TV. Twum was filming frustrated national ID card applicants.

Again in Ghana, an Assembly member for Mantse Agbona, a suburb of Accra, led some residents of the area to physically attack David Andoh, a photojournalist with Joy News, on September 10. Andoh was covering a public health and sanitation enforcement exercise.

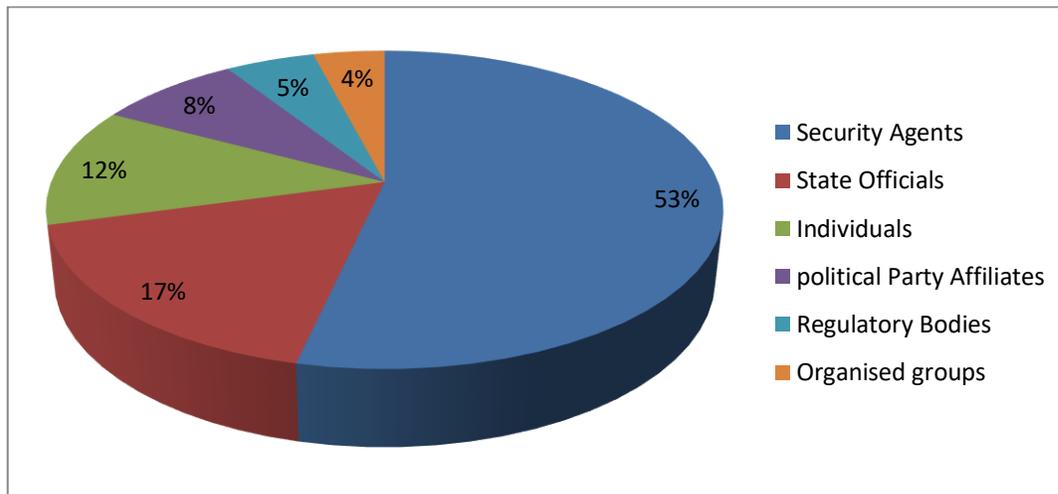
Table 2: Country and Types of Perpetrator

<i>Perpetrators of Violations</i>								
Country	Security Agents	State/Public Officials	Individuals	Political Party Affiliates	Court	Regulatory Body	Organised Group	Total
<i>Nigeria</i>	47		7	2		2	5	63
<i>Guinea</i>	12	7		3	1	1		24
<i>Ghana</i>	9	2	6			2		19
<i>Liberia</i>	4	4	5					13
<i>Mauritania</i>	8	3						11
<i>Sierra Leone</i>			2	4	1		2	9
<i>Benin</i>	2	3				1		6
<i>Cote d'Ivoire</i>	1	4						5

<i>Gambia</i>	1			3				4
<i>Senegal</i>	3			1				4
<i>Niger</i>	2	1						3
<i>Togo</i>		2				1		3
<i>Guinea Bissau</i>		1				1		2
<i>Burkina Faso</i>		1						1
Total	89	28	20	13	2	8	7	167

As shown in the table above, security agents were responsible for a whopping 89 more than half of the incidents recorded in Nigeria alone.

Figure 2: Perpetrators and Percentage of Violations



Targets /Victims of Violations

The 167 violations recorded in 2019 affected a total of 280 direct victims of which 149 were journalists, 35 political party affiliates, 24 activists, 12 media organisations and one media worker. In terms of gender, nine females were identified among the victims.

The 283 direct victims include the 20 reporters who were attacked at the Ebony State Assembly in Nigeria in one incident. Fifty-two were demonstrators who were mostly attacked during violent

crackdowns. These include the nine protesters were killed October 14, the November 4, two fatalities recorded when Guinean security forces opened fire on a cortege accompanying the remains of 11 demonstrators killed in Conakry from October 14 to 16.

Comparative Analysis of 2019 and 2018 Findings

The findings from 2019 and 2018 showed both a few variations and similarities. There were incidents of killings in 2018 and 2019, with Nigeria and Guinea recording fatalities in both years. Togo, Senegal and Gambia were the other countries to record fatalities in 2018, while Ghana, Benin, Nigeria and Guinea recorded killings in 2019. Arrests/detentions and physical assault, were the two commonest types of violations recorded in both years.

