

Benin: Wave of attacks on press freedom highlights urgent need to reform Digital Code

The Benin authorities' recent wave of sanctions against independent media outlets highlights the urgent need to protect press freedom in the country, said Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and Internet Without Borders. The call comes as Benin's parliament debates revisions to the Digital Code – legislation critical to the protection of a free press and freedom of expression.

Since the beginning of the year, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communications (Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication – HAAC) has [suspended](#) two newspapers, three news websites and a TikTok news account "until further notice." These suspensions are still in force.

"In recent months, Benin's authorities have been silencing media outlets, often after they carried coverage critical of the government or the HAAC. The Digital Code contains provisions that allow the attacks on freedom of expression seen in recent months. Its revision is an opportunity to reverse this worrying trend and further protect press freedom," said Dieudonné Dagnéto, Executive Director of Amnesty International Benin.

Series of media suspensions

On 12 March, the news website Bénin Web TV was suspended and the press card of its managing director withdrawn. The HAAC [accused](#) the media outlet of publishing two articles containing inaccurate information, one concerning alleged errors in the budget request submitted by the HAAC to Parliament, the other concerning the request for a company car by the institution's president.

On 21 January, the newspaper Le Patriote and its website were similarly sanctioned after the publication of an editorial pointing out 'the government's ineffective strategy' during an attack on a military position in the border zone between Burkina Faso and Niger.

Le Patriote's editor told Amnesty International: "My newspaper was one of the few that gave a voice to all sides. I'm sure that, given the current context, the media will no longer take the risk of dealing with information on the security situation other than that which comes from the government or the authorities in charge of security."

"None of the legitimate grounds for restriction of the freedom of expression set out in international law are invoked in these cases of censorship. HAAC's sanctions also threaten the economic survival of the media and their employees. This is an intolerable interference

with press freedom," said Sadibou Marong, Director of Reporters Without Borders' Sub Saharan Africa bureau.

A dozen journalists who have worked for Le Patriote are now unemployed, according to its managing editor. Bénin Web TV is already suffering a loss of income following the withdrawal of certain advertisers, according to a letter seen by Amnesty International.

The recent wave of sanctions follows a series of similar curbs in 2023 and 2024.

In February 2024, the press group La Gazette du Golfe laid off all its employees following the HAAC's suspension of the group's activities in 2023.

In January 2024, news websites Crystal News, Reporter Médias Monde, Les Pharaons and the TikTok news account Madame Actu were also suspended. The HAAC justified the decision by saying that these were "unauthorized websites" that had been "the subject of numerous complaints" and were responsible for making "unfounded allegations" and disseminating "media content without prior HAAC authorization". The [communiqué](#) did not specify which content was problematic.

These suspensions contravene the standards established by the UN Human Rights Committee, which clearly state that blanket bans on the operation of certain sites and systems are not compatible with the right to freedom of expression, nor is the granting of licences by the state to authorize the work of journalists as provided by Beninese law.

Qemal Affagnon, Regional Coordinator for West Africa at Internet Without Borders, said: "The HAAC relies on the current Digital Code to punish all those who commit 'criminal acts'. The examination of a bill amending this Code is an opportunity to implement the recommendations accepted by the government in 2023 during the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in line with the consultative modification work carried out with Beninese MPs by Internet Sans Frontières. It is essential to guaranteeing freedom of expression and HAAC's independence."

Background

In its [recommendations](#) to Benin during the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, Amnesty International mentioned revising the Digital Code.

Benin accepted several recommendations aimed at ensuring the independence of the Audiovisual and Telecommunications Authority, and revising the Digital Code, particularly article 550 which unduly restricts the right to freedom of expression by providing for prison sentences for offences such as the dissemination of false information and harassment via electronic communication.