Fourteen countries were cited during the year under review with Nigeria, Guinea and Ghana emerging as the three countries where the most violations were recorded. It was almost the same scenario in 2018, except that Ghana recorded more violation than Guinea. There was however, a significant variation in the number of violations; 167 in 2019 as against 152 in 2018, an increase of about 10%.

Nigeria recorded not only the most violations both in 2018 and 2019, but also a 300% increase (from 21 to 63) during the latter year. Niger made an impressive progress from 13 violations in 2018 to three violations in 2019. Senegal also witnessed a significant improvement, recording four in 2019 as against 15 in 2018. No violations were reported in Mali during 2019, a huge improvement for that country where 11 incidents were recorded in 2018.

Table 3 below provides further details about the relative frequency of violations perpetrated in the respective countries in 2019 and 2018.

Table 3: Frequency of Violations Recorded in 2019 and 2018

Country	Frequency of Violations	
	January – December 2019	January-December 2018
Nigeria	63	21
Guinea	24	18
Ghana	19	18
Liberia	13	8
Mauritania	11	7
Sierra Leone	9	8
Benin	6	2
Cote d'Ivoire	5	9
The Gambia	4	8
Senegal	4	15
Niger	3	13

Togo	3	10
Guinea Bissau	2	2
Burkina Faso	1	2
Mali		11
Total	167	152

Redress/Impunity over Violations

In the first instance, the Supreme Court in Guinea, on November 28, ordered the media regulator, Haute Autorite de la Communication (HAC), [to restore the licenses](#) of two radio stations that had been closed down for installing their transmitters at an authorised location. The Supreme Court granted the relief pending the determination the appeal of Radio Continental FM and Ado FM against the sanctions imposed on them on October 30, 2019.

On the same day (November 28), the Court of Appeal in Conakry provisionally released members of the political pressure group, Front National pour la Defense de la Constitution (FNDC) who were serving various prison terms for organising recent anti-government demonstrations. The FNDC leaders, including a former minister of state, were convicted in October in connection with a demonstration they had called to be staged in Conakry on October 14.

In another progressive development, a journalist who works for Adom FM in Accra, on December 2, 2019, secured a symbolic [legal victory](#) over a political party activist who assaulted her. The presiding judge, Gifty Adjei Addo, awarded cost of GH¢9,000 (about US\$1,600) against Hajia Fati, a member of the ruling New Patriotic Party in Ghana, for her May 2, 2018 assault on the journalist, Ohemaa Sakyiwaa of Accra-based Adom FM.

While the above are positive, they hardly balance out the entrenched impunity for violations against journalists in the region, with incidents in Guinea and Nigeria in particular symbolising this culture. A minister of security was sacked in Guinea following the crackdown by security forces that killed 11 people in Conakry between October 14 and 16. Besides this, no action has been taken against the perpetrators of the serial killings and physical attacks against protesters opposed to president Conde's attempt to tamper with the constitution to satisfy his personal ambitions.

In Nigeria, Omoyele Sowore was detained for 124 days by the DSS who had court authorisation to keep the journalist and activist in custody for up to 45 days. The DSS flouted several court orders to free Sowore who had met bail conditions. On December 5, the DSS released Sowore on a yet another court order, only to storm the court and re-arrest him the following day during proceedings. He was eventually released on December 24 on the orders of Nigeria's Attorney General.

On March 30, four armed operatives believed to be agents of the Department of State Services picked up Jones Abiri, Editor of the Weekly Source newspaper, from the premises of the newspaper and drove him away. He was released from a police secret detention centre in Abuja on April 1. On May 22, Abiri appeared in a High court in Abuja on same cybercrime and terrorism charges for which he was detained from 2016 to 2018. At the end of the proceeding, the judge remanded him in custody until October 25, 2019 when he met bail conditions.

In Ghana, the raid on *Modernghana.com* to arbitrarily arrest and detain two journalists has not been remedied. The subsequent dropping of cybercrime charges against the journalists confirms the baseless nature of the security operation against the media house and its employees. Radio Gold and Radio XYZ, two pro-opposition media houses, which were shut down in an operation that smacked of discrimination, remain closed. The highly critical Roots FM in Liberia, which was shut down under dubious circumstances, also remain closed.

Other Key FOE Developments

There were two major boosts for press freedom and access to information in West Africa during the period under review. The first was President Weah's [signing into Law](#) a Bill to decriminalise libel. Given the serial abuses of the libel law to harass and jail journalists, the repeal is a huge relief.

The second progressive development occurred in Ghana where the Parliament finally [passed into law](#) the Right to Information Bill, which had been before it for ten years. The law is expected to promote accountability and enhance the fight against corruption by facilitating access to public information.

In Mali, Issiaka Tamboura, Editor of the *Soft* newspaper, [was released unhurt](#) on February 18 after more than 30 days in captivity. Tamboura was kidnapped in central Mali by a suspected militant group on December 27, 2018.

In another development, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) in collaboration with the Nigeria Union Journalist (NUJ), the International Media Support (IMS), organised a forum on media and police relations in Abuja from February 6-8, 2019. The intervention contributed to a reduction in police-perpetuated attacks on journalists during the coverage of the country's general elections

The MFWA and its partner organisation, Union des Journalistes Indépendants du Togo (UJIT) organised a similar Forum on Security-Media Relations and the Safety of Journalists in Lome on March 5. This helped to foster a cordial working relations between the two institutions.

In one of the most progressive developments recorded during the year, Mauritanian blogger, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkheitir, was released on July 29 after five years in detention on blasphemy charges. Mkheitir who was sentenced to death in 2014, remained in detention even after an Appeals Court granted him reprieve by commuting his sentence two years' imprisonment on November 9, 2017.

On September 25-28, the National Press Centre-Norbert Zongo, MFWA's national partner organisation in Burkina Faso, successfully held the eighth edition of its biennial freedom of expression event, Festival International de Liberté d'Expression et de la press, (FILEP) in Ouagadougou. The

over 400 participants from 37 across Africa called on African governments to make more concrete effort to promote freedom of expression. They also urged the governments of countries where journalists have been killed without redress, to find and punish the perpetrators.

Senegal conducted elections without recording a single press freedom violation during or after the elections. Nigeria's presidential elections, on the other hand, recorded some incidents of attacks on journalists, although much fewer than during previous elections.

Conclusion

The violations recorded in the course of the year 2019 demonstrate that the battle for press freedom and freedom of expression is far from won, particularly because of the impunity with which the majority of these violations were perpetrated. The violations also underline a blatant lack of commitment on the part of the authorities in the various countries to uphold the principles enshrined in the various legal, national and international frameworks adopted by all the countries cited in this report to guarantee the right to press freedom and freedom of expression generally. These frameworks include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the national Constitutions of the respective countries.

Considering the many violations including the killing of protesters by security forces and journalists by unknown assailants in Nigeria and Guinea, these two countries pose a daunting freedom of expression challenge. The persistence of these violations and the lack of redress tend to create a culture of impunity, which induces fear. The ultimate result is widespread corruption and deterioration in democratic standards as the media is impeded from demanding accountability of public authorities and informing the public to enhance citizens' participation in public discourse on critical development issues.

Freedom of expression and press freedom is thus central to building strong, inclusive and peaceful societies. Moreover, freedom of expression is the key enabler of the enjoyment and fulfilment of other rights. No effort must therefore be spared in jealously protecting media freedom and citizens' right to freely express their opinions, including critical or dissenting opinions. To this end, the MFWA makes the following recommendations towards improving the freedom of expression environment in the region.

Recommendations

To Media Organisations and Journalists

- Work with high standards and professionalism at all times.
- Media managers must commit to using all legal means to ensure justice for media persons whose rights are violated in the line of duty.

To Governments in West Africa

- Ensure that both state and non-state actors respect and protect the FOE rights.
- Promote the safety and protection of journalists and media organisations.
- Ensure that security agents stop violating the rights of journalists and others exercising their right to freedom of expression. Specifically, police and security forces must cease committing acts of physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and detentions against journalists and dissenting voices.
- Train security agents, particularly those in Guinea and Nigeria, to appreciate the work of the media in democratic societies and to collaborate with them.
- Order a stop to violent attacks on demonstrators and protesters

To ECOWAS

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

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

- Engage the new government in Nigeria, Ghana and Guinea on the need to intensify investigations into the killing of journalists and demonstrators in the respective countries and ensuring that the perpetrators are identified and punished.

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

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



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